

Light rail failed when common purpose derailed

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In the end, there was nothing light about the Durham-Orange light rail project. At an estimated cost of \$2.76 billion, it was a heavy lift. And this week its frustrated and weary supporters finally had to let it drop after years of effort and \$130 million in spending.

There's no shame in the project's failure. It was a sincere and inspired effort. But there is cause for concern about what its demise says about the strength of the state's and region's commitment to mass transit and how a lack of transit options might shape and constrain the Triangle's future.

What may be most notable about the project and its fate is that it tried to overcome — and eventually fell to — a fractured political landscape. This wasn't the regional commuter rail system that was first considered for the Triangle. Wake County didn't join in. So Orange and Durham counties went ahead with a light rail system. Their voters approved a 1/2 cent sales tax to support the project and engineering and design work got underway for an 18-mile line that would connect Chapel Hill and Durham.

The project, already narrowly based in the Triangle's two smaller counties, then got rocked by the General Assembly. Funding was supposed to be 25 percent local, 25 percent state and 50 percent federal, but Republican lawmakers balked. They cut the state's commitment to no more than 10 percent and then no more than \$190 million, about 7.7 percent. The state also made its funding contingent on local and federal funding being in place and imposed a deadline of this November.

Durham and Orange counties gamely tried to make up the lost funds, but the project's balance was lost and its time frame narrowed. With the project wobbling, Duke University knocked it over by refusing to give up land for a light rail corridor near its medical center. The North Carolina Railroad also balked at sharing key parts of its right of way.

The board of trustees of GoTriangle, the regional agency overseeing the project, voted on Wednesday to end the project. And the dream, or the boondoggle, depending on your perspective, died.

U.S. Rep. David Price, as chairman of the Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development Appropriations Subcommittee, was well positioned to give secure federal funding for the light rail project. His statement on its end is worth noting here: "With the Triangle growing and developing rapidly, we cannot afford to sit on our hands and watch as our roads clog with traffic and prospective employers choose to locate elsewhere. Unfortunately, for now we have been stymied by unreasonable conditions imposed by the General Assembly and by the failure of essential participants to reach agreement."

There were reasonable objections to the project's course, its technology and its rising cost. But there will be resistance to any great public undertaking.

If key parties stand separate, the Triangle will choke on its lack of options for getting from here to there. It's not an attractive situation for major employers who might consider the Triangle, and eventually it will be discouraging for people who are here.

That a transportation project failed is one thing. That the legislature and the Triangle failed to cooperate is more worrisome. Without cooperation — much more than without light rail — the Triangle isn't going anywhere.