

## Light rail plan makes Pettigrew Street a 'transitway'

The News and Observer By Jim Wise January 15, 2015

DURHAM — Triangle Transit last week brought forth a new idea for the proposed light-rail line in Durham, which involves converting downtown Pettigrew Street into a multi-purpose "transitway."

Up to now, the plan was to build light-rail tracks alongside the existing rail lines used by Amtrak and Norfolk Southern freight trains. The new plan shifts most of the light-rail track slightly to the south, and moves some of the proposed station sites.

The change offers some advantages, said Patrick McDonough, senior planner with Triangle Transit (TTA), such as moving the downtown station closer to American Tobacco and improving access for neighborhoods near Alston Avenue and N.C. Central University.

But it also requires some major study on how to handle automobile traffic downtown, and negotiations with property owners along the new route who would not have been affected before – including Duke University.

The new alignment also all but eliminates the prospect of elevated rail tracks that would create a "great wall" between the downtown core and the American Tobacco-DPAC district to the south.

"Which we're ecstatic about," said Dan Jewell, president of the Durham Area Designers group devoted to good urban design. "I am glad the great wall is gone."

### The 'transitway'

Re-routing the Durham-Chapel Hill Light Rail Transit System – as the line is formally called – came about because the North Carolina Railroad (NCRR), which owns the railroad corridor through downtown, has plans of its own, McDonough said.

The NCRR, which is publicly owned but leases its tracks to Norfolk Southern, plans to add tracks to handle increased freight and passenger traffic. That didn't leave room for the double track Triangle Transit needs for its light-rail system running from Alston Avenue in East Durham to UNC Hospitals.

Pettigrew Street, which actually is within the NCRR's 200-foot wide right-of-way, presented an apparently workable alternative.

The proposed Pettigrew Street Transitway is, arguably, the greatest departure from the original plan.

From Chapel Hill Street east past Dillard Street, Pettigrew would become one-way, with a single, eastbound lane for private motor vehicles and light-rail tracks in the middle and north side (westbound) lane.

Buses and emergency vehicles, though, would be allowed to use the transitway's westbound lane (closest to the existing railroad embankment), preserving access to the Durham Station bus depot.

The downtown light-rail station, originally planned between Duke and Chapel Hill streets at the former Amtrak station site, is moved east, next to the bus terminal.

### No wall alternative

The new route also calls for closing a section of Pettigrew Street between Erwin Road and Campus Drive, and relocates the eastern terminal to the west side of Alston Avenue.

Moving the Alston station, McDonough said, eliminates the need for TTA to share a new bridge with the NCRR, and affords better access to N.C. Central University via Grant and Lincoln streets.

For downtown residents and urban designers, the new alignment is a relief. With the light rail expected to add as many as 150 trains per day running through downtown, consultants working on safety improvements at Durham grade crossings had suggested raising the existing railroad bed 10 feet and lowering Mangum and Blackwell/Corcoran streets to run through tunnels under the tracks.

The idea met vehement opposition from residents who saw the proposal as further dividing the downtown that the railroad already divides. "For the time being," the wall remains on the area's long-range transportation plan, city Transportation Director Mark Ahrendsen said, but with the light rail set apart from the freight tracks, the great wall is for all practical purposes off the drawing boards.

Downtown homeowner Marcia McNally said that's a "first step" toward knitting downtown's two sides of the tracks together.

"But we have many more opportunities to do a splendid job in the process of designing light rail as it comes through our city," McNally said.

## **Triangle Transit floats Pettigrew Street light-rail line option**

The Herald-Sun By Ray Gronberg Jan. 13, 2015 @ 04:51 PM

DURHAM — Triangle Transit wants to put the downtown portion of a Durham-to-Chapel Hill light-rail line in Pettigrew Street rather than close to the existing tracks of the N.C. Railroad.

Eventually, the change would lead to the conversion of several stretches of Pettigrew Street into a "transitway" primarily for trains and buses. The targeted portions reach from Erwin Road near Duke University to Alston Avenue in east Durham.

The proposal surfaces as Triangle Transit tries to strike a deal with the N.C. Railroad for use of its right of way, which at 200 feet wide covers much of Pettigrew Street along with the tracks that now handle trains for the Norfolk Southern Corp. and Amtrak.

David King, Triangle Transit's general manager, presented the idea to City Council members and County Commissioners Tuesday morning.

"Sometimes challenges become opportunities," King said, alluding to the difficulties involved in securing permission to use right of way that N.C. Railroad officials covet for its long-term, 100-year value as a freight corridor. "We've been referring to this as 'Operation Silk Purse' for that very reason."

King and city administrators say the change could bring some major benefits, provided that further examination shows that any negatives are manageable.

Mayor Bill Bell, who now chairs Triangle Transit's board, also endorsed the idea.

"When I first saw this represented, immediately I thought it was the right fit," Bell said. "This is the right way to go."

If the plan unfolds as King and his staff explained it, the portions of Pettigrew Street closest to Duke would be closed entirely to cars, trucks and buses. Triangle Transit would have to create new driveways for a few buildings that now use the street as their primary access point.

The actual transitway would begin when the corridor reaches downtown. From West Chapel Hill Street to Dillard Street, builders would embed new tracks in the existing pavement, leaving room only for one-way car and truck traffic.

But the design would allow buses — the Durham Area Transit Authority's, primarily — to drive on the pavement over the tracks in the periods between trains.

That would allow them continued easy access to the city's Durham Station bus terminal. And one of the major benefits of the plan, as Triangle Transit sees it, is that it could put a boarding platform for the light-rail line at Durham Station beside the terminal itself, rather than across the way at the Amtrak station.

The change would bring the line that much closer to the American Tobacco complex and the Durham Performing Arts Center, two of downtown's signature attractions. And it could undercut the case some consultants have made for elevating the existing N.C. Railroad tracks to "grade-separate" existing crossings at Blackwell and Mangum Streets.

"That happening if light rail is [operating on Pettigrew] at grade is unlikely," city Transportation Director Mark Ahrendsen said. "I just don't see it."

From Dillard Street east, there's room enough that regular two-way car and truck traffic can continue following the arrival of the light-rail line in about a decade.

The line would end at a station just east of Grant Street, a north-south road that passes the site of the former Fayette Place apartment complex, land that's a major redevelopment target for the Durham Housing Authority.

Grant Street itself links up to a street network that offers easy access to the northern portion of N.C. Central University's campus.

The change in placement of the line isn't necessarily set in stone at this point, as officials want to hear from the public, rework construction-cost estimates and figure out where traffic denied the use of Pettigrew Street would go.

But they're working against the clock, as a Congressional mandate gives them until late February of 2016 to complete the project's environmental-impact statement. As part of that, they have to nail down the routing, resolving uncertainties in Chapel Hill's Meadowmont area and Durham's U.S. 15-501 corridor along with those downtown.

With 13 months to go, Triangle Transit officials "are guardedly optimistic we can get to the finish line," King said when Councilman Eugene Brown asked about the feasibility of meeting the Congressional deadline.

Bell and King also noted that the agency has to figure out how to fund the project.

Officials have long assumed that half the money needed for a line that's likely to cost about \$1.8 billion in actual year-of-construction cash will come from the federal government. Local-option sales taxes in Durham and Orange counties will supply another 25 percent.

The problem is that the initial planning assumed the state would supply the remaining 25 percent, as it did last decade for a light-rail line in Charlotte. But the Republicans who now control the N.C. General Assembly have capped the state's potential contribution, in a way that means it will cover no more than about 10 percent of the remaining cost.

Gov. Pat McCrory's administration has signaled support for the project, which means it'll get more than the "zero state funds" allotted to it previously, Ahrendsen said.

As for the remaining 15 percent, King said Triangle Transit is now studying the possibilities for "value capture" or tax-increment financing via local property taxes.

That implies asking governments in Durham and Orange counties to give up at least a portion of new revenues they would otherwise expect from private-sector development sparked by the line's opening.

But City Councilman Steve Schewel said a Triangle Transit request like that would face "competitors," to include financing ordinary local-government services and subsidizing low-cost, "affordable" housing projects near the line's stations.

## Boulevard transit routing draws concern

The Herald-Sun By Ray Gronberg Jan. 14, 2015 @ 05:52 PM

DURHAM — Business owners along Durham-Chapel Hill Boulevard have started speaking up against the idea of placing a segment of a proposed light rail line next to the highway near its intersection with Garrett Road.

The re-routing of the segment would jeopardize two car dealerships and other businesses on the southeast side of the boulevard, Triangle Cycles owner Russell Reynolds and other critics of the idea say.

If local officials put the line next to the highway, "I'm going to lose the value of any kind of retirement, the building and the business" thanks to likely property takings, Reynolds told members of the local Transportation Advisory Committee on Wednesday.

Opposition also came from the owners of the Mark Jacobson and Sport Durst auto dealerships, which between them employ about 400 people after recent expansions and remodelings.

"The impact would be enormous," Jacobson said.

The business owners spoke after Triangle Transit officials gave the committee a progress report on the environmental-impact study they're preparing for the federal government.

A detailed look at routing options in the Garrett Road area is a key element of the effort, as some environmentalists are worried about the project's effect on nearby New Hope Creek.

The line has to cross the creek to get to Chapel Hill from downtown Durham.

To date, Triangle Transit has favored a routing that involves erecting a new bridge over the creek, about 600 yards southeast of the boulevard.

But in 2011, members of the New Hope Creek Corridor Advisory Committee pressed officials to consider a next-to-the-boulevard routing. While still needing a new bridge, putting it in an area that's already been disrupted would minimize the project's effects on plants and wildlife, they argued.

State regulators agreed, so Triangle Transit cooked up a couple of options for changing the line's placement. One would put the line next to the boulevard from the Martin Luther King Jr. to a point about 290 yards southwest of the creek.

The other, like the agency's original routing, would start out along University Drive. It would then jog northwest toward the Garrett Road intersection, passing just behind Jacobson's used-car branch on its way to meeting the boulevard.

Officials from Durham city and county, Chapel Hill, Carrboro and Orange County are scheduled to resolve the still-open routing questions in the fall, after Triangle Transit finishes estimating the like cost, ridership and environmental effects of the choices.

Also pending are choices about the line's routing in Chapel Hill's Meadowmont area, its placement in downtown Durham and the location of a station at Duke University.

Reynolds appeared to favor the just-behind-the-businesses loop, saying it would "clean up" a wooded area sometimes used as a homeless encampment.

But the loop still has "business impacts," said Patrick McDonough, Triangle Transit's planning manager.

Elected officials on the Transportation Advisory Committee asked McDonough to make sure that the business owners receive notices about the public hearings that will precede their decision-making in the fall.

## **Delta drives passenger growth at RDU Airport**

The News and Observer.com Posted by Bruce Siceloff on January 15, 2015

Led by strong growth at the Delta Air Lines counter, Raleigh-Durham International Airport saw its airline passenger count grow to 9.5 million in 2014 – 3.8 percent more than in 2013.

It was RDU's best showing since 2008, but well short the airport's record 10.4 million travelers in 2000, when it was the hub of the former Midway Airlines.

"Despite capacity cuts airlines have made over the past several years, we have been fortunate to have additional seats and flights introduced into our market in the past two years," RDU president and CEO Michael Landguth said in a statement. "As we have said before, if seats are available, our customers will book them."

Delta and its regional carriers added more flights and brought in larger aircraft to serve more travelers at RDU in 2014, increasing their combined passenger count by 10 percent to claim a 29.6 percent share of the airport's total business. Southwest and its Airtran subsidiary saw their combined traffic drop by 1.7 percent at RDU, where they now have a 22.2 percent share.

Some of the airport's growth was focused on recently added nonstops to the West Coast. United added a second daily flight to San Francisco, and Delta added second daily departures on peak days of the week to Los Angeles.

Delta also increased flights to Las Vegas, Philadelphia and several Florida destinations.

## **South Durham intersection getting new roundabout**

The Herald-Sun By Ray Gronberg Jan. 21, 2015 @ 08:06 PM

DURHAM —N.C. Department of Transportation engineers are getting ready to install another "roundabout" or traffic circle in Durham, this time in the southern part of the city at the intersection at Barbee, Herndon and Massey Chapel roads.

Construction should begin in the spring, after the agency's Division 5 staff chooses a contractor to do the actual work. DOT has set aside \$550,000 to pay for it.

The project comes because the intersection — on the route between The Streets of Southpoint area and south Durham neighborhoods like Parkwood — is seeing the sort of traffic volume and congestion that normally warrants an upgrade.

And city officials agree with DOT that "the roundabout would be a better traffic-control treatment at that location than a traffic signal," city Transportation Director Mark Ahrendsen said.

DOT opted to go with a roundabout in part because there aren't any turn lanes at the intersection, and a signal "would require" some, said Ben Upshaw, division design engineer.

Moreover, roundabouts are becoming the “preferred option” for some intersection upgrades because they’re “generally considered safer than” a traditional intersection, Upshaw said.

“Even though you might have some accidents, they’re generally not as severe as those at a signalized intersection,” he said.

Some work has already occurred at the Barbee/Herndon/Massey Chapel crossing, with crews moving utility lines that otherwise would be in the way.

But DOT and city officials are also finishing some of the necessary legal prep work involved in the project.

Part of the plan calls for the installation, at the state’s expense, of new sidewalk segments around the edges of the traffic circle. Today, the City Council will begin reviewing an agreement with DOT that would commit their government to maintaining the new walkways.

The utility relocations also required a deal with the city, as they involved moving water pipes. The two sides reached agreement on that last summer, the city agreeing to pay up to \$170,500 for the work.

The contractor Division 5 hires to build the roundabout will also move the city pipes, Upshaw said.

The existing intersection at Barbee, Herndon and Massey Chapel uses stop signs to regulate movements from either leg of Herndon Road. The crossing is also unusual for the northern leg of Herndon meeting the other roads at a sharp, 45-degree angle instead of the customary 90 degrees.

The arrangement makes for restricted sight lines.

Motorists approaching from the west on Massey Chapel have to contend with an off-camber jog to the right while passing through the crossing. In the middle of it, there’s also a utility manhole in the pavement to give unwary drivers an extra jolt.

As Upshaw noted, roundabouts have become DOT’s preferred option for upgrading many Durham intersections. Notable examples include a circle the former crossing of Mt. Moriah and Old Chapel Hill roads, and another the intersection of Erwin Road and N.C. 751.

DOT’s draft 10-year construction program would continue the trend, endorsing for example the idea of putting in a roundabout at Hope Valley Road and University Drive.

One of the agency’s congestion-management engineers in 2012 told area business leaders traffic in Durham likely would work “a lot better” if DOT replaced three-quarters of the city’s traffic lights with roundabouts.

The agency met with south Durham residents 2013 to sound them out on the Herndon/Barbee/Massey Chapel plan. Upshaw said they seemed to support the idea.

“People are becoming more familiar with” roundabouts, he added. “Years ago, you never knew how different neighborhoods were going to be receptive. But public perception of roundabouts is changing, and [the Herndon/Barbee/Massey Chapel plan] seemed to get quite a bit of positive feedback.”

## **I-40 bridge a boost for health, business**

The News and Observer.com (thedurhamnews.com) By Jim Wise January 22, 2015

DURHAM — A survey of people walking, running and cycling on the American Tobacco Trail near Southpoint mall suggests that its Interstate 40 bridge has boosted local health and the economy.

Results from May and June 2013 and the same time a year later showed:

- A 133 percent increase in use on the trail section studied;
- A 163 percent increase in calories burned;
- And a \$3.7 million increase in spending related to trips on the trail.

That's according to "Behavioral Effects of Completing a Critical Link in the American Tobacco Trail," a study released last week by the Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE) at N.C. State University.

The study was intended "to see the impacts on transportation, health and economic behavior in that area," said Sarah McCue with the state Department of Transportation, which sponsored the study.

"We were very interested in promoting the bicycle and pedestrian use over that bridge," McCue said. With the bridge, the American Tobacco Trail's long-separate north and south sections became a continuous 22-mile greenway from downtown Durham to Apex.

ITRE staff, N.C. State students and volunteer researchers collected 2013 data at two trail checkpoints, one north and one south of the bridge site, two miles apart. In 2014 they added a checkpoint near the bridge. At each checkpoint they kept counts of passersby, and asked them to fill out a 19-question survey.

Data collecting went on from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. on two weekdays and two weekend days each year. The researchers then used mathematical formulas to analyze the information and see what it had to say.

"Our thought was, back in 2012 and 2013 ... wouldn't it be great if we could get before data and then do an after study," said Thomas Cook, a program manager with ITRE.

"It's very seldom a before-and-after study (such as this) has been done," Cook said. "Usually somebody says, 'It would have been nice to have done that.'"

For example, the typical trail user was male, 26 to 54 years old, had an advanced degree and an annual household income between \$60,000 and \$119,999. That profile was the same before and after the bridge opened, and in both years the main reasons people gave for being out on the trail were recreation and exercise.

More than 90 percent of trail outings were round trips – out and back to the starting point. However, there was a 2 percent increase in travel from one point to another, using the trail to get somewhere rather than just for the pleasure of it; and a 4 percent increase in users who got to the trail on foot or bicycle rather than driving there.

"One of the more interesting findings was ... folks that lived to the north of I-40 tended to extend their trip over the bridge and use the trail for a longer distance," Cook said.

Overall, after cyclists and pedestrians could cross the highway, there was a 27 percent increase in per-trip distance (7.2 miles to 9.3 miles) and a 17 percent increase in active per-week use of the trail (138 minutes to 162 minutes).

That surprised Dale McKeel, bicycle-pedestrian coordinator with the city of Durham. "I guess new horizons to explore led people to increase the amount of time they were on the trail," McKeel said.

With the increase, according to the report, trail users who took the survey were meeting recommended physical activity guidelines – and burning an estimated 175 million more calories than before the bridge opened.

"We really wanted to get as well a rounded picture as possible of the variety of changes that might have taken place," Cook said, and the surveys asked about "spending patterns" – both related to the trips they were making at the time and, over the preceding year, "in terms of purchasing running, jogging, bicycling equipment, that sort of stuff.

"We had more people using the trail," he said. "That resulted in an increase in expenditures."

- Estimated direct spending on groceries, retail and restaurants went from \$2.4 million to \$6.1 million;
- Resulting state and local tax collections went from an estimated \$193,000 to \$522,000;
- Estimated direct and indirect effects of more spending included 43 more jobs and \$4.9 million more annual gross business revenue.

Cook's "ballpark" estimate of the study's cost was \$100,000, paid by the state DOT and the Helen and William Mazer and Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation.

"I hope that it will be a positive catalyst for ... construction of additional (bicycle-pedestrian) trails," he said.

The study report does acknowledge that its data "cannot show a true causal relationship between pre- and post-bridge changes in behaviors."

It adds, though, "It is difficult to attribute the majority of activity increases ... to any event other than the completion of the bridge."

## Parking still problem for Ninth Street

The News and Observer.com (thedurhamnews.com) By Jim Wise January 23, 2015

DURHAM — At noon one day last week, the Ninth Street business district appeared to be its usual bustling self with one discordant element in view: the public parking lot.

The free two-hour spaces along the street were getting heavy use, as was the free parking lot meant for shoppers at Harris Teeter and the other new businesses on Ninth Street's west side.

But in the public lot, where the city began charging \$1 an hour last June 1, 43 of the 48 spaces were empty, despite the rush of lunchtime trade going on. Later that day, at 5 p.m., only one of the lot's spaces was taken.

"A ghost lot," said Tom Campbell, co-owner of the Regulator Bookshop.

"No one ever parks there," said Dain Phelan, owner of Dain's Place pub. "It's uncanny how there can be no parking anywhere and that lot is 100 percent open."

In truth, people do park there: at night and on weekends when there's no charge. But the city instituted parking fees in hopes of covering some of the \$82,500 it pays to lease the lot and keep it available for the parking public.

But the public isn't paying.

"There is some utilization, but it's by no means significant right now," said city Transportation Director Mark Ahrendsen. "As long as people are finding free alternatives, that's probably what they're going to do."

'Hot topic'

So far, the free alternatives include the private lot next to the city-leased lot. Both are owned by CPGPI Regency Erwin, developer of the Harris Teeter and the new building, housing Panera Bread and the Duck Shop among other businesses, at the corner of Ninth Street and Hillsborough Road, that have opened within the past 18 months.

The private lot is meant to serve only those shops facing it, and prominent signs give notice that "unauthorized vehicles" may get towed. But shoppers willing to take a chance are using the lot and taking their trade elsewhere.

"We deal with it quite a bit, with people going across the street," said Austin Emory, manager at the Duck Shop. "It is definitely a hot topic," he said.



"I don't know that I would say we have noticed, specifically, people parking in our lot and walking across the street," said Regency Centers property manager Jay Kanik. "I can say that I've seen students and others leave their cars on our property for extended periods of time."

Also, he said, "The number of cars in our parking lot against the number of customers in our stores – that ratio has not gone unnoticed. ... Yes, it is a concern of ours."

Regency hasn't started towing cars "as of yet," Kanik said. Regency may add more signs "so that everybody is even more aware of the importance of parking and shopping on our property as opposed to parking and leaving our property."

"We want to be good neighbors," he said.

"We will take our cues from our tenants as to at what point and to what extent we need to protect the parking," Kanik said.

'For the principle'

The city's parking fee has affected older east-side merchants in different ways. When Market Street Coffee closed its Ninth Street shop in December, a notice on the door blamed business loss since the parking charge began.

Michael Bell, owner of the Hunky Dory vinyl and smokeware shop, said his August through mid-December sales figures for 2014 were \$8,000 below those for the same period a year earlier, when the city lot was still free.

At The Playhouse toy store, owner Donna Frederick said her sales have been down, and customers over the holidays "were just not happy" about the fee – "Not for the money," she said. "For the principle."

Vaguely Reminiscent owner Carol Anderson had a similar observation.

"It's not about the money," she said. "Our customers are well-heeled enough to afford a dollar to park. ... That's not the issue. It's the inconvenience."

Anderson said her business hasn't "grown by leaps and bounds, but neither was there a sharp decline" last year. The Regulator is attracting new customers from nearby developments across the street such as the Crescent Ninth Street apartments, but also losing some old ones, Campbell said.

"We're kind of swimming uphill, I think," he said.

Campbell said he hears customers concerned for the Regulator when they see the empty parking lot.

"They go, 'Are you doing OK?' Anyone driving past and seeing an empty lot and not knowing anything would just assume that this part of Ninth Street is dead," Campbell said.

"The other thing they say is, 'I WILL NOT pay to park on Ninth Street.' Over and over again I have heard that. They take it as a personal affront."

## **Road Worrier: Cost-conscious Wake transit planners get more bang from a bus**

The News and Observer By Bruce Siceloff January 26, 2015

RALEIGH — While Orange and Durham counties invest high hopes in a light-rail line that would run between UNC and Duke, old-fashioned buses are earning new respect as transit priorities in Wake County.

A 2011 Wake transit plan featured electric-powered light rail from Cary through downtown to North Raleigh, along with beefed-up bus service and diesel-locomotive commuter trains that would run at rush hour between Durham and Garner.

Light rail was always farthest off in Wake's future, but it remained first in the hearts of many transit advocates.

Buses are getting more attention this year in a transit rethink guided by a new county manager with transit experience, Jim Hartmann, and Oregon transit consultant Jarrett Walker.

County residents will be asked at public meetings over the next month and in an online survey through March 5 to ponder the issues Walker frames in a 92-page "Transit Choices" report released last week (online at [www.waketransit.com](http://www.waketransit.com)). County commissioners eventually are expected to draft a transit plan and ask voters in 2016 to consider paying for it with a half-cent sales tax.

Walker hasn't reached the point of gauging our preferences for buses and trains. He is focusing first on limited tax dollars and how best to spend them, asking two main questions:

- Concentrate on building transit ridership with frequent service along busy urban corridors – or on steering buses into every far-flung rural and suburban neighborhood?
- Invest heavily in the capital-intensive infrastructure needed for a rail line or bus rapid transit line – or in putting more buses on the road?

When he laid out the questions that way for an advisory group of government and civic leaders at a daylong meeting last week, buses came out on top.

Walker carved the 70-member Wake County Transit Plan Advisory Committee into nine groups, asking each to draft a transit plan for a county that will grow from 1 million residents this year to an expected 1.2 million in 2025.

He gave them a budget to work with, based on expected receipts from that half-penny tax. A light-rail line would consume half of that budget, he said.

Each of the nine groups called for more bus service. There was an emphasis on running buses every 15 minutes on Hillsborough Street, Capital Boulevard from downtown to Wake Forest, New Bern Avenue, South Saunders Street, Glenwood Avenue and other major routes.

Five also provided for more expensive bus rapid transit service. And seven of the nine included money for the Durham-to-Garner commuter trains.

None of the nine groups recommended light rail in their transit plans for Wake County. They said Wake couldn't afford it.

"It had nothing to do with whether you were – like me – a big proponent of light rail," said Will Allen III of Raleigh, a Triangle Transit board member who took part in the session. "When faced with the challenge of having a finite budget in today's world, we all decided we could get more bang for our buck by spending the money on other modes (of transportation)."

Walker's "Transit Choices" report suggests that putting more frequent bus service on under-served corridors could make Capital Area Transit more productive, generating revenues from the increased ridership to help recover the added costs.

And 15-minute bus service could change the lives of transit-dependent folks, including those under 18 and over 65, whose share of the Wake population is growing, and low-income residents with less access to automobiles, whose numbers are highest in Southeast Raleigh.

"It will allow people a lot more freedom to schedule their lives and be involved in things when you have a bus system that is much more frequent in service," said Corey D. Branch, a Raleigh Transit Authority board member who also

took part in last week's planning session. "With more frequency, all I have to do is go to a stop and jump on. I don't have to map out a schedule and figure out what time does my bus come."

Wake is more prosperous and growing faster than its neighbors to the west. But the cost-benefit argument isn't as strong for a mostly suburban light-rail route here as it is for an Orange-Durham line anchored at both ends by big universities with thousands of hospital patients, students and employees.

Last week's planning exercise could be an indication of how these questions will play out in Wake County over the coming year.

While none of the nine groups endorsed light rail, most of them agreed that the option should be included in March, when Walker presents three or four bus-and-rail scenarios for public consideration. Light rail is still in the running.

## **Durham police focus on pedestrian safety after rash of incidents**

abc11.com By Tamara Gibbs Tuesday, January 27, 2015 06:33PM

DURHAM (WTVD) -- A Durham man struck by a vehicle Monday near a popular trail has convinced police to beef up patrols at other crosswalks in the city.

Police said 37-year-old Roddy Flowers was seriously injured as he attempted to cross the 1500 block of Riddle Road.

Another pedestrian was hurt last week in Durham's Brightleaf Square. That's where officers on bicycles focused their efforts Tuesday.

Armed with pedestrian safety flyers, officers stopped 124 people on West Main, Gregson and Duke streets. Within the span of an hour, they noted 35 pedestrian violations.

Despite warning signs and other traffic calming efforts, several Triangle area cities rank high when it comes to pedestrian accidents.

According to a report published by the UNC Highway Safety Research Center, Charlotte, Raleigh, Greensboro, Durham, and Fayetteville made up the top five list of cities with a high number of pedestrian crashes.

## **Moped registration coming to NC, and more regulations are debated**

The News and Observer.com By Bruce Siceloff January 27, 2015

RALEIGH — North Carolina will require registrations and license plates for mopeds starting in July, and some state leaders also want to require liability insurance and place new restrictions on who can drive the little scooters.

Kelly Thomas, the state motor vehicles commissioner, told a legislative committee Tuesday that mopeds and their drivers are subject to more regulation in most states than in North Carolina. He recommended legislation to:

- Bar automobile drivers who have lost their licenses because of medical problems or impaired driving from operating a moped.
- Require a driver's license or state-issued ID card for all moped operators.
- Require moped operators to carry liability insurance.

- Outlaw mopeds on roads where the posted speed limit is 45 miles per hour or faster. Under state law, mopeds are supposed to be incapable of speeds greater than 30 mph.

"Most (moped) fatalities are on higher-speed roads, and it's kind of a no-brainer," Thomas said. "A low-speed vehicle on a high-speed road will lose."

Authorities reported 3,812 crashes involving mopeds from 2009 through 2013, including 115 fatal crashes. About one-third of these crashes and two-thirds of the deaths were on roads with speed limits of 45 mph or faster, according to state Department of Transportation crash statistics. Wake County led the state with 357 moped crashes, nine of them fatal.

Legislators said that requiring license plates for mopeds will help police with traffic enforcement. Sen. Joel Ford, a Charlotte Democrat, said it also will help law enforcement keep track of "individuals who are operating these mopeds who are committing criminal activity."

The new law requiring moped registration was enacted last year after the House rejected a Senate push for more extensive regulation, including a proposed insurance requirement. Some members of a joint House-Senate transportation oversight committee indicated Tuesday that they still think moped insurance – required in at least 19 other states, Thomas said – is a good idea here.

Thomas' recommendation to bar impaired drivers from operating mopeds highlights a major factor in moped use. Drivers who lose their licenses often turn to mopeds as their only legal means of transportation.

Among 833 moped operators involved in crashes in 2013, the automobile driver licenses had been revoked or suspended for 374 of them – mostly for driving while impaired, according to a DMV analysis. Only 114 of these moped operators had active driver's licenses.

"This is a tough issue," said Sen. Warren Daniel, a Morganton Republican. "We all recognize the benefit of allowing people who have made mistakes to have some way to get to work."

Daniel said he also worried that a move to outlaw mopeds on high-speed roads would mean barring them from all rural roads.

## MOPEDS IN NORTH CAROLINA

State law defines a moped as a small two- or three-wheel vehicle with no transmission, an engine no larger than 50 cubic centimeters, and a top speed capability of 30 miles per hour.

Drivers must be 16 or older and must wear motorcycle safety helmets. No driver's license or insurance is required.

Under a 2014 law that takes effect July 1, moped owners must register their vehicles and get license plates from the state Division of Motor Vehicles, paying an \$18 fee.

## Business leaders call for more NC transportation spending, but not for more taxes

The News and Observer By Bruce Siceloff January 28, 2015

- Gas tax ups and downs

The legislature has moved twice over the past decade to put an upper limit on rising gas tax rates. But in 2009, a tax ceiling that had been enacted two years earlier was converted to a floor, to close a gap in the DOT budget. Without that action in 2009, the tax rate would have dropped from 29.9 to 27.9 cents.

The tax rate, adjusted every six months, is 17.5 cents plus 7 percent of the average wholesale price for gasoline.

Now the gas tax is 37.5 cents per gallon, one of the highest in the United States. With the worldwide plunge in fuel prices in recent months, there are projections that North Carolina's tax rate could drop by 6 to 8 cents a gallon in July – reducing the DOT budget by \$300 million to \$400 million a year.

RALEIGH — North Carolina business leaders on Wednesday called for the legislature to increase state transportation spending by billions of dollars over the coming decade – but they refused to discuss possible new taxes.

"We're not endorsing any specific idea," Lew Ebert, president of the N.C. Chamber, told reporters. "We think that's what elected officials are here to do."

The state Department of Transportation said last year it expected by 2040 to take in only \$60 billion of the expected \$94 billion it will need just to maintain roads and bridges in their current condition.

That money gap is expected to grow even wider because the state's 37.5 cent-per-gallon gas tax rate – pegged by law to fuel prices that have plunged in recent weeks – is scheduled to drop by a projected 6 to 8 cents per gallon on July 1.

"Over 10 years, this is about a \$5 billion problem for North Carolina," Ebert said of the gas tax rate.

Gov. Pat McCrory promised last year to outline new transportation revenue proposals for consideration by the 2015 General Assembly, which began its work Wednesday. McCrory said in September he would call for a bond issue worth about \$1 billion to help pay for new road and bridge projects, but he has offered no hints about what else he will recommend.

Several studies have documented that North Carolina's transportation needs are growing sharply, with an additional 3 million residents expected by 2030. State and federal per-gallon gas tax collections are declining as average automobile fuel economy improves.

"We don't need to study this any more," Jerry Cook, vice president for government relations of Winston-Salem-based Hanesbrands, told reporters. "We know what the answer is, and it's time to act."

Ebert's organization, the state's leading business lobby, recently commissioned another study of the state's transportation money needs and their economic impact. He said the N.C. State University analysis will give legislators a menu of 16 options for new revenue. He gave reporters a few pages from the 79-page report but declined to discuss its contents or to mention any of its suggestions for tax increases.

"Our hope is some hybrid of those ideas is the best combination for North Carolina," Ebert said. "Some of it involves more efficient use of dollars, and some of it involves more new dollars."

The N.C. Chamber and other business groups have cheered the legislature's tax cuts over the past two years. Ebert declined to promise an endorsement of whatever state leaders propose for new transportation fees and taxes.

The full NCSU report, provided later by an N.C. Chamber spokeswoman, gives top marks to three options for raising more transportation money: Higher fees on heavy trucks, an increase in the highway use tax collected on automobile sales, and eventually a fee based on the miles traveled by each vehicle.

## Road Worrier: McCrory ponders how to pay for NC transportation needs

The News and Observer By Bruce Siceoff February 2, 2015

RALEIGH — During his first two years in office, Gov. Pat McCrory changed how North Carolina chooses the best uses for transportation dollars, and he spelled out his “25-year Vision” for transportation improvements from the mountains to the coast.

Now comes the hard part. At the start of his third year, McCrory may be ready this week to take the big next step: recommending new taxes and other means of shoring up our anemic financing for roads, transit and other transportation needs.

The Republican governor has said he'll give the 2015 General Assembly “targeted revenue recommendations” for filling a transportation funding deficit expected to reach between \$34 billion and \$94 billion by 2040.

McCrory accomplished more than many North Carolinians expected in 2013 when he overturned a politically entrenched highway spending system. He established a more open and objective Strategic Mobility Formula, which considers urban traffic congestion and other modern problems.

In September, when he set out priorities for upgrading ports and railroads, and for helping rural residents commute to cities within and outside state borders, McCrory started some new conversations about the future.

But how will McCrory pay for the transportation we need?

Whether he answers the question Wednesday in his State of the State speech or waits for another chance, we can speculate now about McCrory's options for new taxes and other ways to generate billions of transportation dollars.

We know what could work — on paper, at least. State agencies, study commissions and university experts have produced a shelf-full of reports on North Carolina's transportation money choices.

- **Borrowed money.** McCrory has offered no details, and his office has declined to provide documents, on his proposal in September for a \$1 billion bond issue to raise money primarily for rural highway projects — most of them rated as low priorities under his Strategic Mobility Formula.

- **Gas taxes.** Our new cars burn less gas per mile than our old cars. Since we pay gas taxes by the gallon, we're paying less for every mile of road. Meanwhile, per-mile construction and maintenance costs are rising — and our growing state needs more miles every year.

But you don't hear many calls to increase gas taxes, which are our chief source of transportation money (\$1.82 billion in 2013). In fact, the state gas tax is scheduled to fall sharply in July, because of a legislative formula that pegs the tax rate to plunging gas prices.

McCrory and the legislature might agree to set a new floor on the gas tax — let it fall a couple of pennies, so it counts as a “tax cut,” but not drop so low that it would cost the state Department of Transportation a few hundred million dollars each year.

- **DMV title and registration fees.** They're already higher here in North Carolina — where they yielded more than \$600 million in 2007 (before the recession cut car sales) — than in neighboring states.

- **Highway use tax on car sales.** This is our third major DOT revenue source (\$550 million in 2013), and at 3 percent the tax rate is lower in North Carolina than in neighboring states. A report from N.C. State University says a 1 percentage point increase would give DOT an additional \$170 million. Make that \$220 million if the legislature adds the highway use tax paid on leased cars – which now goes to the non-transportation General Fund.

- **Fund transfers.** The legislature takes \$257 million more in gas tax receipts and other transportation revenue each year and gives it to the General Fund. There are calls to end that transfer.

- **Mileage fees.** Also called odometer or VMT (vehicle miles traveled) taxes, these fees ignore differences in fuel economy.

Some states are experimenting with mileage fees, widely seen as an eventual replacement for gas taxes. There are privacy issues (based on widespread misunderstanding, NCSU says) and technological hurdles.

The NCSU study says 1.9 cents per mile would equal what North Carolina gets from gas taxes now. Higher fees could be set for heavy trucks.

- **Heavy truck fees.** Four states collect fees for heavy trucks – assessed by weight and by mile. In Oregon, the fee generates \$300 million a year.

- **Tolls.** One study says more tolling could bring North Carolina as much as \$250 million a year by 2020, and \$928 million by 2040 – but that would require a sea change in public sentiment. Tolls have limited use, geared mostly to busy expressways. Local drivers paid \$9.9 million in tolls to use the Triangle Expressway last year.

Opposition in Eastern North Carolina has squelched efforts to approve toll financing for the overdue overhaul of Interstate 95. Still, toll express lanes – with variable tolls that cost more when nontoll-lane traffic is slower – appear to be in the future as a means of paying for improvements to urban commuter routes.

- **Advertising, sponsorship and cost-recoupment fees.** Developers, heavy haulers and billboard owners pay only a portion of the cost of services they get from DOT, worth millions of dollars, sticking other taxpayers with this expense. DOT asked the legislature to consider raising these fees, and generating new revenue streams from other businesses that would sponsor such things as ferries, roadside cleanup and roadside assistance services.

It's too early to guess whether our tax-whacking legislature will go for any of these ideas – or whether they'll even hear them.