

News Release: Raleigh-Durham Area Motorists Lose More than \$1,400 per Year on Roads that are Rough, Congested & Lack Some Safety Features...

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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The RTA and NC Chamber present report on economic impact to motorists from congestion, and infrastructure and safety investment issues. Please see the [release of a new report](#) .

It's been 33 years since RDU had a year like 2020. So how bad was it?

BY THE HERALD-SUN BY RICHARD STRADLING

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MORRISVILLE –Thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, Raleigh-Durham International Airport served fewer passengers last year than in any year since 1987.

Fewer than 4.9 million travelers passed through RDU in 2020, down from a record 14.2 million the year before. About half of the 2020 passengers flew in the first three months of the year, when it appeared that RDU was on pace to set another record.

But demand for air travel cratered as COVID-19 cases rose across the country and businesses and governments pulled back and shut down. Fewer than 40,000 passengers flew through RDU in April, about the same as a typical day in 2019.

Business has rebounded some but remains depressed. The final week of the year, starting Dec. 28, was the busiest at RDU since the pandemic began, with 112,000 arriving and departing passengers. That's down 56% from the same week last year.

Still, the arrival of COVID-19 vaccines gives the travel industry reason for optimism, said Michael Landguth, RDU's president and CEO.

"The aviation industry has recovered from many economic and health crises in its hundred-year history, and it will recover from COVID-19," Landguth said in a written statement. "With widespread distribution of vaccines, we are optimistic that passengers will regain confidence in flying and get back to traveling for business or to visit family and friends."

Airlines have begun to resume flights they suspended last year; American is flying to Washington's Reagan National Airport again starting this month, and Delta will resume nonstop flights from RDU to Austin and Jacksonville on Feb. 11 and to Las Vegas on March 2.

Airlines now offer nonstop flights from RDU to 38 destinations. That's down from 57 destinations, including five international ones, before the pandemic but up from 25 at the lowest point in air travel last year.

In December, airlines averaged 102 departures a day from RDU, down from 223 the same month in 2019.

Is proposed Buc-ee's mega gas station too big for Orange County? Leaders skeptical.

THE HERALD-SUN BY TAMMY GRUBB

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Some Orange County commissioners remained opposed to one of the world's largest Buc-ee's gas stations opening in Efland, after nearly three hours of discussion with development officials Tuesday.

The board voted 5-2 to give Buc-ee's Ltd. officials a list of conditions to consider before Feb. 16, when the commissioners could vote on Efland Station, a 425,000-square-foot commercial development proposed for Interstates 85/40 near the Orange-Alamance line.

A 64,000-square-foot Buc-ee's Travel Center with 60 dual-sided gas pumps could anchor that development, becoming the first North Carolina gas station for the Texas-based company with a fan following and awards for the cleanest bathrooms in America.

The commissioners asked the company to consider a smaller travel center with fewer gas pumps, to guarantee the station will open with 10 electric vehicle charging stations, and to provide more details about water usage, solar potential and what else could be built.

Commissioner Amy Fowler, who said she would reject the project without "a significant reduction in scale," also asked the developer to consider a 24-foot sign that meets county rules, instead of the 80-foot sign proposed.

"I would really like to see a development, here is a perfect place for development, however, even with those pressures (to attract tax revenues and jobs), I have many concerns that this proposal is not aligned with our county comprehensive plan's overarching goal of sustainability, nor the first five of six specific land-use goals, multiple parts of the (Unified Development Ordinance), and our 2017 resolution to decrease greenhouse gas emissions," Fowler said.

Buc-ee's size makes the company successful, attracts visitors and ensures there is an open gas pump when drivers leave their car at one to linger in the store, project officials said. However, they agreed to consider the board's conditions.

PROJECT CHANGES, SKEPTICISM

Efland's proposed station would be about twice the size of Carrboro's Harris Teeter store but not quite as big as the Buc-ee's store in New Braunfels, Texas, which holds the world record for the largest gas station at 68,000 square feet.

Efland Station also could have a 120-room hotel and over 148,000 square feet of manufacturing, office, retail and restaurant space, with buildings up to 60 feet tall. The Buc-ee's Ltd. development team presented a revised plan Tuesday that eliminated a 185-foot-long car wash and cut the space allotted to manufacturing uses in half to 75,000 square feet.

The county has estimated that the \$40 million project could generate up to \$1 million in local property and sales tax revenues in the first phase and more later. County staff would review site plans as the project is built if the board approves the master plan and conditional zoning district.

Only the travel center is prohibited under the current zoning, which allows for up to 2 million square feet of office and manufacturing land uses. The county already spent \$4 million in sales tax revenues to bring water and sewer to the site.

The project's scale and how it would affect Efland's rural character, as well as traffic, are important issues, Commissioner Sally Greene said. The county also has no guarantee the restaurants, hotel and other uses will be built or when, she said.

"I'm very skeptical of just a promise that we'll have these other things that we desire," Greene said.

Buc-ee's development director Stan Beard tried to reassure the board, saying his team is "very confident" other tenants will follow.

"We absolutely think that this is a perfect, prime location for not a regional but a community-based development that is what you were thinking of when you were thinking of a gateway to Efland," Beard said. "I would say we're a better gateway than a distribution center. Unfortunately, I can't make guarantees, and no one's going to come unless we're there."

JOBS, BUSINESS AND CONCERNS

The 104-acre site, between interstate exits 160 and 161, backs up to the North Carolina Railroad line, roughly two dozen homes and several small, local businesses.

Roughly 40% of the land would remain open space, Buc-ee's attorney Elizabeth Trahos said in a Jan. 7 letter. The changes also respond to stormwater concerns, she said, by adding debris screens to all drains and meeting roughly the same nitrogen and phosphorus levels in its runoff as the undeveloped site currently meets.

Buc-ee's is a family-oriented business, similar to a general store, with freshly prepared food, snacks, arts and crafts, clothing, toys and more, Trahos told the commissioners.

"Buc-ee's is to a Sheetz what Wegman's is to a Piggly Wiggly," she said. "These things are not the same."

The project has divided residents over whether it's the right fit for land long designated by the county for commercial development and within sight of the Buckhorn Economic Development District.

Most of the roughly 100 public speakers in December and January were opposed to what the project could mean for their way of life and the environment. Many supported the current zoning, which allows office and manufacturing uses.

Proponents, who included Buc-ee's fans and longtime Efland residents, said they were excited to see good-paying jobs, tax dollars and business investment proposed for the rural community, where roughly 1 in 5 residents earn less than \$15,000 a year.

The divide also has fallen along racial lines, with mostly Black residents backing the project. Commissioner Earl McKee noted that split Tuesday after warning the community that its "anti-business and anti-commercial attitude" is pushing out those who cannot afford it.

Buc-ee's offers a minimum wage and benefits that a lot of local companies do not provide, and Black and Hispanic residents have reached out to say "we need these jobs," McKee said. His support grew after hearing from those opposed to the project, he added.

"It was especially insulting for me to hear that a \$15 an hour job was a dead-end job, was a job that only allowed you to clean toilets," he said. "I do not understand that kind of thinking. I do not agree with that kind of thinking, and I do not agree with denigration of individuals looking to improve their life situation."

The county expects Buc-ee's to hire up to 200 full-time employees, who would also receive benefits, such as health, dental and life insurance, paid vacations and a 401(k) program.

FOSSIL FUELS VS. ENVIRONMENT, WATER QUALITY

The biggest concern for the board, many residents and environmental advocates, such as the Eno River Association and the Center for Biological Diversity, is the potential effect on water quality and runoff from a large amount of fuel that Buc-ee's would store and the thousands of cars idling and visiting the site.

Two streams on the site are in a protected watershed between two critical areas for wildlife habitat and water quality. The streams also drain into Sevenmile Creek, part of a critical watershed for the Eno River.

That raised a lot of questions from public speakers about the risk of storing 240,000 gallons of fuels underground, as well as reminders to the county commissioners that Orange County has pledged to act on climate change.

The Orange County Commission for the Environment recommended denying the project earlier this month because of its potentially negative effects on water and air quality, focus on fossil fuels, and concerns about sustainability and greenhouse gas goals.

Orange County has signed onto the Paris Climate Accord and is committed to reducing carbon emissions by 80 percent and moving to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050.

Buc-ee's has alarms, email alerts and other safeguards against a fuel leak from one of their six double-walled, concrete-encased, fiberglass/resin fuel storage tanks, Trahos and others said. The fuel storage and pipe systems also have leak sensors, they said.

Only a quarter of the 41-acre open space will be used for stormwater ponds and controls, they said, and a rainwater collection system will be used for irrigation.

TRAFFIC, STREET CHANGES

The remaining big concern is traffic and changes to how people get around Efland and surrounding communities. Most Buc-ee's customers would get off the interstate, shop and get back on the interstate, representatives said.

Up to 125,000 vehicles travel Interstates 40/85 daily, they said and Buc-ee's could attract about 11,500 of those vehicles every day. A traffic study estimated up to 800 vehicles an hour during the evening commute and over 1,200 during peak Saturday hours. Another 4,700 more vehicles could arrive each day as the site is built out, the study found.

The N.C. Department of Transportation is working with the county and the developer on several changes, including new traffic lights on Mt. Willing Road and the I-85 Connector. The westbound off-ramp at Exit 160, which is the main exit for drivers heading north on Mt. Willing Road, could be closed, forcing them to get off at Exit 161 and pass through two traffic lights to reach Mt. Willing.

The Federal Highway Administration still has to review the plan to close the exit.

Plans also show two right-in, right-out driveways on the service road that parallels I-85/40 West and other driveways off the I-85 Connector and Mt. Willing Road. Drivers turning from Ben Johnston Road left onto the connector would have to turn right and make a U-turn at the new Efland Station driveway.

There have been conversations about potentially realigning Ben Johnston Road to a new intersection with the Buc-ee's driveway and the connector road. More information about that possibility could be shared at the February meeting.

North Carolinians drove far less during the pandemic. So why did fatal crashes go up?

THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER BY AMES ALEXANDER

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The numbers seem to defy common sense: Although North Carolinians drove fewer miles during the pandemic, the death toll on the state's highways climbed to more than 1,500 in 2020 — the highest number in 13 years.

In 2020 — a year of stay-at-home orders, curfews and widespread work from home — the number of miles driven dropped 19% but the number of fatal crashes rose 8% over the previous year, North Carolina Department of Transportation data show.

"The spike in traffic fatalities is a public health crisis," said Mark Ezzell, director of the N.C. Governor's Highway Safety Program.

COVID-19 helped drive the increase, experts believe. Many drivers, taking advantage of less-crowded highways, are speeding more. Others are more distracted.

"We know when people are ill, fatigued or distressed, they may be more likely to crash," said Libby Thomas, senior research associate for the UNC Highway Safety Research Center. "Their thoughts may not be as focused on driving."

Ezzell agreed, saying, "With COVID, there's been a sense of emotional distraction. People are concentrating on their health and their financial futures. And they're not concentrating on the task of driving. So that's a concern."

The raw numbers for last year show a total of 1,506 people died in 1,491 fatal crashes in North Carolina. People drove about 99 billion miles in the state in 2020, compared with about 123 billion miles the previous year, according to the state DOT.

The highest number of traffic fatalities in the past two decades was 1704 in 2007. The figures include traffic deaths on all roads within the state.

Chief among the factors contributing to last year's road deaths: speeding, alcohol, lane departures and motorists who did not wear seatbelts.

Experts and law enforcement officials said they're troubled by a sharp rise in the number of people who neglected to buckle up. That contributed to a third of the fatal crashes last year — a 20% increase over the previous year.

"People are not doing things they normally do behind the wheel," Ezzell said. "They may simply be forgetting to do that because their minds are elsewhere."

Speeding played a role in about a quarter of the fatal crashes, according to the DOT data. Many speeders have exploited the more open highways during the pandemic, experts and law enforcement officers say.

"Congestion is an annoying thing, but one positive thing about it is it slows people down," Ezzell said.

The number of teenagers who died in wrecks also surged. Crashes claimed the lives of 154 teens in 2020 — a 15% jump over 2019.

Before the pandemic, teenagers spent much of their days in classrooms and in extracurricular activities, N.C. Highway Patrol Sgt. Chris Knox noted. But that was not the case during the pandemic. Youths now have more time to drive, "so there are more opportunities for these fatal crashes to occur," Knox said.

Knox said he has heard about teens who listen in on classes as they drive. "That is an added distraction that could have fatal consequences," he said.

The rising highway death rate is not unique to North Carolina. [Data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) show that the rate of traffic fatalities nationally — 1.35 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled during the first nine months of 2020 — increased 19% over the same period the previous year.

National figures for the full year are not yet available. But the available numbers suggest North Carolina's death rate exceeds the national average. For all of 2020, North Carolina's highway death rate was 1.52 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled.

Ezell said he hopes the rise in traffic deaths in North Carolina is a "temporary blip." But to reverse the trend, he and other experts know drivers will need to change their behaviors.

"When you're behind the wheel, you're basically in control of a 2,000-pound guided missile," he said. "And it deserves all the attention you can give it."

MOST FATAL CRASHES PREVENTABLE

Mecklenburg was among the many N.C. counties that saw road deaths rise last year. Wrecks in the county claimed the lives of 106 people — 12 more than the previous year. Fatalities also increased significantly in Gaston and Iredell counties.

This past Christmas morning brought no respite from the bloodshed.

In Charlotte that morning, 36-year-old Lemorris Agurs was killed and his two sons were injured when their car drove through the center median on Interstate 77 and collided with a tractor-trailer.

Earlier that morning, about 70 miles to the northwest in Burke County, a pickup truck began driving recklessly on Interstate 40 while the occupants were involved in a verbal altercation, according to a highway patrol trooper. The truck sideswiped a Chevrolet Trailblazer and both vehicles collided with a guardrail.

The pickup driver, Monica Torres-Garcia, 39, of Bessemer City, [later died at a hospital](#), while a toddler was seriously injured. Five others suffered minor injuries.

Law enforcement officers say virtually all fatal crashes have one thing in common: They're preventable.

"We see the lives touched when a family member dies in a car crash," Knox said. "That's what really drives us. We see the end result of making poor choices."

Staff writer Gavin Off contributed to this story.

Buc-ee's will bring bucks, gas pumps and Beaver Nuggets to NC. Why some don't want it.

BY TAMMY GRUBB

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A Texas developer wants to bring jobs, tax revenues and more businesses to western Orange County, but some residents said Tuesday night they would prefer anything else but a Buc-ee's Travel Center.

Buc-ee's is a "garish, outlandish, oversize Texas gas station, carwash and mega-convenience store that Efland residents neither want nor need," Efland resident Catherine Matthews said. during a public hearing.

“They violate every core value, every mission statement, every planning goal, everything that Orange County — a progressive county in the state of North Carolina — prides itself on and believes in,” she said.

The 104-acre Efland Station mixed use development and its Buc-ee’s anchor has been controversial since proposed in August for the rural exit off Interstate 85/40 near the Orange-Alamance county line.

Matthews and 19 others who spoke to the county commissioners Tuesday were among 111 signed up for the hearing. Although Commissioner Earl McKee pushed to hear from the rest before Christmas, the board voted to continue the hearing on Jan. 5 and Jan. 12.

The board could vote on the Efland Station project Jan. 19.

The plan from Buc-ee’s Ltd. calls for a 64,000-square-foot Buc-ee’s Travel Center with 60 dual-sided gas pumps between exits 160 and 161 on Interstate 85/40 in western Orange County. It also would have a 185-foot-long automated car wash.

The second phase of construction could add a 120-room hotel and over 223,000 square feet of manufacturing, office, retail and restaurant space. Roughly 40 acres could be open space, and buildings could be up to 60 feet tall, with city of Mebane sewer service and Orange-Alamance water service.

Only the travel center is not allowed under the current zoning. The commissioners are being asked to approve a master plan and a conditional zoning district that could include traffic, environmental and other constraints. If the plan is approved, county staff would approve each site plan as it nears construction.

BUC-EE’S JOBS, TAX DOLLARS, FANS

The Buc-ee’s Travel Center would be the first in North Carolina. County officials reported the 38-year-old company has over 3,000 employees in 37 stores — most in Texas — and 10 more projects underway across the South.

The company is most famous for its snacks, including the caramel-coated corn puff Beaver Nuggets, and for its award-winning “cleanest restrooms in America.”

Her family enjoyed Buc-ee’s when they lived in Texas and would like to see the project built, Jennifer Landstrom told the board.

“They are well organized, well run, the staff is treated well, and there is excellent customer service. We’re always blown away by the food options. It’s not like a gas station,” she said. “We always love going to get gifts for family. Our kids love it very much, and it’s a unique experience.”

Buc-ee’s employees must meet strict standards, company officials have said. Online reviews say work shifts are long — up to 10 hours — with very short breaks and working lunches. However, employees in low-level jobs start at roughly \$15 an hour, and full-time benefits include health, dental and life insurance, paid vacations and a 401(k) program.

An Orange County Economic Development report last week noted the \$40 million Efland project could bring up to 200 full-time jobs and \$25 million in annual retail sales, potentially generating \$1 million in property and sales tax revenues for the county. The state also could see \$1 million in sales taxes and \$6.5 million in gas tax revenues, it said.

More jobs and sales and property tax revenues are anticipated from the second, future phase of the project.

The undeveloped land now generates just \$428.78 in property tax revenues for Orange County, because its listed as agricultural.

Anthony Weston urged the county to build on that agricultural identity and create a special commission to plan for the site’s best use.

"I think something quite lovely has happened actually, which is that the Buc-ee's proposal has awakened us to the idea that something big and transformative could be done with this land," Weston said.

EFLAND GROWTH, QUALITY OF LIFE

Efland Station would dramatically change the rural Efland exit and the unincorporated community of modest homes, local businesses and farmland that surrounds it.

County data shows the area is diverse, with over half of the 531 residents within a mile of the site identifying as white, 41% as black and 8.5% as Hispanic. Nearly 19% of the residents earn less than \$15,000 a year, the county reported. Another 37.4% earn between \$15,000 and \$50,000 a year.

Many opponents have formed a group, A Voice for Efland & Orange, encouraging supporters to visit their website, email the commissioners and speak at public hearings. About 60 people rallied against the plan Dec. 5 in Hillsborough.

Their concerns range from traffic and light pollution to environmental damage and negative effects on their quality of life.

Buc-ee's threatens the "beautiful place with lots of trees, quiet, clean and fresh well water, and a night sky filled with stars" that his family enjoys, Scott Buechler said. The business is based on outdated fossil fuels and offers "dead-end jobs," he said.

"A massive Buc-ee's with 60 gas pumps and 64,000 square feet of cheesy retail clearly violates the character of the Efland community, which is characterized by farms and forests, relative quiet and the absence of traffic congestion," Buechler said.

Others voiced support for business investment, jobs and tax revenues that improve affordability. Buc-ee's will allow residents to meet their needs in town and will support community organizations and programs, Leo Allison said.

"We need to take advantage of this opportunity, because projects like this don't come along too often," he said.

Sam Gharbo noted "it could be worse." The location between the interstate and the railroad tracks already creates light and noise, he said, and only some of what the county could allow will be paved.

"There are jobs. In the following phases, that creates opportunities for entrepreneurs, it also creates opportunities for industries, also for transportation, and revenue for the taxes, because I'm tired of being the leading taxpaying counties in the state," Gharbo said.

INTERSTATE LOCATION, CUSTOMERS

The site has long been marked as ideal for commercial, industrial and high-intensity development. A more recent draft Buckhorn Area Plan calls it one of the area's "most suitable economic development parcels." The commissioners will hear more about that in January.

Company officials have dismissed concerns that Buc-ee's will siphon dollars from Missy's Grill, the M-Mart convenience store and other local businesses.

Most customers are passing by on the interstate, they said, noting that up to 124,000 vehicles travel Interstate 40/85 daily. Buc-ee's is expected to attract roughly 11,500 of those vehicles each day, including 800 an hour during the evening commute and over 1,200 during peak Saturday hours.

The second phase of construction could bring 4,700 more vehicles to the site each day, a traffic study found.

That will necessitate changes, officials have said, including two right-in, right-out driveways on the service road that parallels I-85/40 West. Additional driveways would link to the U.S. 70/I-85 Connector and Mt. Willing Road.

Road improvements also could include traffic lights at multiple intersections, modified turn lanes and the closure of an I-85/40 West off-ramp at Exit 160. Westbound drivers heading to Mt. Willing Road would have to take Exit 161, and drivers turning left from Ben Johnston Road would have to turn right and make a U-turn at the new Efland Station driveway.

ENVIRONMENTAL, WATER CONCERNS

Another major concern is the potential for damage to the environment and regional water quality.

Buc-ee's will have six double-walled, concrete-encased, fiberglass/resin fuel storage tanks, which hold 40,000 gallons each. The fuel storage and pipe systems have sensors that monitor for leaks, said attorney Beth Trahos, representing Buc-ee's. A breach would trigger an alarm and send an email to the fuel and environmental team, she said.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Eno River Association have cited concerns about fuel storage and stormwater runoff in letters opposing the project.

Two streams on the site are in a protected watershed between two critical areas for wildlife habitat and water quality, they said. The streams also drain into Sevenmile Creek, which is part of a critical watershed for the Eno River.

"It is clear to me that the residents of Orange County — and the (native, at-risk species) Carolina madtom, Neuse River waterdog, and Atlantic pigtoe — all have much more to gain from seeing these forested lands, open fields, and protected watersheds kept intact for the quality of life benefits and extinction prevention services that they provide," Center for Biological Diversity attorney Perrin de Jong said.

The project faces additional reviews by the N.C. Department of Environmental Quality and the county's Commission for the Environment. County staff also is working on the stormwater requirements, planning director Craig Benedict said.

County staff also has asked the commissioners to require additional environmental studies for all future site plans.