January 11, 2022

Dear Chair Weaver and members of the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro MPO Board:

We are local volunteer-led organizations that advocate for safe and inclusive transportation systems that enable community members to walk, bike, or take transit to reach jobs, retail, social services.[1] We are gravely concerned by rising rates of injuries and deaths on our streets and roadways. We are writing to ask the DCHC MPO Board to work with staff, local jurisdictions, and NCDOT to take immediate steps to evaluate why our efforts to improve safety are not working and to chart a path forward that prevents the fatalities and serious injuries occurring on our transportation network.

On New Year's Eve, two middle school students crossing the street in a crosswalk were hit by someone driving a car on Estes Drive in Chapel Hill. Both were severely injured, and one is still in intensive care. On December 22, a man crossing West Club Boulevard in Durham in a crosswalk was hit by someone driving a car. He died one week later. This is the reality of traffic violence throughout the DCHC MPO region.

The presentation in your agenda packet tells the story—each year, the goal for the annual rate of fatalities and serious injuries has been dropping, while each year the rate of fatalities and serious injuries has been increasing. Meanwhile, the state's ambitious goal of reducing fatalities and injuries by one half by 2035 has not changed. Therefore, the goal for 2022 is a 13.8 percent reduction in the fatality rate and a 21.7 percent reduction in the serious injury rate. While we support these targets, given recent trends, while they may look good on paper, they are meaningless in practice.

Local governments are certainly committing to do better. Vision Zero plans adopted by NCDOT in 2015, the City of Durham in 2017, and by Chapel Hill in 2021 set ambitious goals for zero deaths or serious injuries across all modes of transportation. Local governments have begun to dedicate staff time and capital resources towards developing new and improved facilities for vulnerable road users. But despite these efforts, our streets have become more dangerous.

Business-as-usual is not going to get us to Vision Zero. The NCDOT, MPO and local governments have spent more than a decade stating that they will place the safety of all road users–people driving, walking, biking, or using transit–at the forefront of our planning priorities. Though we do not question their intentions, their actions are not working. They still make decisions that prioritize reducing driver delay over safety. Our systems are insufficient; our strategies are disjointed; and our priorities are conflicting.

We appreciate that both MPO staff and NCDOT staff plan to follow-up on this agenda item with additional information about what more can be done. In addition, the recently enacted

[1] BikeDurham is a Durham-based non-profit organization that advocates for access to safe, affordable, and sustainable transportation for everyone regardless of who they are or where they live. NEXT Chapel Hill-Carrboro is a non-profit made up of community members and leaders who are inspired by our community's vibrancy and values, and who see opportunities to enhance our quality of life through promoting diversity, inclusiveness, economic growth, transportation options, and housing choices. The Carrboro Bicycle Coalition is a non-profit organization of local residents dedicated to building a network of cyclists in the greater Carrboro region and actively working to promote all types of cycling in Carrboro and the surrounding communities. BACH is a bicycle advocacy group in Chapel Hill working to foster a bike friendly culture in town.

Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act requires NCDOT to perform a Vulnerable Road User Safety Assessment which analyzes the transportation network from a safe systems approach with a special focus on vulnerable road users such as bicyclists, motorcyclists, and pedestrians. (Sec. 11111 of the bill.) This will be a useful effort. However, these studies and reports, on their own, will be inadequate to meet the moment of our transportation safety crisis.

We believe the MPO Board needs to take additional steps to ensure real action is taken to improve transportation safety. The MPO board must make specific requests to lay the groundwork for future action. Therefore, we ask that NCDOT and the MPO's NCDOT members and staff representatives provide the following information and data to the Board over the next few months:

- **Review and propose modifications to NCDOT and local procedures relating to the safety of all users.** We are concerned that current procedures continue to prioritize vehicular throughput over safety (e.g., Section 7.9 of the 2050 MTP lists several strategies for reducing driver delay that would make intersections more dangerous for people walking or biking). Recently, one of our NEXT Chapel Hill-Carrboro members submitted an online request that a local government provide a protected pedestrian phase at an intersection along a major state road, the member was told "NCDOT will not separate the pedestrian phase without significant pedestrian counts or a pattern of targeted correctable collisions."[2] In other cases, NCDOT prohibits traffic control devices on certain roadways even where there is heavy existing or potential crossing activity. These policies require that local advocates and governments make significant efforts even to collect the data NCDOT requires to consider changing the vehicular status quo to protect the safety of people outside of cars, especially our most vulnerable citizens like children and the elderly, with no guarantee of action.

- **Review and propose modifications to NCDOT and local government engineering designs and policies to ensure they adequately protect vulnerable road users.** Compared with designs used in other parts of the country like Seattle and Boston, or forward-looking guidance issued by organizations such as NACTO, NCDOT and local government roadway designs often treat pedestrians and bicyclists as afterthoughts. For example, the roundabouts at Estes Drive and North Greensboro Road in Carrboro and along Old Chapel Hill Road in Durham include no bicycle accommodations, forcing people on bicycles to ride with vehicles through the circle or dismount and walk their bicycles on the sidewalk. These inadequate designs were implemented despite requests from local advocates and advisory groups, and superior examples from numerous best practices from around the country.

- **Analyze and report on non-MPO transportation expenditures in the past five years for safety projects within the MPO boundaries.** The MPO Board should ensure that we are spending the maximum amount of federal and state funding on safety improvements to our streets, and that none of the funding is being redirected towards other projects.

[2] https://seeclickfix.com/web_portal/zLnotryMveH48bsTrfxSbSYH/issues/11117832

- **Review the updates to NCDOT complete streets guidelines**. They have been under development and may be completed, and Board and public review would allow us to evaluate whether they are adequate for the region's needs.

Ensuring the safety of the most vulnerable transportation users should be our top priority. Occupants of cars are safer than ever before because of improvements in automobile design. The human body has not received similar upgrades. Impacts from fast-moving cars (which grow larger and heavier every year) cause serious injury. People will not feel safe traveling by walking, bicycling, or transit (which is vital as we work to address our climate crisis) unless our transportation system protects their safety. For the MPO's efforts to increase non-auto mode share to succeed, we need to reengineer our transportation network so that biking, walking, and transit trips can be made safely.

Moreover, the Governor's Executive Order No. 246, signed just last week, directs NCDOT to develop a Clean Transportation Plan that recommends strategies including the "increased availability of non-vehicle transportation modes." With this statement, the governor has emphasized that NCDOT must treat all users of the transportation network as a priority, not just cars and trucks.

Vision Zero is an ambitious goal. Unfortunately, despite years of work, we are further than ever from zero fatalities and zero injuries. The MPO Board has an opportunity to help the local jurisdictions and NCDOT pivot towards making improvements that enhance safety for vulnerable roadway users. We hope you will embrace this opportunity. We look forward to engaging with you on this issue throughout 2022.

Very truly yours,

John Tallmadge, Executive Director	Molly DeMarco Geoff Green Martin Johnson	Heidi Perry, Board Chair	John Rees, Chair
BikeDurham	NEXT Chapel Hill Carrboro	Carrboro Bicycle Coalition	Bicycle Alliance of Chapel Hill (BACH)
bikedurham.org	nextnc.org	bikecarrboro.org	bikechapelhill.org