

Legislature to Durham-Orange light rail: Stop dead in your tracks

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER-ROAD WORRIER BLOG BY BRUCE SICELOFF SEPTEMBER 15, 2015

RALEIGH -- House and Senate Republican leaders agreed Monday that the state should not contribute more than \$500,000 to any light-rail project.

That provision in the newly released [state budget](#) could be a lethal blow to the [planned 17-mile Durham-Orange light rail line](#), projected to cost as much as \$1.6 billion.

The new state budget also includes a lethal blow for 29 state Department of Transportation employees, whose jobs – listed by their individual position numbers – are identified for elimination.

In addition to these specified folks, DOT is ordered to fire another 21 “filled positions that are centrally or regionally based and that perform administrative, managerial, supervisory, or oversight functions.”

The budget also:

Halts the yearly transfer of \$216 million from the Highway Fund to the General Fund. This is gas tax money, generally intended for transportation needs. The change means that DOT will have more money for roads and bridges, and the State Highway Patrol budget will be covered instead by income tax and other General Fund revenues.

This action, one of the biggest revenue shifts in the entire state budget, still leaves about \$40 million in gas tax receipts that will continue to pay for non-DOT needs.

Restores state funding for driver’s education at roughly last year’s level, enough to cover most of the cost with students paying a \$65 fee (or local schools making up the difference).

The budget includes a stepped-up state effort to strengthen [oversight of local driver’s ed programs](#) by the state Department of Public Instruction. A legislative oversight committee will study driver’s ed and recommend improvements next year.

Increases DMV fees. The fee for an eight-year driver’s license renewal will rise from \$32 to \$40. The cost of renewing your car registration each year, not counting the county property tax you pay at the same time, will rise from \$51 to \$66.

Adds new late fees for tardy registration renewals. If your registration is expired for less than one month, you pay \$15. More than one or less than two months, \$20. Two months or longer, \$25.

Establishes the “DOT Report” program making DOT more accountable when citizens complain about potholes – which now must be patched within two business days after the complaint is filed – and other problems. This is Rep. John Torbett’s baby.

Allows cities to levy motor vehicle fees of up to \$30, up from a previous \$5 limit.

Increases the highway use (sales) tax on some commercial vehicles.

“Light rail” seems to have become an ideological issue here and across the country – conservatives scorn it, liberals love it – and a confusing label. Many people say “light rail” when they mean any kind of rail transit that isn’t Amtrak.

Charlotte secured state funding to pay for about 25 percent of its first light-rail construction project, and Triangle leaders have been hoping since then for similar support when their turn comes.

On the bright side, Wake County may have dodged this little bullet: The transit plan under consideration in the capital county does include an option for rail, but it’s not the “light” kind (which runs on electricity). It’s called a diesel multiple unit (DMU) or “rail rapid transit,” and it involves rail cars powered by their individual diesel engines.

Legislative leaders squelch light rail, boost roads and bridges

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER BY BRUCE SICELOFF SEPTEMBER 16, 2015

RALEIGH -- The new state budget proposal deals a crippling blow to a planned \$1.5 billion light-rail line from Durham to Chapel Hill, with a provision that would put a \$500,000 limit on state funding for any light-rail project.

The budget also raises Division of Motor Vehicles fees for the first time in 10 years, provides \$700 million more to build and repair roads and bridges, restores state money for driver's education classes, and eliminates the jobs of 29 specific Department of Transportation employees.

Charlotte launched North Carolina's first light-rail line eight years ago, with the state covering 25 percent of the construction cost. Triangle leaders have been counting on comparable support when their turn comes.

The prospect of a light-rail cap never came up when House and Senate leaders developed their separate budgets this year. The Republican-led legislature previously had clamped broader restrictions on funding for transit projects.

GoTriangle, the regional transit agency that wants to build the 17-mile Durham-Orange rail line, secured approval for \$138 million in state funds this year when the state Board of Transportation approved the 10-year State Transportation Improvement Program.

But prospects for actually getting that money were cast in doubt when House and Senate Republican leaders [released their budget](#) Monday night with no explanation for the new cap. Chapel Hill Mayor Mark Kleinschmidt called the half-million-dollar cap a "project killer."

He said local officials and DOT officials have worked hard to develop the light-rail project. Orange and Durham agreed to pay their share with a dedicated half-cent sales tax levied in both counties, he said, and they counted on state funds.

"I don't understand why this should be politicized," Kleinschmidt said. "For (legislators) to do this is really quite shocking. It is very disappointing."

Jeff Mann, GoTriangle's general manager, said [the Durham-Orange line](#) proved its merit when it competed with highway projects for funding under a new program developed by Republican leaders for setting transportation spending priorities.

"The Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project scored well in the data-driven process under the Strategic Transportation Investments law, which this (budget) would circumvent," Mann said. "GoTriangle will continue to seek state funding for the project, which we believe is the best transportation solution for the corridor."

Leaders in Orange and Durham counties have planned all along to get roughly half the capital cost from the federal government and one-quarter from the state, with the remainder coming from local sales taxes. This week, the Federal Transit Administration gave GoTriangle \$1.7 million to support plans for transit-oriented development around the light-rail stations.

Wake County should not be affected by the new light-rail limit. The [transit plan under consideration](#) in the capital county includes an option for rail – but it's not the "light" kind, which runs on electricity. Wake is considering a transit plan that might include heavier trains called [diesel multiple units](#) – rail cars powered by individual diesel engines.

The new budget also takes aim at 29 state Department of Transportation employees, whose jobs – listed by their individual position numbers – are identified for elimination.

In addition to firing those workers, DOT is ordered to eliminate another 21 "filled positions that are centrally or regionally based and that perform administrative, managerial, supervisory, or oversight functions."

It's a list pared down from an earlier Senate budget [proposal to get rid of 56](#) specific DOT employees. The reduced hit list still includes veteran engineers and two senior managers with salaries above \$115,000: Debbie Barbour, who

oversees highway design, project development and other services as DOT's preconstruction director; and Jennifer Brandenburg, who is responsible for highway maintenance and other chores as DOT's asset management engineer.

Legislative leaders have said the job cuts are related to stepped-up quotas for outsourcing – to let private contractors take over engineering and other jobs now done by DOT employees. But no explanations have been offered for the particular names chosen for elimination.

Transportation Secretary Nick Tennyson declined to comment on the transportation budget. Barbour and Brandenburg did not respond to requests for comment.

Elsewhere in the budget, legislators target unfilled positions in other departments for elimination. Twelve employees are marked for transfer to the newly reorganized Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, where they risk having their jobs reclassified or eliminated.

The [budget](#) also:

Halts the yearly transfer of \$216 million from the Highway Fund to the General Fund. This is gas tax money, generally intended for transportation needs. The change means that DOT will have more money for roads and bridges, and the State Highway Patrol budget will be covered instead by income tax and other General Fund revenues.

This action, one of the biggest revenue shifts in the entire state budget, still leaves about \$40 million in gas tax receipts that will continue to be spent for non-DOT needs.

Gives DOT more money to spend in key areas. Over the next two years, the budget will increase spending for construction projects by \$337 million, replacement of substandard bridges by \$147 million, road resurfacing by \$147 million and state ports by \$70 million.

Restores state funding for driver's education at roughly last year's level, enough to cover most of the cost with students paying a \$65 fee (or local schools making up the difference).

The budget includes a stepped-up state effort to strengthen [oversight of local driver's ed programs](#) by the Department of Public Instruction. A legislative oversight committee will study driver's ed and recommend improvements next year.

Increases Division of Motor Vehicle fees. The fee for an eight-year driver's license renewal will rise from \$32 to \$40. The cost of renewing your car registration each year, not counting the county property tax you pay at the same time, will rise from \$51 to \$66. This is the first DMV fee hike since 2005. Starting in 2020, the fees will rise every four years under a new inflation-indexed formula.

Adds new fees for late registration renewals. If your registration is expired for less than one month, you pay \$15; more than one or less than two months, \$20; two months or longer, \$25. The late fees will be used to pay for driver's ed.

Establishes the "DOT Report" program to make DOT more accountable when citizens complain about potholes – which would have to be patched within two business days after the complaint is filed – and other problems.

Increases the highway use (sales) tax on some commercial vehicles.

Gives DOT authority to plan and build more toll roads and bridges. The authorized list is expanded to include 11 projects – nine to be named in the future plus two that are on the books now: the completion of the [540 Outer Loop](#) in Wake County and the [Monroe Connector Bypass](#) in Union and Mecklenburg counties.

NCDOT Rail Plan builds on freight and passenger train momentum

Train ridership is rising as car-train crashes decline

Freight improvements focus on ports and the needs of container shippers

More daily trains will be added to the Raleigh-Charlotte timetable



Passengers prepare to board the #75 Piedmont Raleigh to Charlotte train at the Cary Amtrak station on 211 N. Academy Street. jleonard@newsobserver.com JULI LEONARD News & Observer file photo

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER BY BRUCE SICELOFF September 14, 2015

RALEIGH -- In its Comprehensive State Rail Plan for developing better freight and passenger train service over the next 25 years, the state Department of Transportation aims to extend the momentum it has built up in 25 years of undeniable improvement.

Even as more trains carry more North Carolinians up and down the tracks – rider counts have doubled in a decade, to nearly 1 million in 2013 – crashes at rail crossings have fallen sharply, from 200 in 1990 to 51 last year.

The state is making use of \$545 million in stimulus grants from the Obama administration for construction projects to straighten curves, add double tracks and passing sidings, upgrade passenger depots and increase train speeds between Raleigh and Charlotte.

The new DOT Rail Plan, released last month, builds on this work. It focuses priorities on future projects to make trains an appealing option for more riders and shippers, reducing highway congestion and promoting economic development.

On the freight side, a lot of DOT's attention is turned to the needs of container shippers in the realm known as "intermodal," because it breaks down the barriers that separate competing forms of transportation.

"That's really where the industry is going, as far as moving containers from ship to train to truck," said Paul Worley, DOT Rail Division director.

Most of the containers that arrive by ship at the Wilmington port leave it on trucks. DOT wants to improve the port's rail connection so that more of those containers can move out on trains. A container with anything from bulk grains to UPS packages can be shifted from one train to another before completing its journey on the back end of an 18-wheeler.

The Rail Plan envisions new rail routes at both ports – possibly relocating N.C. Railroad tracks in Morehead City, and adding a new Cape Fear River bridge into Brunswick County from Wilmington – to improve rail shipping for port customers. At the same time, DOT wants to find ways to reduce train-related delays for motorists in the port cities.

More highlights from the Rail Plan:

Asheville and Wilmington passenger service Studies have projected that 24,000 riders, in just the first year, would take advantage of proposed train service to western North Carolina, linking Asheville to the Amtrak routes that pass through Salisbury. About 29,000 are projected in the first year for a proposed train route for southeastern North Carolina, to Raleigh from Goldsboro and Wilmington.

These upgrades are proposed for sometime between 2020 and 2035. As a preliminary step, DOT plans to extend Amtrak's Thruway Bus Service from Asheville to Salisbury in 2016 and Wilmington to Raleigh in 2018.

More trains on the Piedmont timetable After the stimulus projects are finished in 2017 to beef up passenger and freight capacity between Raleigh and Charlotte, DOT plans to add a fourth train to the daily schedule in 2017 or 2018, and a fifth in 2019.

More Amtrak stations New depots are planned or proposed in Hillsborough (2018) and Lexington (2020 to 2035). Also in view is a station at Harrisburg in Cabarrus County, not far from UNC-Charlotte. The biggest planned station improvements are at both ends of the line. Raleigh's Union Station is expected to open in 2017, while Charlotte's downtown Gateway Station is pegged for sometime after 2020.

Better train and crossing safety DOT has improved signals at more than 1,000 crossings since 2002, so drivers are more likely to stop for an approaching train, and another 189 crossings have been closed since 1992. More crossing upgrades are planned. But, while crossing deaths have decreased to single digits in the past few years, DOT faces

tougher challenges in so-called “trespasser” deaths – usually people sitting or walking along the tracks – which have stayed around 20 per year.

Eight locomotives and other units will be equipped in 2016 with technology that automatically slows or stops trains in danger of crashing or derailling.

A gradual approach for the Southeast Rail Corridor This interstate line, formerly known as “high-speed,” is envisioned to provide faster train service from Raleigh to Washington, D.C., and the Northeast – and, later, from Charlotte to Atlanta and points south.

Most of the planning work has been completed on the key section – a 35-mile shortcut between Raleigh and Richmond, Va., using the old CSX “S” line. DOT’s aim is to eliminate every at-grade crossing on the road – bridges for some, closings for the rest – for trains that could move as fast as 110 miles per hour.

But that won’t happen without an estimated \$3.8 billion to \$4 billion in federal funds. Rather than wait forever for this money to materialize, DOT has begun looking at a more incremental approach.

Worley said he will look at what it would cost to acquire the entire “S” line and put in new tracks and stations – enough to introduce standard-speed train service to Richmond – without all the bridges and other improvements needed for faster trains. Another option might involve starting out with service along just part of the line – from Raleigh to Franklinton or Henderson.

“We’ve never looked at the options,” Worley said.

Studies have shown that the proposed Southeast Rail Corridor could generate enough money in passenger fares to cover its operating costs. And DOT rail planners say that could make the rail line an appealing candidate for takeover by a private, for-profit railroad.

Southeast Corridor rail milestone advances prospects for faster trains

Environmental impact statement signed for Raleigh-to-Richmond railroad shortcut

\$4 billion needed for the full plan to serve 110-mph trains

North Carolina and Virginia look for less speedy, less costly options

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The News and Observer-Traffic By Bruce Sicheloff September 17, 2015

RALEIGH -- Environmental documents have been signed to advance a planned railroad shortcut between Raleigh and Richmond, state and federal officials said Thursday, boosting prospects for faster trains between Atlanta and Washington, D.C.

North Carolina, Virginia and the Federal Railroad Administration approved the final environmental impact study for the Raleigh-to-Richmond leg of a rail route known as the Southeast Corridor.

"Without a strong passenger rail system, the Southeast's growth will be choked by congestion for a very long time," Anthony Foxx, the U.S. transportation secretary and former Charlotte mayor, said in a news release. "I urge everyone involved to continue pushing this effort forward. High-speed rail in this region is not a luxury but a necessity."

North Carolina's DOT has mapped a route for trains that would run as fast as 110 miles per hour between the two state capitals. It would cut 35 miles off the current Amtrak path, which curves through Selma and Rocky Mount, and trim an estimated 75 minutes from the travel time for trips from North Carolina to Washington and the Northeast.

The plan calls for eliminating every level-grade rail crossing along the line – closing some and building dozens of bridges to carry automobiles over or under the tracks. The route would follow the old CSX "S" line, which serves some freight customers in North Carolina but has been abandoned farther north and in southern Virginia. Curves in the track would be straightened to allow faster train speeds.

But it won't happen soon, because DOT still needs an estimated \$4 billion to buy the land, lay tracks and build roads, bridges and stations. Rather than wait indefinitely for full funding, Virginia and North Carolina officials say they will look for options to start out with less speedy, less expensive train service.

The environmental impact statement, a key project milestone, lays out the detailed route from downtown Raleigh – starting with a new rail bridge over Capital Boulevard between Peace Street and Wade Avenue – and Petersburg, Va., where it would join the current Amtrak route to Richmond. After the next step called a record of decision, expected by the end of 2015, NCDOT will have authority to begin working on the rail line.

"This is a significant step toward making high performing rail in the Southeast Corridor a reality," Gov. Pat McCrory said in a news release. "Rail is a critical component of our 25-Year Transportation Vision that will improve connectivity throughout the state and strengthen our economy."

North Carolina and Virginia have shared \$691 million in federal funds, awarded by the Obama Administration, to develop the Southeast Corridor from Charlotte to Washington, D.C. Virginia's effort is focused on adding a third track between Richmond and Arlington, Va., to eliminate freight train congestion that is blamed for frequent Amtrak delays, and to allow Amtrak speeds of up to 90 miles per hour.

In July, Foxx announced that the U.S. DOT had launched a \$1 million Southeast Corridor planning effort that will include South Carolina and Georgia. He said he hoped to make substantial progress on the rail line before his tenure in Obama's Cabinet ends in early 2017.

Republican legislators defend the budget's light-rail killer

NCDOT will cancel all but \$500,000 of \$138 million commitment for Durham-Orange project

McCrory decries secret move that injected politics into transportation spending

Stam, Rabon cite road and bridge priorities

The News and Observer-Traffic By Bruce Sicheloff September 17, 2015

RALEIGH -- State Rep. Paul Stam was pleased to discover a provision that House and Senate negotiators had inserted in the state budget – four lines that probably will kill prospects for light rail transit in Orange and Durham counties.

"Light rail is sort of a dinosaur of the 20th century or the 19th century," Stam, an Apex Republican who is the dean of Wake County's legislative delegation, said last week. "If the cities want to do it, fine. But the state shouldn't chip in on it."

Our Republican-led legislature already had taken steps to limit state spending for transit projects. The Strategic Transportation Investments law adopted two years ago allowed [the 17-mile Durham-Orange project](#) to compete directly with highways and bridges for state money, but under a complicated formula that limits transit to a 10 percent share of state spending in the region.

Supporters say the \$1.5 billion light rail project proved its merit as a cost-effective investment of public funds under the even-handed, objective criteria established in the 2013 law. So in the new State Transportation Improvement Program, the Department of Transportation allocated \$138 million over the next 10 years.

It was all the money allowed under that 10 percent regional cap for transit – a significant expenditure, to be sure, but less than 10 percent of the project cost. Less, also, than the 25 percent share the state kicked in for Charlotte's first light rail line and was scheduled to contribute to Charlotte's second line.

Naturally, Triangle leaders have been counting on a 25 percent share for the Durham-Orange project, too.

Now, under the [budget compromise](#) worked out by House and Senate leaders, adopted by both chambers and signed by Gov. Pat McCrory last week, the 2013 STI law has been rewritten to say that the state [will not spend more than \\$500,000 on any light rail](#) project. DOT will amend that 10-year plan to erase that \$138 million, or at least \$137.5 million of it.

Public transit in North Carolina has had few greater champions than McCrory. As Charlotte's Republican mayor, he helped develop his city's transit plan and lobbied the legislature to let Mecklenburg County and Triangle voters tax themselves to help pay for transit.

MY BIGGEST CONCERN, REGARDLESS OF YOUR FEELINGS ON LIGHT RAIL OR HEAVY RAIL, IS THAT I DON'T WANT TO POLITICIZE THE WHOLE TRANSPORTATION PROCESS.

Gov. Pat McCrory

One of his signature accomplishments as governor was the passage of the STI law, designed to take politics out of the decisions about our transportation spending priorities. Now with that anti-light-rail provision, he says, politics is worming its way back into the 2013 law.

'A huge mistake'

"Once you start amending that, as this (budget) bill does, then I think you're endangering the goal that we have in this administration of doing roads and rails based on data, not politics," McCrory [told Time Warner Cable News](#) last week. "My biggest concern, regardless of your feelings on light rail or heavy rail, is that I don't want to politicize the whole transportation process."

He called the light-rail killer "a huge mistake." Whoever inserted it into the state budget should "have the courage to speak up and say, yeah, I did this behind closed doors," McCrory said.

So far, no courage.

"Everybody seems to be saying that it was somebody else," said Sen. Mike Woodard, a Durham Democrat.

Stam says he doesn't know who added the light-rail measure to the budget. Sen. Bill Rabon, a Southport Republican and one of his chamber's transportation spending bosses, says the same thing.

But, like Stam, Rabon thinks it was a great idea.

I THINK IT'S THE BEST TRANSPORTATION BUDGET IN OUR LIFETIME. I'M SURE THAT ORANGE AND DURHAM COUNTIES DON'T THINK SO.

Sen. Bill Rabon, Southport Republican

"We thought we could put that money to better use on roads and bridges," Rabon said. "The locals can use their sales taxes and use a bond if they would like. Light rail doesn't serve the whole state. It serves a locale."

Sen. Floyd McKissick, Jr., a Durham Democrat, echoes McCrory's lament about politics distorting the state's transportation decisions.

The new \$500,000 limit on state funding "leaves a profound deficit that cannot be filled from other sources" for the Durham-Orange light rail line, McKissick said. "It kills the project unless it can be undone."

Rabon is pleased with other transportation priorities advanced in the new budget. The state has focused spending on legislative goals to reduce the number of structurally deficient bridges and to insure that all roads are resurfaced every 12 to 15 years.

"And every little bit of money we can find to do it helps," Rabon said. "I think it's the best transportation budget in our lifetime. I'm sure that Orange and Durham counties don't think so."

Hillsborough about to get growth spurt

12 new projects will add more than 1,000 new homes and apartments

The new housing will grow the town's population by about one-third

Many of the projects were approved before the Great Recession

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER-CHAPEL HILL NEWS BY DEANNA OVERMANN SEPTEMBER 28, 2015

HILLSBOROUGH -- A wave of residential growth, much of it approved before the recession of 2007-09, is coming to Hillsborough.

Twelve projects totaling 1,032 new houses, town homes, condominiums and apartments are underway or about to begin construction.

Four additional proposed developments could add up to 1,180 more homes.

The town's population was estimated at 6,381 in 2013, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

"Hillsborough is in the process of unprecedented growth," Town Manager Eric Peterson said. "Our population is projected to grow by 36.3 percent from January 2015 to June 2018."

"All but two or three of these developments were approved five, eight to 10 years ago," he said. "But (they) were delayed by the recession. So, a lot of the developments we see today were approved years ago."

The new projects will take at least three years to complete.

What does this mean for the residents of Hillsborough?

"People will not notice at first," Planning Director Margaret Hauth said. "They will gradually notice more people in the parks, downtown and on the streets."

The town has more than enough water and sewer capacity for every project approved and in the pipeline, she said.

Hauth, who has been with the town of Hillsborough for 24 years, said this is the first rapid growth she has witnessed.

One Town Board member sees potential traffic tie-ups.

"I do see that if the Collins Ridge development adds over a thousand new homes we will see bottlenecks on U.S. Highway 70A and Churton Business," said Town Commissioner Evelyn Lloyd.

Bigger reservoir

Town Engineer Kenny Keel is working on second phase of a project will raise the West Fork Eno Reservoir 10 feet.

The \$8.6 million project was approved Sept. 16, the same night the Town Board approved the latest residential project, Fiori Hill, which will put 46 single-family homes on 17.6 acres off U.S. 70 East.

"This project will more than double our current capacity," Keel said. "The reservoir currently holds 786 million gallons of water, and Phase II will add over a billion gallons."

"The new developments and the Phase II project are not directly linked," Keel said. "But we are broadening our future water supply for growth we anticipate for the next 20 years."

The project will take approximately one and half years, raising the level of Carr Store Road, replacing an existing culvert on Mill Creek Road, and building a bridge on Efland Cedar Grove Road.

The projects

The approved new developments include:

- Bellevue Mill is a 104 multi-family project on 19.8 acres.
- Cates Creek Apartments is a 270-unit apartment complex on Cates Creek Road.
- Corbin Creek Woods Subdivision is 18 residential lots on 12.2 acres on Mitchell Street.
- Corbinton Commons is a 228-unit on 40.1 acres on U.S. 70 East.
- Elfins Pond is 118 townhomes on 24 acres at the intersection of Orange Grove Road and Eno Mountain Road.
- Forest Ridge is a 233 single-family unit project on U.S. 70 A.
- Waterstone has three projects totaling a possible 670 units on Waterstone Drive by the UNC Hospital's new Hillsborough hospital.

Proposed developments include:

- 515 North Churton Street is a 24-unit condominium project on 1.49 acres adjacent to Sinclair Station.
- Webb Grove is a 10-unit condominium project on 2.7 acres on the corner of West King and Hassel Street.

Orange County residents make final pleas in support, opposition to light-rail project

GoTriangle will host a second public hearing at 7 p.m. Thursday in Durham

NC Senate fails to lift \$500,000 cap on light-rail funding

The 17-mile, 17-station light-rail system could cost \$1.8B to design and build



An artist's rendering of a light-rail train running beside U.S. 15-501 over New Hope Creek in Durham.

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER CHAPEL HILL NEWS BY TAMMY GRUBB SEPTEMBER 29, 2015

CHAPEL HILL -- GoTriangle gave residents the last word Tuesday at an Orange County public hearing on the proposed 17-mile, \$1.8 billion light-rail line from UNC Hospitals to Alston Avenue in Durham.

More than a hundred residents and several local leaders, including Durham Mayor Bill Bell, attended the public hearing at the Friday Center in Chapel Hill. The majority oppose all or part of the plan.

GoTriangle will give Durham County residents a similar opportunity Thursday from 4 to 7 p.m. in the Durham County Commissioners chamber, 200 E. Main St. The regional transit agency plans to take comments on the plan through Oct. 13 at its website (ourtransitfuture.com).

Comments will be included in the final version of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement before it's submitted to the Federal Transportation Administration in February. A DEIS that indicates the "locally preferred route" is required when seeking federal bus and rail system dollars.

Federal approval would be a positive sign that federal dollars could help pay up to 50 percent of the project's cost, GoTriangle officials have said. It also would start the design and engineering phase.

The plan also relies on 25 percent in local funding, from a half-cent sales tax that Orange and Durham voters approved for transit, vehicle registration fees, fares and a rental car tax. The remaining 25 percent is expected from the state.

GoTriangle was promised up to 10 percent, or \$138 million, as part of the state Strategic Transportation Investments program, but a recent state budget provision capped light-rail funding at \$500,000.

The state House voted Monday night to remove that cap, but Senate leaders, instead of bringing the bill to a vote, sent it to the Rules Committee late Tuesday. The move leaves the \$500,000 cap in place at least until next year.

Proponents said light rail would be more environmentally friendly than adding cars to already-congested roads as the region grows. Light rail could help ease future congestion by reducing traffic now, they said, and give UNC and Duke students and employees another way to commute.

Chapel Hill's Town Council unanimously backed the light-rail plan Monday, Councilwoman Maria Palmer said.

Population growth can't be stopped, she said, but "what we can do as responsible public servants is to make decisions that prepare the community, so that we can have the least impact to our environment, the least pollution, the least traffic."

Chapel Hill resident Daniel Cole agreed. The light-rail line will pass his condo, making it difficult for him to drive in and out, he said, but sometimes there are "sacrifices for the greater good."

"Buses will not work as well because they also have to use the roads," Cole said. "To help the environment, to help the community, we have to get cars off the road."

The plan's critics argued light rail is an outdated technology with the potential to create many unsafe, at-grade crossings and traffic jams on smaller roads that intersect with N.C. 54. They also questioned GoTriangle's numbers, which put the potential ridership at 23,000 boardings a day by 2035.

Despite several changes, including increased travel times, several hundred fewer parking spaces and re-aligned tracks, Downing Creek resident Alex Cabanes said GoTriangle is standing by its original ridership data.

"The projected 23,000 daily boardings was built on numerous flawed assumptions," Cabanes said, including that 40 percent of households in the rail corridor won't have cars. The Census Bureau puts the number without cars now at 10.4 percent in Durham and 7.4 percent in Chapel Hill, he said.

Downing Creek neighbors want the rail line to follow its original path through Meadowmont, across the highway. Many Meadowmont residents oppose that plan.

Bill Ferrell, with the Meadowmont Community Association Board of Directors, said the C2A route past Downing Creek is the best, because it protects the wetlands, offers the best investment for the money, and has the highest potential for attracting riders and affordable housing.

That route skirts the southern edge of N.C. 54, turning north just over the county line until it crosses Farrington Road to parallel I-40. It would require GoTriangle to buy six properties through eminent domain, including one that has been in the same family since 1888, resident William Pitts said.

Neighbors think the Farrington Road crossing and a proposed rail operations and maintenance facility – ROMF – are incompatible with surrounding homes and an elementary school. The ROMF could leave the neighborhood facing increased stormwater runoff, noise and traffic, Pitts said.

"A BRT, or bus rapid transit system, will serve the area much better at far less cost to taxpayers who will have to support the project and will be flexible and be able to provide the safest (option as) ... conditions change over time," he said.

Tammy Grubb: 919-829-8926, [@TammyGrubb](#)

ADD YOUR OPINION

Triangle residents have less than two weeks to comment on plans for a 17-mile light-rail line from UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill to Alston Avenue in Durham.

A public hearing will be held from 4 to 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 1, in the Durham County Commissioners chamber, 200 E. Main St. in Durham.

The deadline for submitting comments about the plan's draft Environmental Impact Statement to GoTriangle is Oct. 13. The regional transit agency plans to submit the final report to federal transportation officials by February.

A copy of the draft Environmental Impact Statement is available at ourtransitfuture.com or at the Chapel Hill Public Library. Comments can be submitted to GoTriangle by email to info@ourtransitfuture.com; or mail to D-O LRT Project – DEIS, c/o Triangle Transit, P.O. Box 530, Morrisville, NC 27560.

Durham County commissioners approved \$20 million to help fund RTP modernization

Money will help redevelop phase one of Park Center

Park Center is considered a cornerstone of RTP's master plan for the next 50 years

Park Center will include retail, residential and open spaces

THE NEWS AND OBSERVER BY VIRGINIA BRIDGES SEPTEMBER 28, 2015

DURHAM -- County commissioners unanimously approved an agreement Monday night to give up to \$20 million toward an effort to modernize the 50-year-old Research Triangle Park.

The money will be used to help fund phase one of Park Center's redevelopment, a cornerstone of Research Triangle Foundation's master plan to modernize the park with retail, residential and open spaces.

Commissioners also approved amendments to the Durham Comprehensive Plan, the Unified Development Ordinance and related rezonings to create a new zoning district – Science Research Park-Center – to accommodate and define the standards for the mixed uses in the proposed redevelopment for some areas within the 98-acre property known as Park Center in Research Triangle Park. The area is surrounded by N.C. 54, Davis Drive, Interstate 40 and N.C. 147.

The approvals allow aspects of the RTP master plan, announced in 2012 to guide changes in the park for the next 50 years, to move forward. Phase one of Park Center includes the redevelopment of 45 acres on the eastern half of the center, Elizabeth Rooks, executive vice-president of the Research Triangle Foundation, said before the meeting.

"We have done the more detailed plan for the east side," Rooks said. "The west side, we are keeping the existing buildings that are there for the time being."

The re-development plan for Park Center includes 600 apartments, about 1 million square feet of office space, about 300,000 square feet of retail, a full-service hotel, a second hotel, possibly a boutique hotel, and a meeting center, Rooks said.

The Research Triangle Foundation has already invested \$25 million in Park Center and has committed to spending another \$20 million, according to a county report. The \$20 million in county funding, which will be paid over a 10-year period, would help cover the development of utility infrastructure, parking and public parks.

Now that commissioners have approved the related zoning changes, the site plan already submitted for phase one of Park Center can move forward – beginning with an administrative review by county planning officials.

Commissioners said Monday that approval of the public-private \$20 million agreement between the county and the Research Triangle Foundation marks an exciting moment for the community.

"I think this is something that 10 years from now we are going to look back and say that it was a great vision in this community," said Commissioner Ellen Reckhow. "I think we will reap the dividends of this investment for many decades."

Light-rail funding restoration requires Senate OK

The Herald-Sun By Lauren Horsch Updated Sep 29, 2015

DURHAM — The North Carolina House of Representatives this week moved to remove a cap on funding for light rail transit systems.

The state budget passed by both houses earlier this month had capped funding for light rail at \$500,000 — which essentially would have killed the planned Durham-Orange Light Rail.

However, House members voted to amend Senate Bill 605 — which includes changes to a variety of revenue legislation — to repeal the cap.

Rep. Paul Stam, a Republican from Wake County, offered the amendment, which originally passed 81-28. The bill passed the House on its third and final reading, 103-6.

And on Tuesday the state government was scrambling to tie up loose ends and pass bills before the end of the session. The Senate was meeting late Tuesday and likely into the wee hours of this morning, hoping to adjourn its current long session.

The bill was sent to the Senate on Tuesday, but it was referred to the Senate Committee on Rules and Operations. On Tuesday afternoon, both Durham County senators — Democrats in the GOP-majority Senate — were hopeful the bill would pass.

Durham senators Mike Woodard and Floyd McKissick Jr. both said their colleagues in the Senate had raised objections to certain parts of the bill.

"I know that there is language in 605 that deal with things other than the transit issue, that members do find objectionable," McKissick said Tuesday.

Woodard said he wasn't sure how the bill was going to play out because of those concerns.

However, he said he hadn't heard much opposition to the light rail funding, rather that many in the Senate were supporting it.

Woodard mentioned how well the Durham-Orange Light Rail line scored with the strategic transportation investments law (STI). The STI created a formula using "data-driven scoring and local input" to help determine what projects would get funding through the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

Previously the Durham-Orange Light Rail line had been set to receive \$138 million through STIP, but the budget provision passed by the General Assembly circumvented that.

The STIP funding would be paid out over a decade and account for a sizeable fraction of the cash needed to support the nearly \$1.8 billion project.

McKissick said he remained "cautiously optimistic" that the bill would pass the Senate, but aid there remained a possibility the General Assembly would have to take a look at it again in six months when the Legislature comes back for its short session.

"There are certainly Senate members who are not fans of transit," McKissick said, adding members believe that politics have been put "right in the middle" of the discussion and debate of public transportation.

McKissick said funding through STIP was a way to remove politics from the process.

"Let's hope now that we'll be able to keep things moving in the right directions," McKissick said.

The maneuvering comes days before a public hearing on the draft environmental impact statement on the Durham-Orange Light Rail system. On Thursday, a public hearing will be held on the statement as a way for residents to get their opinions on the record about the project. The hearing will be held at 4 p.m. in the Durham County Commissioners' chamber at 200 E. Main St.

\$50 million puts RTP a step closer to executing strategic plan

By WRAL TechWire (WRAL.com) Posted October 1, 2015

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, N.C. — The Research Triangle Foundation of North Carolina, managers of Research Triangle Park, announced Thursday that it has raised \$50 million to invest in the 100-acre Park Center Development, the park's first major expansion since its establishment 50 years ago.

The goal is to make RTP more than just a place to work.

"Every product has to innovate to stay competitive. It's time for us to innovate," said Bob Geolas, RTF president and CEO.

Geolas has described Park Center as "a new kind of place" that combines living and working space. "It's about a collaborative commons place where people can share ideas," he said.

The plan was developed with feedback from Research Triangle Park companies, many of them smaller than the well-known IBM, which lack cafeterias and other on-site amenities. The strategic plan for RTP, outlined in 2012, called for mixed-use housing, retail and business.

Work will begin in January on a parcel of land on the south side of Interstate 40 acquired over recent years by the foundation.

About [\\$20 million of the money comes from Durham County](#) to be used to build public infrastructure.

The entire project could total billions of dollars of investment over multiple phases. Geolas said he expects to see the vision start to take shape over the next three to five years.

"We know if we don't innovate, we will be in trouble," he said. "This is the beginning of that innovation. Nothing will stop us."

Local Brief: Cap remains on light rail funding ... for now ... as Legislature adjourns

THE HERALD-SUN BY: STAFF REPORTS OCTOBER 3, 2015

Cap remains on light rail funding

DURHAM — With the N.C. General Assembly closing its session early Wednesday morning, a debate on funding for light rail transit stalled.

On Monday, the state House of Representatives had cleared an amendment deleting a provision in the state budget capping funding for light rail lines at \$500,000.

The Senate was set to take up the bill on Tuesday, but instead referred it to the Senate Rules Committee, thus stalling it for the rest of the session. The issue is expected to be brought back for consideration at the General Assembly short session in April.

The cap on funding drastically cut the amount of money GoTriangle transit officials had been anticipating for the Durham-Orange Light Rail transit line. They had believed they would receive \$138 million.

Pros, cons weigh in at Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project public hearing

THE HERALD-SUN BY: LAUREN HORSCH OCTOBER 3, 2015

DURHAM — As the comment period on the draft environmental impact statement for the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project draws to a close, more than 50 people put their concerns on the record during a recent public hearing.

The hearing held in the Durham County Board of Commissioners' chambers was a three-hour look into arguments for and against the 17-mile, \$1.8 billion transit plan that has been decades in the making.

The project has drawn plenty of criticism as GoTriangle prepares to release the majority of its preferred options, including locating a maintenance facility off Farrington Road in a primarily residential area.

This was the second public hearing of the comment period on the draft statement. The comments heard were recorded and put onto the record that goes to the Federal Transit Administration for the final environmental impact statement.

The comment period ends Oct. 13.

Those in support of the transit system, like Andrew Jacobson of Durham, say because of the continued growth of the region the light rail would help centralize and "focus the growth" as well as serve as a backbone in the community.

Multiple speakers representing Durham Congregations, Association and Neighborhoods (CAN) spoke in favor of light rail and the affordable housing opportunities that would be built in conjunction with it.

Mark-Anthony Middleton, with DurhamCAN, said the organization supports light rail for various reasons — including supporting 15 percent of housing near the 17 light rail stations to be dedicated to affordable housing.

"We believe that the work that is occurring in Durham is inevitable," Middleton said. "And that the light rail transit system will be just a part of a strategic and comprehensive plan."

Middleton said DurhamCAN believes that the light rail system would not only serve the residents of the city who are dealing with poverty, but would be able to help lift them out of it.

"We believe that the growth that is occurring in the Triangle, particularly in Durham, is inevitable and will continue," he said. "We believe that it is not bad, but is indicative of the great metropolis we are becoming."

However, opponents of the light rail contend that the estimates — not only in ridership but other factors that would determine light rail success — have been inflated by GoTriangle. They also believe environmental impacts have been down played.

Debbie McCarthy, who lives on Trenton Road near the proposed rail maintenance site, has been working on environment issues in the New Hope Creek corridor for decades.

McCarthy said the Farrington Road site would require the most residential relocations, has the worst environmental score and would have the greatest number of stream impacts.

"There will also be toxicity in that runoff from the chemicals (at the maintenance facility)," she said. "And those of us who drink from wells on Trenton Road are not happy about that."

Concerns were also raised about how the transit line would not serve Raleigh-Durham International Airport and doesn't go far enough into East Durham to serve the many residents there who depend on mass transit.

Others proposed a bus rapid transit system that would provide more flexibility in routes.

Jim Doughty, a Durham County resident, advocated for the bus rapid transit because it is more "flexible and scalable in ways that rails pinned to the ground are not."

He believes the draft statement process was flawed, due to a 2012 alternatives analysis which rejected bus rapid transit.

Bonnie Hauser, a Hillsborough resident, advocated for the no-build option — meaning light rail wouldn't be built at all.

"No-build allows leaders to redirect local funds toward a regional transportation network, complete streets and other transportation improvements including last mile service features," she said.

The public hearing came on the heels of GoTriangle being left in the lurch for \$137.5 million expected funding from the state government. GoTriangle was promised that funding after scoring well through the Strategic Transportation Investments program, but spending on the project was capped at \$500,000 in the just-passed state budget.

An amendment to remove that cap passed the House, but was remanded to committee for study in the Senate and will not be re-examined until April's General Assembly short session.

In a statement released Thursday, GoTriangle remained "confident that the funding cap will be addressed in the future, and are grateful for the support we have received for the project. We continue to believe the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project provides the best transportation solution for the Durham to Chapel Hill corridor."

City Council revises, OKs light rail letter to GoTriangle

THE HERALD-SUN BY: LAUREN HORSCH OCTOBER 6, 2015

DURHAM — The Durham City Council this week gave their approval for Mayor Bill Bell to send a letter to GoTriangle in support of the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project — with a few changes.

The draft letter presented to the council endorsed several options including using the so-called C2A alignment over Little Creek, the NHC2 rail alignment over New Hope Creek, the Trent/Flowers rail station location, the Farrington Road maintenance facility and building the light rail system.

However, some council members wanted to add more language in order to address issues brought up by residents.

Councilman Don Moffitt proposed four additions to the letter.

His additions include adding a sentence about supporting the move of the Alston Avenue transit stop to the east side of Alston Avenue if constraints can be overcome.

Moffitt's second addition would urge GoTriangle and engineers to examine the feasibility of modifications to the location of the Buchanan Boulevard station and the Durham multi-modal transit station as well as adding a "City Center" station.

Those additions were originally proposed by the Durham Area Designers (DAD). In their proposal, DAD suggested shifting the Buchanan station closer to Buchanan Boulevard to create better visibility from Burch Avenue, the West End and Trinity Park neighborhoods and West Chapel Hill Street businesses.

The addition of a city center station would better serve City Hall, the county courthouse and jail, the Durham Performing Arts Center, the Durham Bulls Athletic Park and other businesses downtown.

The proposed city center station would be located near Mangum Street on Pettigrew Street.

DAD said in its proposal that by adding the city center station and shifting the Buchanan station and Transit Center station west, a total of 3.4 million square feet in 109 buildings would be within a quarter-mile walk.

A third addition would urge GoTriangle to investigate and implement storm water controls to ensure water quality near a proposed rail operation and maintenance facility on Farrington Road.

The final addition would ensure "safe and convenient access" to N.C. 54 for Downing Creek residents.

Councilwoman Diane Catotti also brought forth the addition of a clause suggesting GoTriangle go back and evaluate having a maintenance facility on Cornwallis Road if problems arise at the Farrington Road site.

Mayor Pro Tem Cora Cole-McFadden raised concerns once again about the lack of access for students at N.C. Central University.

"It still does not look right for a piece of this project to be UNC and another at Duke, and then you don't have the historically black universities included," she said.

She also mentioned that Durham Technical Community College students wouldn't have access.

Mayor Bill Bell said that in his opinion if the light rail project isn't done right at this time then it is never going to happen.

"I know that there are pros and cons. But again, if the Feds choose not to fund this project it's not going to happen," Bell said, referring to federal funding.