

Bus riders say Connector not serving all equitably

Revised route has increased stops at the university, a major bus system funder

Some riders and advocates want stop restored at Durham Transportation Center



The Bull City Connector pulls into the Durham Transit Center in Durham during the afternoon rush in this April 2012 file photo. Chuck Liddy cliddy@newsobserver.com

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER BY LISA SORG FEBRUARY 4, 2016

DURHAM -- For the elderly, people using walkers or wheelchairs, and those who are visually impaired, it can be a perilous journey from the closest downtown Bull City Connector stop to the Durham Transportation Center.

One must cross the Downtown Loop at West Main Street, travel an uneven, crumbling sidewalk beneath a rail bridge, then navigate a dangerous intersection at Pettigrew and East Chapel Hill Streets.

This is among the reasons the Bull City Connector, the only free bus service in the system, should revert to its old route and stop at the Durham Transportation Center, members of SpiritHouse, a social justice group, told the Human Relations Commission Wednesday night.

"The BCC is not serving all populations equitably," said Nikki Brown of SpiritHouse. She has a visual impairment and regularly rides buses. "That's not a safe walk for me."

The BCC runs along Main Street from Golden Belt on east of downtown to the VA Medical Center and Research Drive near the north clinics of the Duke Medical Center.

GoTriangle plans, markets and oversees GoDurham, formerly known as DATA, but the city approves the routes. Each year, Duke University contributes \$350,000 toward the BCC, about one-third of the service's \$1.1 million budget. The city funds the rest.

"We struggled with this for a long time," said John Tallmadge, director of GoTriangle's Regional Services Development Department. "It's a difficult decision to make. What people value about this is that it's free. The reason it's free is because there is money coming from Duke. That has some impact on the service design."

After several discussions between city officials, GoTriangle, Duke University and an advisory panel of community groups, the BCC route changed last August, no longer stopping at the Durham Transportation Center or the south clinics at Duke Medical Center.

SINCE THE CHANGE, THE NUMBER OF RIDERS GETTING OFF THE BUS AT DUKE UNIVERSITY STOPS HAS INCREASED 12 PERCENT.

Those stops had resulted in less frequent service, with buses running every 20 to 25 minutes, depending on the time of day," Tallmadge said. "From Duke's perspective, the connector was not carrying enough students and staff."

The new route allows buses to run every 17 minutes all day and evening, which helps Duke employees and students to travel more efficiently between West Campus, the Medical Center and downtown. Roughly 3,000 Duke employees work in the city center, said Phail Wynn, Jr., vice president of Durham and regional affairs for Duke University.

Since the change, the number of riders getting off the bus at Duke University stops has increased 12 percent.

"We want people to leave their cars at home," Wynn added. "Our main concerns were that the bus was unreliable and not running on schedule. It was spending too much time at the station, and taking away from the linearity of the route. We saw a mutual benefit in encouraging students and employees to come downtown."

Hurt by changes

But low-income people and those with disabilities are hurt by the changes, Brown of SpiritHouse said. While several routes roughly overlap with the BCC's, those buses are not free. In addition, riders connecting to southbound routes cannot easily transfer to and from the BCC because the BCC does not stop at the main station, nor does it connect with those routes elsewhere.

More than half of BCC riders surveyed by GoTriangle said they were African-American; 70 percent reported household incomes of less than \$25,000 a year. Yet the free service does not travel farther east into low-income, minority neighborhoods, or to N.C. Central University.

There is not enough funding to extend BCC service to NCCU, Tallmadge said, which would be expected to contribute some money to the system.

Before the change, the Durham Transportation Station was one of the most popular boarding and disembarking points for the BCC. Since August, overall ridership on the BCC is down 30 percent since the changes, said Tallmadge, but some of those passengers likely take a regular GoDurham bus. Fares are \$1 per trip, but day passes and discount passes for seniors, children and people on Medicaid are also available.

Systemwide, ridership has decreased 3 percent to 4 percent, which Tallmadge attributes to low gas prices.

Brown played audio of several interviews that SpiritHouse members conducted on the BCC. Several people complained that connections between the BCC and other routes are mistimed. And those who have to walk to the station add time to their trips. "Please, anything that y'all can do to change, let it be done," one woman said in an interview.

The HRC did not vote on the matter, but a committee will study the issue and bring it to the full commission for a possible recommendation to City Council.

Durham Freeway traffic to shift, effective Feb. 12

N.C. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION FEBRUARY 9, 2016

RALEIGH — Motorists who use southbound Durham Freeway (N.C. 147) will be dealing with a long-term traffic shift, starting the night of Friday, Feb. 12, weather permitting. That is when the contractor for the East End Connector project plans to move southbound traffic to new lanes that have been built in the median of the highway between south of Briggs Avenue (Exit 10) and just north of Ellis Road (Exit 8). The highway will continue to have two southbound lanes, just in the different location.

The shift is expected to be in place until about mid-June. It will allow the contractor to safely remove, regrade and stabilize the current southbound section in that area to prepare it for new concrete pavement. Other work will include constructing part of a new bridge on the southbound side of the road and widening a couple of the existing bridges.

Southbound motorists need to pay attention to the new pattern and use extra caution while traveling through the work zone as the new traffic alignment will include having barrier rails on both sides of the roadway in some sections.

Once work on the southbound side wraps up and traffic returns to its original pattern, the northbound lanes will be shifted into the median lanes for about another four months for similar work on that side.

The shift location is where a new interchange for the Connector is being built for the new 3.9-mile interstate-standard road that will link the Freeway and U.S. 70. It will also upgrade U.S. 70 to a freeway between Pleasant Drive and N.C. 98. Once open it is expected to add the I-885 route designation.

Although this is the only major shift planned for the \$142-million dollar for the time being, drivers need to continue to be alert to possible day or night lane closures along highways linked to the project to support construction activities. Lane closures along the Durham Freeway are allowed between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. Sunday through Thursday nights, and 8 p.m. to 10 a.m. on Friday and Saturday evenings. Similar closures are permitted on U.S. 70 from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. Sunday through Thursday nights, 8 p.m. to 9 a.m. Friday evenings, and 8 p.m. to 11 a.m. on Saturday nights. Lane closures on other roads within the work area can happen anytime except 6 to 9 a.m. and 4 to 7 p.m. on weekdays.

The East End Connector, under way since April 2015, will provide a direct freeway connection between the Durham Freeway and north of the U.S. 70/N.C. 98 intersection, completing a link between I-85 and I-40, the Triangle Expressway and U.S. 1 in southern Wake County. It is expected to promote economic development in areas along the I-85 corridor toward Virginia by improving access for people and goods between Durham and counties north of the city to major employment and retail centers, including Research Triangle Park, Raleigh-Durham International Airport and Wake County.

Another benefit will be alleviating congestion on the Durham Freeway through downtown Durham. It will also help divert traffic off local roads such as U.S. 15/501, which is often used as a connection between I-85 and I-40, as well as Roxboro, Mangum, Gregson and Duke streets in Durham

The Connector is expected to be open in 2019.

Road Worrier: NC rail plan not high speed, but it's better and better

North Carolina uses \$520 million in federal funds for Raleigh-to-Charlotte improvements

Top train speed is still 79 mph

California's \$68 billion, 220-mph high-speed rail program is years away from service

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER BY BRUCE SICELOFF FEBRUARY 8, 2016

We're not building high-speed rail in North Carolina – and, for now, that's a good thing.

As California has discovered, high-speed rail takes a long time.

High-speed rail is what the Golden State expects to have one day in a program that costs more (\$68 billion at last count) and [falls farther behind schedule every year](#). The planned 500-mile system appears unlikely to fulfill its promise of hauling riders on its first 29-mile leg by 2022.

What North Carolina is building instead might be called better and better rail. Much of this federally funded work is delivering benefits already, and that includes two of its three main Triangle projects.

The Department of Transportation is in a furious pitch of construction this year all along the N.C. Railroad tracks between Raleigh and Charlotte, in an umbrella effort called the [Piedmont Improvement Program](#).

By the time the \$520 million program is finished in late 2017, DOT will have closed nearly 40 street-level rail crossings to make train and car travel safer. Crossings on a dozen roads will be replaced with bridges.

Two more trains will begin making the daily round trip between Raleigh and Charlotte – bringing the total to five.

That means the state's two biggest cities, and seven stops along the way, will be linked with Amtrak service running every three hours during the day. With those expanded options, we can expect a continued rise in ridership for a route that now serves 450,000 travelers a year.

Stations at four cities along the way have been overhauled to provide better passenger service.

Since Cary's remodeled depot opened in 2011, doubled in size and staffed with ticket agents, it has become the preferred station for many Raleigh Amtrak travelers. (Raleigh's long-awaited Union Station, also being built with state and federal help, will open in 2017.)

In Research Triangle Park, commuters and other drivers on [Hopson Road](#) no longer stop for 12 freight and Amtrak trains each day. A new bridge began carrying trains over Hopson last summer – eliminating a dangerous crossing where three people died in a car-train crash in the early 1990s.

In Morrisville, a street-level crossing on [Morrisville Parkway was closed Monday](#), and replaced with a detour that will be in effect for six months, for a similar project. A new rail bridge is under construction, and Morrisville Parkway will be rerouted to a tunnel under the tracks.

Obama's high-speed rail plan

It was six years ago that President Barack Obama's administration distributed \$8 billion to start what he called a national network of high-speed trains. North Carolina was in the second tier of the top-dollar states with \$545 million. California took home the grand prize, \$2.89 billion.

California expects to have high-speed rail someday: A train that will take riders from Los Angeles to San Francisco in less than half the six hours they now spend making the trip by car. Part of the line will have top speeds of 220 miles per hour.

North Carolina has increased its top train speeds from 59 to 79 mph in the past 20 years, cutting an hour off the travel time from Raleigh to Charlotte. That's down now to 3 hours, 10 minutes – making trains a reasonable alternative to cars for growing numbers of travelers.

WE WANT IT TO BE HIGH-PERFORMING RAIL, AND A VERY SAFE AND RELIABLE TRIP. A 79-MPH, CAR-COMPETITIVE TRIP IS A GOOD THING, BUT IT'S NOT TRUE HIGH-SPEED RAIL.

Paul Worley, DOT rail director

And the ongoing improvements will allow DOT and Amtrak to knock more minutes off the schedule in the next couple of years.

Better and better speed. Not high speed, but frequent service at pretty good speed.

“We shouldn’t sell it as something it isn’t,” said Paul Worley, the DOT rail director. “It’s improved rail. We want it to be high-performing rail, and a very safe and reliable trip. A 79-mph, car-competitive trip is a good thing, but it’s not true high-speed rail.”

Faster is probably in the future here, too. But it could be expensive.

Moving to a top speed of 90 mph between Raleigh to Charlotte would require North Carolina to comply with new standards that include more safety technology and more maintenance spending. For example, Worley said, faster trains require railroads to be more stringent in keeping the track width consistent – and that means more attention to replacing old crossties.

North Carolina and Virginia officials have proposed top speeds of 110 mph for a short-cut track they are planning between Raleigh and Richmond. The higher speed and reduced distance could cut up to two hours off the travel time for trains between North Carolina and New York.

But that would cost about \$4 billion. Nowadays, Worley and his Virginia counterparts have removed the three middle words from the name of a project they used to call the Southeast High Speed Rail Corridor.

They’re studying options for a slower start on the route to Richmond – a less expensive way to launch train service on the new track at top speeds of, say, 79 mph. Then in the future, when faster speeds might make more economic sense, make it better and better.

Bruce Siceloff: [919-829-4527](tel:919-829-4527), bsiceloff@newsobserver.com, [@Road_Worrier](#)

DOT RAIL IMPROVEMENT HIGHLIGHTS

Using federal funds awarded in 2010, the state Department of Transportation Rail Division expects to complete its \$520 million Piedmont Improvement Program by October 2017, including:

- Two daily passenger train round-trips added between Raleigh and Charlotte with seven stops in between – bringing the daily schedule to five round trips
- Passenger stations renovated at Cary, Burlington, High Point and Kannapolis
- 12 bridges built to carry trains over or under automobile traffic at crossings
- 38 street-level rail crossings closed
- 31 miles of double track (between Greensboro and Charlotte) and passing sidings (between Raleigh and Greensboro) to carry more freight and passenger trains and reduce delays
- More miles of tracks realigned to straighten curves, allow faster train speeds and reduce trip times

Source: NCDOT

RELATED CONTENT

[Ride Along the Piedmont Improvement Project](#)

Bus route changes focus of board discussion

THE HERALD SUN BY LAUREN HORSCH FEBRUARY 11, 2016

DURHAM — In an effort to create a more efficient bus service along the U.S. 15-501 corridor GoTriangle is looking to make changes to routes that run between Orange and Durham counties.

Patrick McDonough, manager of planning and transit-oriented development at GoTriangle, played point man on Wednesday for the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization while explaining the changes.

He said the changes would increase efficiency along the corridor between Chapel Hill and Durham, which would increase frequency and create more reliable service. The improvements would also extend service to Carrboro during peak hours of travel.

Right now there are routes that serve both Durham and Chapel Hill in the morning, but McDonough said they weren't well coordinated.

"You'll have two GoTriangle buses pull up at the same time leaving for Durham (from Chapel Hill) together, one of them just takes 15 minutes longer to get there," he said.

The customer frustration from the lack of coordination, has thus given way to enhancing the service to change from fast service every 30 minutes, to fast regional service every 15 minutes.

The routes — 400 and 405 — flow from Chapel Hill to Durham, and will be streamlined under the proposed changes.

Changes would also reach beyond Chapel Hill, allowing service from Carrboro to Durham in the morning, and Durham to Carrboro in the afternoon.

There is also a proposal to create a route that runs from Woodcroft to South Square to the Duke and V.A. hospitals in Durham.

There are ongoing discussions about where stops will be located when the improvements come, but McDonough said the routes already have some stops with low boardings, so those could be dropped in favor of having riders board at another stop that already has a greater number of boardings.

McDonough said there would be increased service from GoDurham buses where riders would be potentially impacted by shifting stops.

By removing part of route 400's deviation around Southwest Durham Drive, Old Chapel Hill Road and University Drive, McDonough said there won't be direct access around that area, and riders would have to travel to a different stop.

"Part of why the revision was done was because this is one of lowest ridership sections," he said.

Members of the MPO brought up concerns about making sure that stops offer adequate shelter, opportunities for bicycle parking and ensuring there are ample park-and-ride opportunities.

The changes have not been finalized, but GoTriangle hopes to finalize them by the end of the month in order to hold stakeholder and public meetings in March and April, with ultimate service implementation in August.

BULL CITY CONNECTOR

The presentation Wednesday came just over a week after the Human Relations Commission addressed a service change to the Bull City Connector that eliminated service to the Durham Transportation Station, the main bus terminal on Pettigrew Street.

By eliminating that stop, members of SpiritHouse Inc., a cultural arts and organizing group, allege the bus is no longer able to serve residents of Durham equally.

The Bull City Connector is a free bus service jointly funded by Duke University and the city. The university pitches in about \$350,000 toward the total \$1.1 million budget, while the city approves the routes.

John Tallmadge, director of Regional Services Development Department for GoTriangle, said changing the route was a difficult decision.

“What people value about this is that it’s free,” Tallmadge told the HRC. “The reason it’s free is because there is money coming from Duke.”

That money thus impacts some service considerations

In August the changes were made to streamline the route along Main Street. While eliminating the Durham Station stop, it added new service to Duke Hospital North, the Durham V.A. Medical Center and Research Drive.

The changes also allowed for service every 17 minutes from 6:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekdays and 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. on Saturdays.

The route change saved about three minutes of travel time during the day, and about 8 minutes in the evenings.

Officials were aware at the time that the Durham Station stop was the most used stop on the BCC route.

Since the shift in August Tallmadge reported a 30 percent drop in BCC ridership.

Nikki Brown, with SpiritHouse, was at the HRC meeting, and played a video of what it’s like to have to walk from the closest BCC stop to Durham Station.

“The BCC is not serving all populations equitably,” Brown said.

Brown herself said the walk from the closest stop to the Durham Station was not a safe walk for her because of her visual impairments.

She said the changes not only impacted those who have disabilities, but also low-income residents.

There have also been continued complaints that the service does not extend farther east toward N.C. Central University or into minority and low-income neighborhoods, which would benefit from the service. Tallmadge said there wasn’t funding available to connect to NCCU, but the university could contribute to the overall funding of the service to become part of the route.

To learn more about proposed changes in bus service heard by the MPO visit

ourtransitfuture.com/projects/bus/ online.

'Extensive' project to repair Chatham County sinkhole to begin in March

WRAL.COM BY DEREK MEDLIN FEBRUARY 12, 2016

PITTSBORO, N.C. — Crews will begin work next month to repair a large sinkhole that has forced the closure of a road in Chatham County.

According to N.C. Department of Transportation, old pipes underneath Lystra Road – which crosses Jordan Lake near Pittsboro – gave way on Jan. 18, creating a large sinkhole that was still growing early in February.

Officials said Friday that work to fix the hole will begin by the second week of March, but they called the project "extensive." A contract to complete the work has not yet been awarded.

Two 72-inch culverts underneath the road will both need to be replaced due to the damage that occurred during recent weather events. Crews will replace the old culverts with one, 12-foot diameter culvert.

The project will involve:

- Relocating a water line that provides water to local residents
- Excavating both damaged pipes
- Placing the new, larger pipe
- Refilling the area with earth
- Repaving of the road

Weather permitting, the road could be open by early June.

Drivers will continue to follow a signed detour between Farrington Point and Jack Bennett Road.

If traveling east on Lystra Road, this detour will use Jack Bennett Road southwest to Big Woods Road, then south on Big Woods Road to U.S. 64 then east to Farrington Point Road then north to Lystra Road. From Farrington Point Road the detour route would be reversed. Lystra Road is accessible to local traffic.

Drivers are asked to use caution in the area and expect an increase in travel times.

Road Worrier: Light rail moves ahead in Durham and Orange

The Federal Transit Administration approves the Final Environmental Impact Statement

Environmental issues have been resolved, but Go Triangle still faces financial and political challenges

Legislators will be asked to remove their \$500,000 spending cap

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER BY BRUCE SICELOFF FEBRUARY 15, 2016

While Wake County folks try to work up an appetite for bus rapid transit service, their western neighbors are rolling ahead on the planned Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project.

The Federal Transit Administration issued a [pair of documents](#) last week to signal that the environmental review is complete and the significant issues about where to lay the tracks have been settled.

The 17-mile rail line would be anchored by UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill, and in Durham by the Duke and VA medical centers and the Bull City's burgeoning urban core. Along the way – running along N.C. 54, Interstate 40 and U.S. 15-501 – the tracks and stations would provide focal points for some of the region's steady economic growth in coming decades.

There are still some unhappy residents at the eastern end of Chapel Hill who dread the trains that would run close to the Falconbridge and Downing Creek subdivisions along N.C. 54. And just north of there on Farrington Road, a

planned 25-acre rail operations and maintenance center would not be a welcome neighbor in a quiet rural neighborhood.

But the newly released Final Environmental Impact Statement justifies these choices as the best options available to Go Triangle, the regional transit service and planning agency. It holds Go Triangle accountable for minimizing the environmental and safety risks related to the rail yard and to the trains – 140 each day – that would zip back and forth across side streets on the south side of N.C. 54. If all goes as planned, service would begin in 2026.

Bigger challenges, political and financial, lie ahead. Go Triangle will be asking the feds to cover 50 percent of the project's \$1.6 billion cost.

And local leaders in Orange and Durham counties – most of them Democrats – must persuade the Republican-led legislature this spring to reverse an abrupt vote last summer that outlawed all but token state funding for light rail.

Triangle folks have been counting on the state to pay 25 percent of the bill, as it did for a pair of light-rail lines in Charlotte. But the 2015 state budget included a surprise provision that [capped state spending](#) at \$500,000 for any future light-rail project. Chapel Hill's former mayor called the vote a "project killer."

Durham and Orange planners and politicians will try to un-kill it when the short session convenes in April. They are banking on support from business leaders and officials in the administration of Gov. Pat McCrory, who criticized the anti-light-rail measure last year.

"We remain confident that the cap can be lifted," Jeff Mann, Go Triangle's general manager, said Monday.

Even with that challenge, prospects for rail transit still look better in 2016 than they did a decade ago, when the region's last plan for trains fell apart.

State funding was not an issue in 2006 for an \$810 million, 28-mile rail line that would have run through Durham, Research Triangle Park and Raleigh. But the Federal Transit Administration pulled the plug, citing doubts about sufficient ridership and the lack of strong local political and financial support.

This time, Orange and Durham voters and leaders have committed a half-penny local sales tax and other local revenues to cover at least 25 percent of the project cost.

And even though the Durham-Orange line would not serve the Triangle's biggest job centers in Raleigh and RTP, it seems likely to earn more favorable ratings when the federal agency evaluates it for ridership, cost-effectiveness, traffic congestion relief and mobility access for low-income residents.

Wake and Raleigh are bigger and growing faster, but they can't hold a candle to Orange and Durham counties when it comes to using public transportation.

Chapel Hill and Durham residents take a combined 70,000 bus trips each day, according to figures in the rail project's Final Environmental Impact Statement, released last week. That's comparable to transit ridership levels in the state's biggest city, Charlotte – which counted 73,000 daily trips in 2006, just before the launch of its successful first light-rail line.

Unlike Charlotte's heavy morning-in, afternoon-out commuter streams – and unlike any of the light-rail lines that have been considered in Raleigh – the Durham-Orange line can be expected to have a healthy two-way flow of traffic during the day and evening.

The trains would take workers, students, shoppers, hospital visitors and cultural-event travelers in both directions. And they'd serve a demand that persists after 5 p.m. every Friday, when RTP goes dark for the weekend.

Before our legislators decided last year that light rail was worth only \$500,000, the Durham-Orange project competed successfully against highway and bridge projects to win a commitment from the state Department of Transportation for \$137 million.

AS WE REACH EACH MILESTONE FOR THE PROJECT, IT'S ANOTHER BIG STEP GOING FORWARD. IT'S A SIGNAL TO DEVELOPERS THAT THE PROJECT IS MORE REAL.

Dave Charters, Go Triangle's engineering and design manager

It's surprising to learn that this 17-mile line can be laid down on the map without causing upheaval from one end to another. Dave Charters, Go Triangle's engineering and design manager, said it's because most of the tracks would run alongside existing roads, within DOT's right-of-way.

An estimated 45 residences would be displaced, along with 20 businesses and institutions. Drivers on Erwin Road would adjust to making right turns, only, when entering or leaving most businesses. In Chapel Hill, Finley Golf Course would redesign its 17th hole.

After the Federal Transit Administration's recent approval, and a follow-up evaluation expected in a couple of months, Go Triangle will be able to purchase land for the project and tackle the final engineering work – a three-year task. Private developers may begin to look more closely at opportunities around those planned station sites.

"As we reach each milestone for the project, it's another big step going forward," Charters said. "It's a signal to developers that the project is more real."

Bruce Siceloff: [919-829-4527](tel:919-829-4527), bsiceloff@newsobserver.com, [@Road_Worrier](#)

DURHAM-ORANGE LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT PROJECT

A 17-mile, double-track line from UNC Hospitals to Duke/VA medical centers and downtown Durham, ending at Alston Avenue. With 17 stations.

Where the trains will go: Follow N.C. 54, I-40 and U.S. 15-501, travel up the median of Erwin Road and then follow the N.C. Railroad tracks.

Park and ride: 5,100 parking spaces at 8 stations.

Light-rail trains: Powered from overhead electric wires. Each train starting with one or two cars, with future option for three cars. Each car seats 40-60, with up to 125 riders including those standing.

Service hours: 5:30 a.m. to midnight. Every 10 minutes during morning and afternoon rush hours, otherwise every 20 minutes.

Expected travel time, end to end: 42-44 minutes.

Cost: \$1.6 billion: 50 percent federal, the rest shared state and local.

Timetable, depending on funding: Construction starts 2019, service starts 2026.

2040 projections

Durham-Orange corridor transit boardings each day: 40,000 (23,000 light rail, 17,000 bus)

Population near light-rail stations: 53,000

Jobs near stations: 119,000

Source: ourtransitfuture.com

Challenge to DOT's protected highway corridors before Supreme Court

WRAL.COM BY DEREK MEDLIN FEBRUARY 16, 2016

RALEIGH, N.C. — The future of a state law that allows transportation officials to hold down prices on land needed for future highways, even if they don't pay property owners for decades, was left up to North Carolina's Supreme Court on Tuesday.

The law has left thousands of property owners in Wake, Johnston, Forsyth, Cumberland, Cleveland and other counties stuck with real estate unlikely to appreciate in value, and dozens of them filled the court's chambers as the justices heard arguments.

"It's made an old man of me," said Gene Kirby, who has battled the state for more than three decades over developing land he owns in High Point.

"It's upsetting to own a piece of property you can't do what you want to with," Kirby said. "The state has set the rules, and we have to like it or lump it."

Attorney Matthew Bryant, who represents Kirby and other property owners, said the law, known as the Map Act, unfairly cheats owners out of money their land could get on the open market in order to give taxpayers a better deal.

"The state has imposed indefinite, perpetual development restrictions on these owners' properties for the sole and single purpose of price control," Bryant told the justices.

The Map Act, named because it prohibits new construction or subdividing property appearing on maps showing highway routes, is so far-reaching it dwarfs other government powers such as zoning restrictions that limit private property, he said. Opponents say North Carolina's law goes further than similar regulations in about a dozen states, from Nebraska to New Jersey.

"These states have all recognized there's a difference — a constitutional difference — between telling an owner he can't build too close to a neighbor's house and telling that same owner you can't build there because some day, in the unannounced future, at some unknown time, the state is going to want that property," Bryant argued.

The price freeze allows state highway builders to stretch out the time until construction, leaving people like 73-year-old Walter Simpkins in limbo. He's been unable to cash in on rising property values in growing Wake County because of highway plans targeting his 40-acre farm off Ten-Ten Road since 1996, he said.

The southern sections of the N.C. Highway 540 toll road has been held up for two decades due to environmental considerations and lack of money.

"I haven't been able to move on with my life because they've got my hands tied," Simpkins said after the court hearing. "I can't develop it, sell it or do anything with it until they decide what they want to do with it — if I'm still living at that time."

A lower court ruled in the lawsuit last year that the state had effectively taken private property along a planned route for a Forsyth County highway when its map froze development nearly two decades ago.

The years of lost land value could cost taxpayers \$200 million or more to pay property owners if the decision isn't overturned by the Supreme Court, state Transportation Secretary Nick Tennyson said last year.

The state House voted last year to repeal the Map Act, but the legislation stalled in the Senate.

Solicitor General John Maddrey, the state's top appeals lawyer, argued Tuesday that the Map Act is as legitimate as zoning that limits conflicts between industry and homeowners or rules banning construction in flood-prone areas. The Map Act merely regulates a property's uses, he said.

"They're designed to harmonize the public's need in the future with what a private property owner can do with his or her property," Maddrey said, adding that property owners get a tax break because the land remains undeveloped.

For Pat Johnson, such discounts don't pay for the time she lost with her husband, who died of cancer in late 2014.

"We should've spent the last 10 years on the beach somewhere instead of fighting this crap," said Johnson, who owns 60 acres near the intersection of Kildaire Farm and Holly Springs roads in the path of N.C. 540. "You can put a man on the moon in 10 years, but you can't build a road in 20. That's crazy."

The Supreme Court's ruling could take several months.

Board looks for input on transportation needs

THE HERALD SUN BY LAUREN HORSCH FEBRUARY 23, 2016

DURHAM -- The Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization is settling in on creating its 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan, and is looking for public input on its goals and objectives.

So far the board has drafted eight goals it wants to pursue for transportation planning. The goals range from protecting the environment and connecting people, to improving infrastructure conditions and stimulating economic vitality.

Each of the eight goals outlined by the organization then has objectives and performance measures that would quantify the work being done.

Under the goal of connecting people, the objective is to "[c]onnect people to jobs, education and other important destinations using all modes (of transportation)."

Breaking it down more, the performance measures range from tracking the percentage of "work and non-work trips by auto less than 30 minutes" and the "miles of sidewalks and bike lanes" to the "ratio of sidewalk, bike lanes and multi use paths to population."

During the board's meeting Feb. 10, Andy Henry with the city of Durham's Transportation Department said the performance measures are what are most likely going to change over the next few months as the master plan gets hammered out.

"Now staff will work on these things and see if we have the data," he said.

Henry reminded the board that the master plan is done in conjunction with the N.C. Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization -- that operates with municipalities in and around the capital.

"We don't have to have the same goals and objectives ... but we're going to try and keep this as close as possible," Henry said.

During the meeting Durham City Councilman Don Moffitt, who sits on the DCHC organization, wanted to make sure that they were going to get comments on the plan not only from the the Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission but also the Environmental Affairs Board.

Board Chairman Steve Schewel said the draft plan was something the board "could be proud of."

With the draft completed the MPO now looks to the public and other stakeholders to share thoughts on the plan.

The MPO will hold a public hearing March 9 at 9 a.m. on the second floor of City Hall. It'll also host a "drop-in public workshop" where individuals can swing by the Durham Station at 515 W. Pettigrew St. and provide comments on the plan any time between 4 and 7 p.m. on March 17.

The comments provided by the public will help shape how the MPO revises the transportation plan moving forward.

To view the plan and make comments visit <http://bit.ly/1oxYllu> online.

Cyclists could have priority on some Durham streets

WRAL.COM BY ARILLE CLAY FEBRUARY 22, 2016

Durham, N.C. — A grassroots effort to keep cyclists safe is growing in Durham, and some streets could soon be designated as "bicycle boulevards."

Austin, Texas, and Portland, Ore., already have the concept in place that gives cyclists priority over drivers on certain streets.

"They're neighborhood streets – very calm neighborhood streets – that have been identified for being ideal for bike priority streets," said Aaron Lubeck, a member of the Durham Bicycle Boulevard Group.

The group wants to take already quiet roadways in the city and make them even calmer for cyclists by pushing drivers to busier thoroughfares. They have proposed Watts Street as a test site.

"Bikes are enhanced as a priority over cars," Lubeck said. "Cars have to divert off every four to eight blocks, so whatever through-traffic there was goes away."

People who live and park on bike boulevards would still have ample access to them, he said.

Bicycle boulevards should appeal to less-experienced cyclists who don't feel confident enough to use bike lanes on busy roads, he said.

"For me, it's a matter of access," he said. "My son turns 10 next month, and the network (of bike lanes) we have right now doesn't serve kids."

Durham City Councilman Don Moffitt supports the plan, saying he especially likes that it is a cost-effective solution that would require minor changes, such as the purple Bicycle Boulevard street signs and bike-friendly barriers.

"(These are) infrastructure improvements that don't cost a lot of money but can bring a big difference to the city," Moffitt said.

This matter is still in the development phase, with Lubeck working alongside the city's Transportation Department. Moffitt is optimistic, though, saying he would like to see testing of the boulevards by the end of the year.

Fewer drivers? Better bus service? Bike lanes? Rail? Tell the transit planners.

BULL CITY RISING BLOG POSTED BY LISA SORG FEBRUARY 22, 2016

OK, I'll be 80 by the time the 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan goes into effect. But provided I'm still on this planet, I'll want safe sidewalks — better for walking (maybe even running!) on my octogenarian feet. I'll want efficient bus service — so I can go to the movies and bars without having to drive. And I'll want passenger and commuter rail — because I plan to work and travel until I die with my boots on.

That's why I took a survey conducted by the Durham-Chapel-Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization about what transit should look like over the next 30 years. The poll is short, but does require some careful consideration in the ranking of your priorities.

April 1 is the deadline to respond.

Here's the press release in full:

"[The Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization \(DCHC MPO\)](#) is seeking public feedback on the draft goals and objectives for its 2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan, which will drive future policies and decision-making processes for highway, bicycle, pedestrian, and transit projects.

Residents and stakeholders can now review and provide input on the draft goals, objectives, and performance measures using a variety of methods:

- Complete a short [online survey](#).
- Visit the [DCHC MPO Website](#) and provide comments directly by [email](#).
- Attend a public hearing with local elected officials on Wednesday, March 9 at 9 a.m. in the Durham City Hall Committee Room, located at 101 City Hall Plaza.
- Attend a drop-in public workshop on Thursday, March 17, between 4 and 7 p.m. at the Durham Station Transportation Center, located at 515 W. Pettigrew Street.

Posted by [Lisa Sorg](#) on February 22, 2016 at 06:24 PM | [Comments \(0\)](#)

<http://www.bullcityrising.com/2016/02/fewer-drivers-better-bus-service-bike-lanes-rail-tell-the-transit-planners.html>

Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit forges ahead as feds give nod

THE HERALD SUN BY LAUREN HORSCH FEBRUARY 28, 2016

DURHAM — There's still a decade standing between Durham County and the proposed light rail transit system, but GoTriangle is moving full steam ahead with plans for the line now that the Federal Transit Administration has signed off on the combined final environmental impact statement and record of decision.

The federal sign-off came on Feb. 11 and since then GoTriangle has been bracing for the next steps in planning the 17-mile line running from southwest Chapel Hill to east Durham.

Patrick McDonough, manager of planning and transit-oriented development at GoTriangle, said in 2005 there were about 175,000 daily travelers across the Durham-Orange corridor but by 2035 that number will surge to about 231,000.

As the GoTriangle hits another milestone in the project — which is one of the first transit projects in the U.S. that completed an accelerated two-year review timeline — it's reiterating why it believes the project is right for the area.

McDonough said the transit line would have returns in the area on mobility, investment and equity.

In 2011 the commute between Manning Drive in Chapel Hill and Cameron Boulevard in Durham was about 20 minutes during peak travel times. Since 2011 the lanes on U.S. 15-501 have been widened and commute times peaked at 19 minutes in 2015.

“The Durham-Orange Light Rail will not be subject to traffic congestion,” McDonough said. “It’s going to speed access across the two communities for everybody using it.”

While the light rail looks to expand access to parts of Durham and Chapel Hill for those who otherwise wouldn’t have been able to commute to work in about 40 to 45 minutes, it’s also looking to create a multimodal hub.

McDonough said in downtown Durham at the proposed Pettigrew Street station there’s work being done to create a “hub” of transportation. That station would be near not only the Durham Station bus transportation center, but also the Amtrak station. There’s planning done in order to have a “kiss and ride,” the bus station, opportunities to take Uber or Lyft and a single lane of traffic moving east toward the American Tobacco Campus, beyond the light rail track.

“If you’ve come to downtown Durham without a car, and you want to keep going without a car, this multi-function hub makes it easy to do so,” he said.

As far as the return on investment for the light rail, McDonough said, it is projected to be an economic boon.

GoTriangle consulted the Development, Planning and Financing Group to do an analysis that showed the economic impact of a light rail transit line in the two municipalities and statewide.

It found that a light rail system would bring in \$4.7 billion in “additional economic output in Durham and Orange counties every year,” McDonough said. An additional \$600 million statewide annually. It would also bolster a projected \$175 million in tax revenue a year.

It would also contribute to the creation of at least 1,750 direct and indirect jobs during the construction phase.

Currently the cost estimate for the project ranges from \$1.6 to \$1.8 billion, but funding is in doubt as GoTriangle awaits the beginning of the North Carolina General Assembly’s short session in April.

During the last legislative session, funding for light rail projects was capped at \$500,000. The state House of Representatives later voted to remove the cap, but the state Senate wasn’t able to get it on its agenda before the close of the legislative session, thus leaving it in legislative limbo.

“Everybody right now is focused on ‘Can that be done?’,” McDonough said of the cap removal.

The light rail plan had scored well with the strategic transportation investments law (STI), which uses a “data-driven scoring and local input” to help determine what projects would get funding through the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

The Durham-Orange line was slated to receive \$138 million through STIP, but the budget provision threw a wrench in that funding projection.

“The cap basically tampered with the STI,” McDonough said.

One of the main topics of conversation around light rail is the availability of affordable housing near the 17 proposed stations. While GoTriangle isn’t in the business of dictating how that works — rather the municipalities decide — it is working on ways to determine how to equitably serve all riders on the light rail and other transit services.

“The access to jobs for zero-car households and folks on lower levels of the income scale goes up significantly (with light rail),” McDonough said.

Using the example of Durham residents who live near the Holton Career and Resource Center in east Durham, there are about 37,000 jobs available within 45 minutes of commuting time in 2016. By 2026, when the light rail is slated to be finished, that number jumps to 69,700.

GoTriangle is also looking to create better ways of charging fares and how those fares impact lower-income residents, who might not be able to shell out \$76.50 for a monthly pass, but rather can pay \$4.50 for a day pass or \$16.50 for a weekly pass. A regular one-way fare would cost \$2.25.

“What we witnessed on our own at Durham Station is ... if it's a pass for \$20 or \$25 you may need something in the \$1 to \$5 range,” Natalie Murdock, Interim Manager of Communications and Public Affairs at GoTriangle said. “It kind of forces a lot of folks to do that daily pass, so they can't get that benefit of having that monthly pass.”

Now as the impact statement and the record of decision is OK'd by the feds, GoTriangle is looking to complete the engineering stage of it, which usually takes about three years.

Murdoch said after the engineering phase GoTriangle would move toward the design phase.

“Currently we're at 30 percent (of the) engineering, but we have to get from that to 100 percent,” she said.

“It's a lot of working with our cities and towns, and all of our stakeholders and partners,” Jeffrey Sullivan, public involvement associate with GoTriangle said. “(It's) a lot of coordination with Duke, UNC, a lot of working with communities and neighborhoods to make sure that those hot topic issues those things that people are , they know about but are a little concerned, working through those details making sure that we get to a point where in general everybody feels good before we start construction.”

So now it'll be much more “hands on” work with the municipalities and residents along the line, Murdoch said.