

Commissioners consider 'complete streets'

The Herald-Sun By Lauren Horsch May. 04, 2015 @ 04:56 PM

DURHAM — County Commissioners expressed concerns Monday about the safety of county residents who frequently travel by bicycle and pledged to help figure out ways to build “complete streets” in the county.

Their concerns came out of a presentation from the Durham Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission's (DBAP) by its chairman, Erik Landfried. The commission advises the City Council and County Commissioners on issues related to bicycles and pedestrians.

Landfried specifically wanted to discuss complete streets with the commissioners on Monday.

“What complete streets are, they are built for everyone,” he said. “They are for people of all ages and abilities ... it engages multiple stake holders through the (building) process.”

Landfried said turning streets into complete streets allows them to be safer for all travelers – including motorists, not just pedestrians.

DPAB's goal in 2015 is to urge local leaders to start the process of making streets in Durham complete streets. Landfried said the community would see fewer traffic-related fatalities and severe injuries.

During the later part of 2014 three individuals were killed in crashes involving motor vehicles in Durham and Chapel Hill, most notably Kent Winberry, an avid participant in Durham's biking community.

Landfried said over the past five years accidents involving pedestrians have increased 58 percent. He added that African-Americans make up 60 percent of the crash victims.

When it comes to complete streets in North Carolina, Landfried said Charlotte is leading the way in construction. In one example, he showed East Boulevard, which before construction had five lanes of travel. Those lanes caused issues for pedestrians who wanted to cross.

Now East Boulevard has only three travel lanes and large medians to help cut the pavement distance pedestrians must cross.

In Durham, Landfried said a portion of Main Street at Campus Drive was redesigned two years ago with the model of complete streets in mind.

It went from a four travel lanes to three with bike lanes and sidewalks in both directions.

“We'd like to see this be more outlined and added in more places,” he said. “There are still a lot of locations where the streets are designed strictly for motor vehicle traffic.”

Commissioners Chairman Michael Page questioned the statistic concerning African-Americans making up 60 percent of accident victims.

“What is the reason for that?” Page asked.

Landfried said he didn't know all of the reasons, but could speculate.

“I think one of the main reasons is that African-Americans in Durham ... walk more than other citizens, especially if you look at places like East Durham and the South Side community,” he said.

In those areas car ownership is lower and more residents use public transportation.

Page said he was concerned about how to address the problem.

"There is still not a lot of opportunity to ride your bike in bike lanes there," Page said.

Commissioner Brenda Howerton was also concerned for the residents of East Durham, due to their lack of sidewalks.

"We can talk about safety, obesity, all these things are pretty high in the African-American community," she said. "And we have so much right now in the press that is unsettling ... It appears that so much has not been implemented in that community. We don't want that in Durham."

She Howerton said the commissioners and the advisory group need to work and invest in communities in Durham that lack resources for safe pedestrians or cyclists.

The commissioners were also concerned with the commission's aging plan, outlined in 2006. Landfried said the commission would like to update it.

Commissioner Wendy Jacobs asked how that would be funded.

Landfried assured the board 80 percent of the funding for a new plan would come from a federal grant. Local funding would have to make up the other 20 percent.

"The biggest barrier right now isn't the funding ... it's the staff time and the staff resources," Landfried said. Only one city-county staffer is assigned to the commission.

Commissioner Ellen Reckhow said the commissioners are behind when it comes to support of complete streets.

"We need to pedal fast and catch up," she said. "I would hope that we will do this in the near future."

4-state Southeast high-speed rail compact being discussed

WRAL.com By Martha Waggoner, Associated Press Posted May 8, updated May 9

RALEIGH, N.C. — The nation's top transportation official says he's more optimistic that high-speed rail will eventually become a reality in the Southeast after Georgia and South Carolina expressed interest in a joint agreement between North Carolina and Virginia to study, coordinate and advocate for the project.

"You look across the country, the Northeast corridor is more than a constellation of states," U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx told The Associated Press this week. "That multistate coordination just hasn't existed as strongly here in the Southeast. And that would be a really key part of starting something big."

North Carolina and Virginia established a compact to promote high-speed rail years ago, and officials in Georgia and South Carolina are now discussing whether they should join.

Officials who advocate high-speed rail for the Southeast aren't talking about Japan-type speeds of 200 mph or more. Rather, the rails would allow for top speeds of 110 mph and average speeds between 85 mph and 87 mph. Speeds now top out at less than 80 mph.

Foxx met Wednesday in Raleigh with state Transportation Secretary Tony Tata, representatives from transportation departments in Georgia, Virginia and South Carolina, and others, including Amtrak officials, U.S. Rep. David Price and local officials. Foxx is a former mayor of Charlotte, which has a light rail system.

"I left the meeting very optimistic that there is an appetite for ramping up rail service," Foxx said.

The meeting was held two days before a Friday groundbreaking for an \$80 million Union Station transit hub in Raleigh, scheduled to open in 2017.

North Carolina is using more than \$500 million in recovery act funds to upgrade the rail line between Raleigh and Charlotte, while Virginia is doing environmental work necessary for higher-speed trains between Richmond, Petersburg and Raleigh, Foxx said.

The current demand isn't only for passenger rail but for lines that can handle a growing amount of freight coming to North Carolina ports in Wilmington and Morehead City, Tata said Friday.

Carlos Monje Jr., assistant secretary for transportation policy in the U.S. Transportation Department, warned at the Friday ceremony that Raleigh will grow from 425,000 people today to 727,000 in 30 years. Without more mass transportation, "it's going to be a mess," he said.

He sought support for funding that he said would allow other cities to build facilities similar to Raleigh's Union Station. Congress, he said, "hasn't funded high-speed rail in a meaningful way in a long time. ... We're looking for a future where we're not stuck in traffic."

Although South Carolina's population growth pattern differs from that of the other three states, officials there are discussing the possibility of joining the compact, said Doug Frate, director of intermodal and freight programs for that state's Transportation Department. "Obviously, we don't have the type of population centers that exist" in northern Virginia, North Carolina's Triangle and Charlotte areas and Atlanta, he said.

"That said, we are experiencing our own population growth and own growth patterns" that may need new types of transportation for both residents and visitors, particularly in the Charleston area, he said.

In a written statement, Georgia DOT spokeswoman Karlene Barron said the department would review information about the compact "and work collaboratively with the other states as it relates to Secretary Foxx's vision for the Southeast corridor."

Durham council questions Alston light-rail switch

The News & Observer.com – Durham News By Jim Wise May 11, 2015

Some City Council members let GoTriangle know last week that they, like some East Durham residents, don't like plans to end the Durham-Orange Light Rail line west of Alston Avenue.

"Everybody I've talked to on this council is really uncomfortable with that alignment," Councilman Don Moffitt told Patrick McDonough, the transit authority's planning manager, and transportation engineer Katharine Eggleston.

GoTriangle (formerly Triangle Transit) switched the planned Alston Avenue station from its original site east of the street after it couldn't reach agreement with the North Carolina Railroad to share its Alston Avenue bridge.

GoTriangle announced the move, a quarter-mile west, to Grant Street, in January. Subsequently, the nonprofit Northeast Central Durham Leadership Council objected that it had not been consulted first and that the move put the station even farther from most residents beyond Alston Avenue.

The railroad's plans for adding track of its own also led light-rail planners to abandon using the existing right of way from Ninth Street east. A new alignment loops south with elevated tracks across Swift Avenue and Campus Drive, then drops to run on Pettigrew Street through downtown.

"That's been very creative," Moffitt said. "But when we get to East Durham ... where's all that creativity?"

Eggleston said planners had looked at two options for using the original site, but both presented space constraints due to existing structures such as a water tower complex on Pettigrew Street and the Durham Freeway interchange.

Neither offered enough room for the station, with its 270-foot platform, and parking deck. Mayor Bill Bell, chairman of the GoTriangle board, asked why the parking deck was necessary.

"End-of-the-line stations tend to attract park-and-ride activity," McDonough said. "If you don't have a parking deck, what you get is people coming in, parking all over the neighborhood ... parking illegally."

Councilman Steve Schewel said moving the station west "makes sense to me, looking at maps and thinking about it. ... And yet I don't feel convinced.

"I don't think it's gotten the same level of scrutiny as ... the decision to move out of the railroad corridor and over to Pettigrew Street downtown. That's what would give me confidence," he said. "Give this the same level of analysis."

McDonough offered to come back with a more detailed analysis of the sites, "the physics things that we feel are really arguing against a station on the east side.

"We tried to get as full an analysis of this as we have everywhere else," he said.

Bell said he had been through the analysis.

"These guys have worked very hard with NCRRT to get to where we are," Bell said. "Why they're on the west side instead of the east side (is) all in the details of what happens when you move these tracks around.

"I'm convinced if we're going to do this thing in the timeframe we're talking about, this is the best site."

The council set a tentative followup for 9 a.m. May 21.

A SITE FOR THE SHOP

East Durham residents and their supporters have also complained that the Grant Street station site hurts chances GoTriangle will put the light-rail line's rail operations and maintenance facility, and its potential jobs, in East Durham.

A 19-acre tract east of Alston Avenue, connected to the station by a single track using the existing bridge, is one of five under consideration from the maintenance facility.

That site, on Pettigrew Street between Bacon and Scoggins streets, has been occupied by the Brenntag chemical company for decades. Replacing Brenntag with the maintenance facility would entail environmental testing and cleanups pushing the site cost \$30 million above any of the other four locations, according to GoTriangle (bit.ly/1EtNxVX); and would displace 150 or more existing jobs.

"People are saying they want the (maintenance facility) there assuming jobs would be going in," Mayor Bill Bell said, "but (they) discount the fact jobs were going to be lost."

Councilwoman Diane Catotti said eliminating the Brenntag site effectively leaves only one maintenance facility site open, at Cornwallis Road, because the other three are in suburban residential zones.

"It's pretty much a slam dunk (those) are off the table," Catotti said. "It's an incompatibility of uses" and attempting the necessary rezoning "would drag the process out for years in terms of public hearings."

The Northeast Central Durham council also objected that ending the light rail west of Alston Avenue makes less likely a future extension farther east, toward Briggs Avenue and Durham Tech.

Alston Avenue has been the eastern terminus since discussion of a Durham-Chapel Hill light rail project began more than five years ago. When Durham County voters approved a half-cent sales tax to support the line and other public-transit upgrades in 2011, the light-rail line was proposed to run 17 miles, from Alston Avenue to UNC Hospitals.

At last week's meeting, though, GoTriangle Planning Manager Patrick McDonough said ending the line west of Alston Avenue would make future extension easier, either to the east or south to N.C. Central University.

WHAT'S NEXT

GoTriangle planners will give a light-rail project Wednesday morning to the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization. The MPO meets in the Durham City Hall Committee Room at 9 a.m. The meeting is open to the public as spectators.

Public presentations on the light-rail route through Durham, from Ninth Street to Alston Avenue, are scheduled:

- Thursday, June 4, 4-7 p.m., Durham Station Transportation Center, 515 W. Pettigrew St.
- Saturday, June 6, 2-5 p.m., John Avery Boys and Girls Club, 808 E. Pettigrew St.

A draft environmental impact statement, including route recommendations and comment from the public and Durham and Orange County officials, is due for submission to the Federal Transportation Administration in June.

After federal review, a second draft is due for publication and public response in September and October. The final statement, including preferred route, must be submitted in early 2016 to meet a deadline for federal approval to apply for construction funding.

The Durham-Orange Light Rail plan anticipates federal grants covering half the line's cost, currently estimated at \$1.8 billion in "Year of Expenditure" dollars, a figure that factors in rising construction costs and inflation between the estimate and the time money is actually spent.

Truckers oppose NC House diesel tax and DMV fees

The News and Observer By Bruce Siceloff May 19, 2015

Truckers say they would be hit unfairly by House Republican budget proposals to increase motor vehicle fees and set the fuel tax for diesel 3 cents higher than the gasoline tax.

"It's just shifting a lot of the burden back on the trucking industry," said Crystal Collins, president of the N.C. Trucking Association, which represents 350 trucking firms. "We already pay more than a fourth of the total taxes and user fees that are paid by the motoring public. We already pay our fair share."

North Carolina taxes gas and diesel fuel at the same rate, now 36 cents a gallon. The House budget ([House Bill 97](#)) would reduce the gas tax to 33 cents in January but keep the diesel rate unchanged, adding North Carolina to the ranks of states that tax the two fuels at different rates.

Fees collected by the Division of Motor Vehicles would be increased by 50 percent, pushing total DMV fee collections to more than \$900 million a year.

Rep. John Torbett, a Gaston County Republican who helped draft the transportation budget proposals, was asked about the diesel tax and DMV fees during the House Appropriations Committee budget discussion Tuesday. He said the higher diesel tax was just one way to come up with needed revenues for transportation. DMV fees haven't changed in 10 years, he said.

Collins provided state-by-state data estimating that an average five-axle tractor-semitrailer combination truck in North Carolina pays \$1,254 in state registration and weight fees, \$6,000 in state fuel taxes and \$8,906 in federal fuel, excise and heavy-vehicle taxes.

"We support a solution that spreads the costs equitably among users," Collins said in email to members of the House Finance Committee, which [endorsed the budget Monday](#). "Our industry already pays more than its fair share."

DMV 50 percent fee hike 'just above inflation'?

Rep. John Torbett, a Gaston County Republican who helped draft transportation provisions in the proposed House budget, said Tuesday that a proposed 50 percent increase for state motor vehicle fees represents a rate "just above inflation, as DMV rates have not been raised since 2005."

But Consumer Price Index data show much lower inflation over the past decade: 20.2 percent.

[The Bureau of Labor Statistics online inflation calculator](#) indicates that a \$28 auto registration fee in 2005 would have the same buying power as a \$33.85 fee today, a \$5.85 increase. The House budget would increase that fee instead by \$14, to \$42.

Developers unveil downtown loop report

The Herald-Sun By Alex Dixon May. 19, 2015 @ 02:30 PM

DURHAM — After hosting workshops with elected officials, planners and developers in March, Cleveland and Church Partners has released a report of recommended project plans for converting the downtown loop.

The developers believe the current one-way layout is strangling development potential, and the loop should be converted into a two-way traffic network.

The report highlights 20 potential projects that could be made possible if the loop is converted.

These include existing sites Austin Lawrence Partners Five Points Center development, Carolina Theatre, a new plaza for City Hall and several mixed-use and parking facilities, in addition to five catalytic sites.

Cleveland and Church says loop conversion will "create significant development potential" for these five sites.

The first site, Roxboro Street and Liberty Street, would integrate the Public Library with "downtown's urban fabric."

In addition, Cleveland and Church proposes three new buildings to occupy the new block that is created by loop conversion, including a downtown grocery and office space.

The second site, West Morgan Street at Mangum Street, would highlight Rotary Park as a focal point since the loop conversion would extend Chapel Hill Street to Cleveland Street and First Baptist Church.

"A new two-way West Morgan Street will include on-street parking that tempers traffic and makes the park accessible from all sides," developers write in the report. "The old police headquarters is given new front and side porticoes to help create a proper face onto the park."

At the third site, at West Morgan Street and Rigsbee Avenue, Cleveland and Church calls for replacing a surface parking lot with a parking structure and small-scale mixed-use buildings.

Along West Morgan and Foster Street, Cleveland and Church envisions street level shops beneath the Durham Centre and a new Convention Center plaza.

Finally, the fifth catalytic site would be a remodel of the convention center along Chapel Hill Street to convert storage bays into street level storefronts.

According to the Durham Department of Transportation, converting the loop would cost approximately \$30 million with streetscape improvements and \$12 million without.

Approximately 80 percent of the potential development sites are government owned, which creates the need for a public-private partnership to move forward with the conversion and development, said Bob Chapman of Cleveland and Church.

But the idea of spending millions to convert the downtown loop into a network of two-way streets fared poorly with city council members after they were asked to rank 10 construction projects in early March ahead of budget decisions.

"This needs to be a citizens' project," Chapman said. "It really needs to be everybody...talking to their county commissioners and city council people and endorsing the idea of un-girdling downtown."

Rob Dickson of Cleveland Church Partners said he hopes the report will move the potential project higher on the council's list and that converting the loop would benefit everyone in Durham with the amount of public space it creates.

"A great downtown has to include everyone in Durham," he said.

David Godschalk, professor emeritus of the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC-Chapel Hill, said the current loop network was established to compete with shopping centers, which had parking and easy access, and downtown was seen as "a hard place to get to."

"That idea has gone out the window now," he said. "Shopping centers are trying to turn their parking lots into something more like downtown, with grid-street, mixed-use and so forth. We tried the idea and it didn't work, and it destroyed an awful lot of things in the process."

Dickson said that, unlike a lot capital projects, fixing the loop creates enough economic activity to support financing those improvements.

"Not every capital project... comes with a revenue stream attached to it," he said. "And this one does."

Oregon to test pay-per-mile idea as replacement for gas tax

The Associated Press By GOSIA WOZNIACKA May 20, 2015 2:17 AM

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Oregon is about to embark on a first-in-the-nation program that aims to charge car owners not for the fuel they use, but for the miles they drive.

The program is meant to help the state raise more revenue to pay for road and bridge projects at a time when money generated from gasoline taxes are declining across the country, in part, because of greater fuel efficiency and the increasing popularity of fuel-efficient, hybrid and electric cars.

Starting July 1, up to 5,000 volunteers in Oregon can sign up to drive with devices that collect data on how much they have driven and where. The volunteers will agree to pay 1.5 cents for each mile traveled on public roads within Oregon, instead of the tax now added when filling up at the pump.

Some electric and hybrid car owners, however, say the new tax would be unfair to them and would discourage purchasing of green vehicles.

"This program targets hybrid and electric vehicles, so it's discriminatory," said Patrick Connor, a Beaverton resident who has been driving an electric car since 2007.

State officials say it is only fair for owners of green vehicles to be charged for maintaining roads, just as owners of gasoline-powered vehicles do.

"We know in the future, our ability to pay for maintenance and repair... will be severely impacted if we continue to rely on the gas tax," said Shelley Snow with the Oregon Department of Transportation.

Other states are also looking at pay-per-mile as an alternative to dwindling fuel tax revenues.

Last year, California created a committee to study alternatives to the gas tax and design a pilot program; Washington state set money aside to further develop a similar program; and an Indiana bill directs the state to study alternatives and a test project.

While growing in popularity, electric vehicles and hybrids are still in the minority on American roads, even in a state as green-minded as Oregon. Of 3.3 million passenger cars registered in Oregon at the end of 2014, about 68,000 were hybrid, 3,500 electric and 620 plug-in hybrid. A decade ago, only 8,000 hybrids were registered.

However, fuel-economy for gas-powered vehicles has been increasing as technology is developed that addresses public concerns about greenhouse gas emissions and dependence on foreign oil.

Oregon is the only state to actually test-drive the pay-per-mile idea.

The gas tax provides just under half of the money in Oregon's highway fund, and the majority of the money in the federal Highway Trust Fund, of which Oregon receives a portion.

Oregon's share of the fuel tax over the past two decades has been mostly flat and in some years declined, state data show. In 2009, the Legislature raised the tax from 24 cents to 30 cents per gallon, but that's not enough to avert shortfalls, state officials said, because construction costs increase with inflation.

Oregon previously held two rounds of small-scale tests involving GPS devices to track mileage.

The current program, called OreGo, will be the largest yet and will be open to all car types. Of these, no more than 1,500 participating vehicles can get less than 17 miles per gallon, and no more than 1,500 must get at least 17 miles per gallon and less than 22 miles per gallon.

Volunteers will still be paying the fuel tax if they stop for gas. But at the end of the month, depending on the type of car they drive, they will receive either a credit or a bill for the difference in gas taxes paid at the pump.

Private vendors will provide drivers with small digital devices to track miles; other services will also be offered. Volunteers can opt out of the program at any time, and they'll get a refund for miles driven on private property and out of state.

After the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon raised concerns about privacy and government surveillance, the state built protections into the program, said ACLU's interim executive director Jann Carson.

Drivers will be able to install an odometer device without GPS tracking.

For those who use the GPS, the state and private vendors will destroy records of location and daily metered use after 30 days. The program also limits how the data can be aggregated and shared. Law enforcement, for example, won't be able to access the information unless a judge says it's needed.

"This is the government collecting massive amounts of data and we want to ensure the government doesn't keep and use that data for other purposes," Carson said.

The OreGo program is projected to cost \$8.4 million to implement and is aimed to gauge public acceptance of the idea of charging motorists per mile of road they travel. It will be up to the Legislature to decide whether to adopt a mandatory road usage charge.

One of the biggest concerns will be whether a program like OreGo could actually discourage people from buying electric or hybrid vehicles.

Drive Oregon, an advocacy group for the electric-vehicle industry, supports the program because every driver should pay for road repairs, executive director Jeff Allen said. Still, he said, "The last thing we need to do right now is to make buying electric cars more expensive or inconvenient."

RDU Airport Authority approves launch of long-term planning initiative

Triangle Business Journal By Jeff Jeffrey May 21, 2015, 3:11pm EDT

With most of its major construction projects out of the way, Raleigh-Durham International Airport is set to begin the first phase of its long-term planning effort that will chart the airport's course for the next 25 years.

The Raleigh-Durham Airport Authority approved Thursday a \$3.98 million contract with Chicago-based Ricondo & Associates to draft a master plan for the airport over the next 18 months. The contract goes into effect June 1.

"With Terminal 1 now finished, it's time we look to the future," says Airport Authority Chairman [Dickie Thompson](#). "This will allow us to decide how best to serve our customers through 2040."

The plan will involve assessing the airport's existing buildings, parking structures and airline services. From there Ricondo will draw upon aviation demand forecasts to make recommendations about renovating existing structures, building new facilities, potential revenue opportunities and ways to better serve customers in the coming years.

It will also include an implementation plan that includes a capital improvement and asset management program. Additionally, the master plan will include an assessment of the potential environmental impact.

The cost of the master plan will be paid for using a \$2.98 million grant from the Federal Aviation Administration. The state is expected to kick in \$496,875. The remaining \$496,875 will be paid for by RDU.

Starting next month, the Airport Authority will host the first of eight public hearings to consider feedback from the community. The first hearing will be June 29 in Durham, with the second being held in Raleigh on June 30.

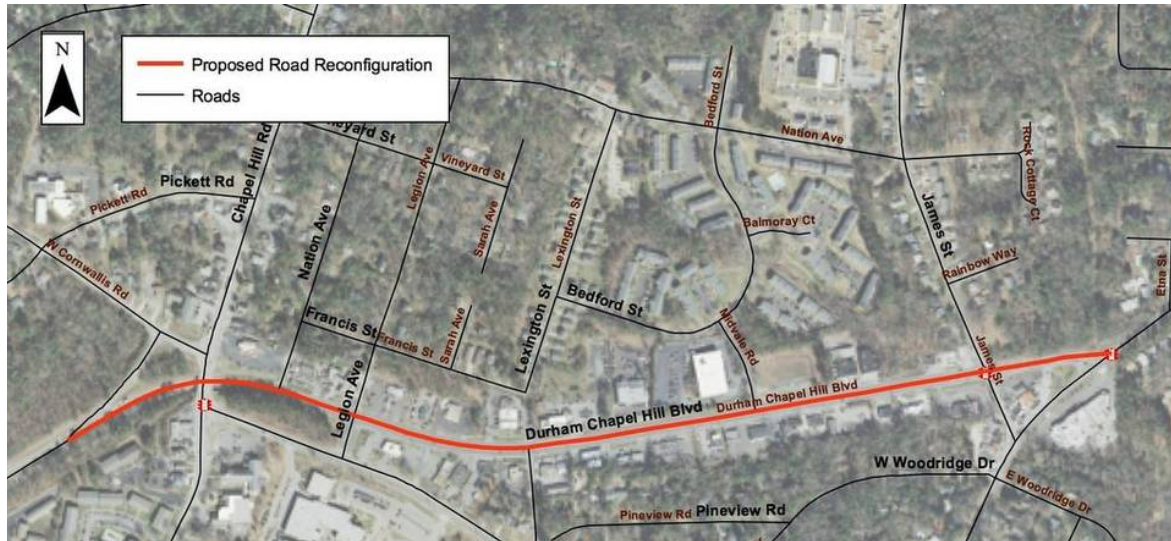
"We want to make sure we're getting feedback from everyone, including customers and government officials," Thompson says.

Last month, [RDU began the final phase of the Terminal 1 reconstruction project, which will involve tearing down what's left of the old building.](#)

The project is expected to cost between \$6 million and \$7 million. Terminal 1 reopened last summer after a \$68 million renovation, and is primarily occupied by Southwest Airlines (NYSE: LUV).

15-501 'diet' gets Durham council backing

Durham News/The News and Observer By Jim Wise May 25, 2015



The red line shows the extent of U.S. 15-501 Business's reconfiguration from five motor vehicles lanes to three. Reconfiguration adds bike lanes and 21 on-street parking places, but the "road diet's" main reason is slowing down cars and trucks on the highway. City of Durham

DURHAM -- It's not official approval – yet – but the state transportation department and City Council members have given assent for trimming miles of U.S. 15-501 Business from five lanes down to three.

The "reconfiguration," or "road diet," is just a matter of putting paint in new places after the state transportation department has the highway repaved later this year or early next.

That relocated paint will mark off bicycle lanes and on-street parking places and, officials say, make the road a safer place by bringing down the speeds of cars and trucks that now usually run well above the 35-mph posted limit.

"It feels dangerous, and it is dangerous," Councilman Steve Schewel said during a recent council discussion on the idea.

"It's paint upon the road," said Christin Lampkowski, chairwoman of the nonprofit Bike Durham board. "If we do find that this is not a beneficial change in that area, we can at minimal cost change back."

Reconfiguring U.S. 15-501, aka Chapel Hill Boulevard (nando.com/151), was an idea of the city transportation staff, but since the boulevard is a state-maintained highway, the N.C. Department of Transportation has final say.

State authorities, Mayor Bill Bell said, are "standing by to act on the preferences expressed by the city of Durham."

A preference for putting the boulevard on a diet will probably get formal approval at the June 1 council meeting.

Pro and con

DOT has U.S. 15-501 Business scheduled for resurfacing from Garrett Road to University Drive. Reconfiguring is to start at the Chapel Hill Road interchange and run to University Drive, creating a center turn lane, one vehicle lane each way, bicycle lanes on both sides and 21 on-street parking places near restaurants on the north side.

Cyclist Jennifer McDuffie said she has talked with over 30 others who live in the area.

"They agree with me they would like to be able to walk, like to be able to bike" on 15-501 and feel safe, she said.

"What we have to think about is whether we want to stick with status quo, when it's all about cars ... or about the future," she said.

On the other hand, Lee Barnes, speaking for several business owners on the road, opposed the plan, saying it would divert traffic onto nearby residential streets and that the on-street parking would lead to accidents.

University Drive homeowner James Montague had a similar objection, and Chip Woods with a beverage company that serves several 15-501 businesses said the change would be unsafe for his truck drivers entering and leaving parking lots.

City Transportation Director Mark Ahrendsen, though, said the parking spaces would be placed so as not to interfere with sightlines, and the three vehicle lanes should be enough to handle the 15,000 cars and trucks a day that use the road.

That traffic rate has been the same for the past five years, he said, and projections indicate it's not likely to change in the future. For comparison, Main Street near Duke East Campus, which has had a similar conversion, carries 11,000 to 16,000 vehicles a day, Ahrendsen said.

Safety is the main reason for trimming the roadway, he said.

Traffic now moves "considerably above the posted speed," he said, and city research has found the crash rate on that section of 15-501 is more than twice the national average. From 2009 through 2014, there were 157 crashes and 54 injuries (nando.com/1b3).

"I use this corridor ... close to daily," Councilwoman Diane Catotti said. "It's just treacherous.

"Lowering speeds will just help everyone in the area, and we can of course 'course reevaluate' it if we have to in the future," she said.

Schewel said he was "appreciative" of the comments in opposition, but likes reconfiguring for safety's sake.

"Because traffic will be slower, I think it will be safer for everybody," Schewel said. "It will be a friendlier place."

Church St./N.C. 54 intersection to close permanently

The News and Observer From Staff Reports May. 26, 2015 @ 12:41 PM

RALEIGH — Contractors with the N.C. Department of transportation will permanently close the intersection of Church Street and N.C. 54 in Durham at 6 a.m. on June 8.

The closure is designed to remove an at-grade crossing at this location and is one of the safety features of the Hopson Road grade separation project.

This project is designed to improve train and vehicular safety along the Raleigh to Charlotte corridor. It will eliminate railroad crossings at Church Street and Hopson Road.

Church Street is being realigned with the closure of the railroad crossing.

In addition, Keystone Park Drive will be extended from Park Knoll Drive to Hopson, creating an alternate route to N.C. 54.

A triple fatality in 1992 at the Hopson Road Crossing prompted NCDOT to establish its Sealed Corridor Program in partnership with CSXT and Norfolk Southern.

Its purpose is to “seal” the rail corridor between Raleigh and Charlotte by eliminating or improving rail-highway street level crossings.

The closure is a critical part of NCDOT’s Piedmont Improvement Program, railroad and highway enhancements aimed to improve safety, spur job growth and improve connectivity between Raleigh and Charlotte and communities in between them.

Jurisdictional confusion adds to transit concerns

The Herald-Sun By Lauren Horsch May. 25, 2015 @ 03:49 PM

DURHAM — GoTriangle officials recently faced a crowd of homeowners in Downing Creek that wanted their concerns answered after they were told a route decision could impact their neighborhood.

Downing Creek, a community just off N.C. 54 sits near the Durham-Orange county line. The route in question concerns where the proposed light rail transit would cross over Little Creek.

Originally a route had been planned along Meadowmont Lane in Chapel Hill, which also houses a neighborhood, but that location was fully aware of the possibility for light rail transit.

But a decision from the Army Corps of Engineers made that route impossible to build, leaving GoTransit to look for other options. Two alternative options, known as C2 and C2A, however, have been causing a stir in Downing Creek. Recently residents sent in 22 questions to GoTriangle in a way to get more information about the alternate routes.

Last week, GoTriangle made every effort to answer those questions, even though more questions and concerns arose from the meeting.

Downing Creek homeowners Jim Doughty and Alex Cabanes have been working to ensure that those questions get answered.

“Some preliminary decisions are being made (soon),” Doughty said. Those decisions include preferences for route options.

Doughty said many of the concerns residents have are about traffic congestion, safety and even parking.

The debate now is whether the route options should run north or south of N.C. 54.

“Should it go north of 54 and through Meadowmont, or south of 54 across the front lawn essentially of our neighborhood?” Doughty said.

While GoTriangle has been working with residents to address concerns, issues arise when it comes to representation in local government.

Downing Creek is a neighborhood in both the city and county of Durham, but some residents have Chapel Hill addresses — thus leading to conflicting reports of who represents them or for whom they can vote.

Patrick McDonough, manager of planning and transit oriented development with GoTriangle, confirmed that Meadowmont was planned with a route through it, but because of the Corps of Engineers' objections to that route, new options had to be considere.

Officials in Chapel Hill and Durham have made no formal decision on routes. The decision-making process is ongoing.

However, council members on both sides have said they're interested in looking at the alternative options (C2 and C2A).

McDonough said the Chapel Hill Town Council has a strong preference for those two options. At least two members of the Durham City Council have some type of preference.

"Elected officials hold the cards," McDonough said.

Doughty feels that Downing Creek is being unfairly victimized by the Corps of Engineers' nixing of the Meadowmont route.

"We're the do-ver (route)," Doughty said. "We're the 'Oops.'"

The more than 50 residents in attendance at the meeting last week were not shy about sharing their thoughts and opinions. Many times they interrupted to get clarifications and clapped in support of opponents.

Cabanes asked that residents be allowed to have some representation on boards that make the decision about where the routes could be put.

He was urged to talk to Durham officials even though Chapel Hill decisions will also impact the issue.

"That is at our front door," he said.

After a nearly two-hour discussion involving future plans for N.C. 54 and proposed light rail, residents were able to get some questions answered but left with concerns still hanging in the balance.

McDonough urged the residents to contact the members of the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO).

"They get the questions you're asking," he said. "They recognize that there are communities just like this one where decisions get made that have repercussions across county lines and across city lines."

He said the MPO would make the final vote on any official routes or alignments.