

Commuter rail in Wake and Durham counties would cost up to \$1.8 billion, study says

Herald-Sun By Richard Stradling January 7, 2020

DURHAM – A commuter rail system running 40 trains each weekday between Garner and Durham would cost \$1.4 billion to \$1.8 billion to build and carry 7,500 to 10,000 passengers a day, according to preliminary estimates from the regional transit agency GoTriangle.

The 37-mile commuter rail line would connect the Triangle's biggest cities of Raleigh, Cary and Durham as well as Research Triangle Park by following the existing rail corridor owned by the N.C. Railroad, a state-owned private company.

GoTriangle says at least 34 miles of new tracks would need to be built in the corridor for commuter trains, because the existing tracks are already heavily used by Amtrak and freight trains. Twenty-seven Amtrak and freight trains pass through the busiest stretch of the corridor, between Raleigh and Cary, each day.

The feasibility study from GoTriangle provides the most refined details to date about the commuter rail system proposed by transit plans in both Durham and Wake counties.

GoTriangle says the study and its cost and ridership estimates are preliminary and are intended to help local governments decide whether to pursue the project further. The agency plans to present them to local government boards in the coming weeks, and started Monday morning with Durham county commissioners.

Durham commissioners expressed caution about the project in the wake of the failed Durham-Orange light-rail line. GoTriangle abandoned plans to develop the 18-mile light-rail project between Chapel Hill and Durham last March, in part because Duke University and the N.C. Railroad balked at providing needed right-of-way.

Commissioner Ellen Reckhow said GoTriangle and others involved must make sure commuter rail has the support it needs to succeed before the county commits money to help pay for more detailed engineering studies.

"We need, before we expend more capital monies, to make sure that all the key stakeholders are on board," said Reckhow, who also serves on the GoTriangle Board of Trustees. "We've got to learn from what happened with light rail and not presume anything."

"We don't want to be burned again," said Wendy Jacobs, who heads the board of commissioners and also serves on the GoTriangle board. "So this is going to be tough. It really is going to be a tough decision."

Commissioners echoed concerns raised by another GoTriangle board member, Durham Mayor Steve Schewel, in a letter written in October and shared with commissioners Monday. While Schewel said he backs the commuter rail project, he said there must be strong public support and involvement and planners need to know what to expect from the N.C. Railroad.

"Candidly, the city has great apprehension about proceeding with the commuter rail project without full awareness of the requirements of the North Carolina Railroad Company and Norfolk Southern, particularly, but not exclusively, in the downtown area," Schewel wrote. "We ardently seek to avoid a situation where we invest significant time, effort, and resources in a project and later learn about costly and impactful design requirements."

For its part, the N.C. Railroad issued a statement Monday noting that it is taking part in the commuter rail study and is "working closely with all parties involved."

"We look forward to continued collaboration with a focus on the highest safety standards and forward-thinking planning to achieve a commuter rail plan that operates successfully with current and future freight and Amtrak service needs," the railroad said. (CONTINUED...)

FEDERAL FUNDING NEEDED

GoTriangle's plan calls for up to 20 round trips per weekday — eight round trips each during the morning and evening commuting hours and two round trips during the midday and evening hours. The trains would stop at Garner, downtown Raleigh, N.C. State University, Cary, Morrisville, Research Triangle Park and downtown Durham.

GoTriangle looked at six scenarios, including two involving seven and 12 daily round trips between Garner and Durham. The other three options covered seven, 12 and 20 round trips per day on a longer commuter rail system between Selma in Johnston County and Mebane in Orange County. The agency is also evaluating 20 round trips a day between Durham and Clayton and between Hillsborough and Clayton, but won't have an assessment of those routes until later this month.

For now, GoTriangle says operating 20 round trips a day between Garner and Durham serves the most riders for the money and is the scenario that would most likely win favor with the federal government, which would be counted on to provide as much as half of the construction cost.

"It will be very important to have federal funding to make this project affordable," Katharine Eggleston, GoTriangle's chief development officer, told Durham commissioners.

GoTriangle expects commuter rail would draw people who would otherwise drive. The agency predicts more than 55% of rail passengers would come from households with two or more cars, compared to less than 10% of GoDurham bus riders.

Durham commissioners said they'll want more information about who would be served by commuter rail and how that compares with the needs of Durham residents. Commissioner Heidi Carter said seeing the percentage of GoDurham riders who depend on the bus to get around makes her more inclined to focus the county's money and energy on improving that service.

"I put that ahead of the commuter rail," Carter said.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT QUESTIONED

GoTriangle was scheduled to present the results of the feasibility study with Wake County commissioners Monday evening, but GoTriangle had not yet arranged to share them with town and city councils in Cary, Durham, Morrisville or Raleigh. Speaking at the Durham commissioners meeting, the head of the city's transportation department, Sean Egan, criticized GoTriangle for not reaching out to the cities and their residents sooner.

"To date, despite potentially significant impacts to many communities along the corridor, the project has not conducted any public engagement," Egan said. "It is particularly important for the community to be engaged prior to limiting the options under consideration."

It's about cultivating relationships, said commissioner Brenda Howerton.

"If people are not at the table and then you try to bring them in after you've made the decisions, you've got problems," Howerton said.

Eggleston replied that GoTriangle is trying to develop the data the public and local governments can use to decide whether commuter rail is worth further study.

"Asking entities to commit before sufficient information is available for them to make a decision is also something that can be problematic," she said.

E-scooters send thousands to hospitals and injure even more in the US, researchers say

Herald-Sun By Charles Duncan January 8, 2020

Electronic scooters have been blamed for tens of thousands of injuries across the United States and more than 3,000 people admitted to hospitals over five years, according to new data published by the American Medical Association.

E-scooters have been popping up in cities all over the country with brands like Bird and Lime building a small industry around letting people rent the motorized scooters with a smart phone app.

The rental scooters have brought debate for city leaders around the United States as local officials try to figure out how to regulate the companies.

The data, collected from emergency departments, shows almost 40,000 people were hurt while riding e-scooters between 2014 and 2018. The estimates show the numbers jump sharply from 8,000 in 2017 to more than 14,000 the next year.

Researchers from the University of California, San Francisco published the data Wednesday in the journal JAMA Surgery.

The researchers estimate almost 3,300 people had to be hospitalized for e-scooter injuries.

A report released over the summer tied e-scooters to eight deaths between the fall of 2017 and June 2019, according to Consumer Reports.

The City of Austin and public health officials studied rental e-scooter injuries in the city for three months in 2018. They found 192 people who went to the emergency room for injuries from e-scooters.

That works out to be about 20 injuries for every 100,000 rides, according to the Austin study.

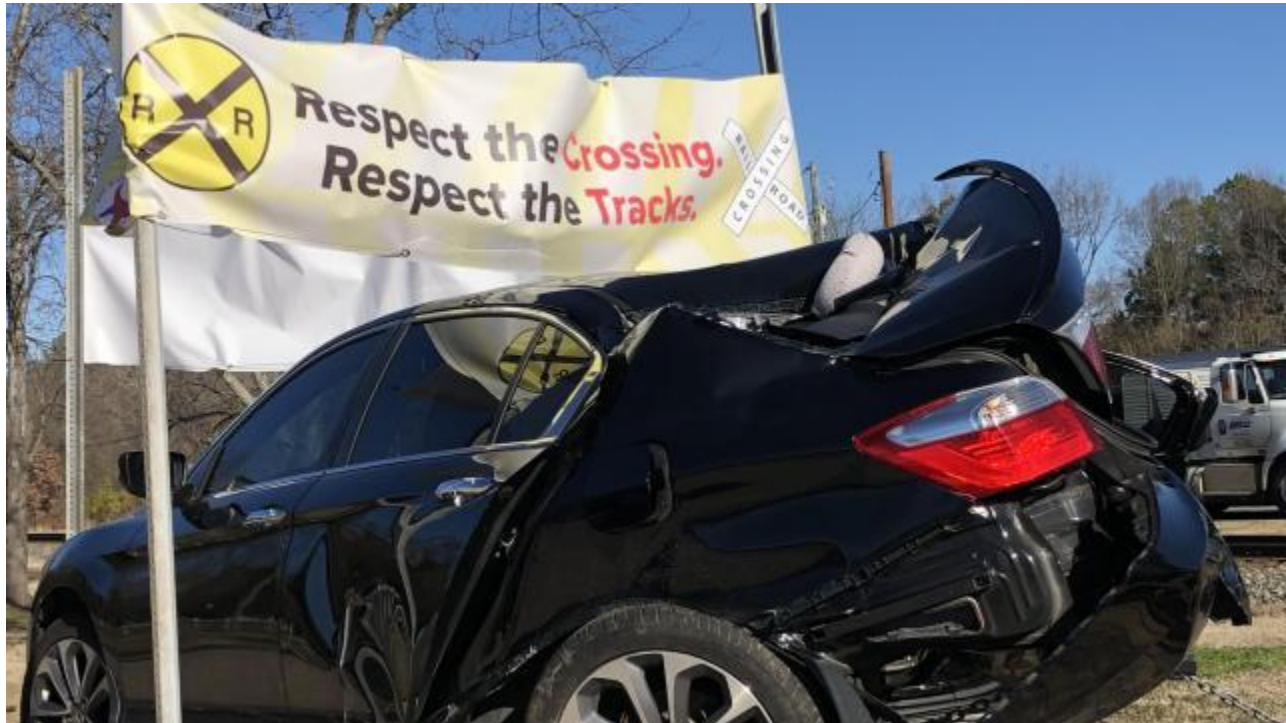
Both the Austin study and the new national data point out how frequent head injuries are with e-scooters. Nationally, about one-third of the people who showed up at the ER for e-scooter injuries had head injuries, "more than double the rate of head injuries experienced by bicyclists."

According to the study from UC San Francisco researchers, earlier research found less than 5% of riders wore a helmet.

The study's authors said, "E-scooter companies should facilitate and encourage helmet use by increasing helmet access."

According to the researchers, "Study limitations include the lack of detailed clinical reports such as collision scenario, alcohol use, or helmet use."

Wrecked car at Morrisville railroad crossing will stay there for 30 days



WRAL.com By Jessica Patrick, WRAL digital journalist January 7, 2020

MORRISVILLE, N.C. — A crashed car has been placed at a Morrisville railroad crossing to prove a point -- that trains don't stop for cars or pedestrians.

The North Carolina Department of Transportation and the Morrisville Police Department created the display at the intersection of Morrisville-Carpenter Road and Chapel Hill Road on Jan. 3 to show how dangerous it is to ignore railroad crossing barriers.

The wrecked car, which is from an actual train crash that occurred Nov. 30, will remain there through the end of the month along with a sign that reads, "Respect the crossing. Respect the tracks."

According to officials, three cars and trains have collided at that intersection since 2013. Four people died as a result of those crashes.

The NCDOT said it takes a train traveling at 55 mph more than a mile to stop. Trains always have the right-of-way, even when emergency vehicles are involved.

Officials ask that all drivers keep their cars behind the white lines when waiting at a railroad crossing.

Self-driving vehicles are coming. NCDOT is paying researchers to help us get ready.

Herald-Sun By Richard Stradling December 17, 2019

RALEIGH –Teams of researchers based at three state universities will spend the next three years developing ways to help North Carolina prepare for autonomous vehicles and other new transportation technologies.

The N.C. Department of Transportation announced Tuesday that it will give \$1 million to each of the three teams to study transportation challenges facing the state. Most of those challenges have to do with technology, notably the expected introduction of electric and autonomous or self-driving cars and trucks.

“Disruptive technologies will reshape the transportation industry,” Transportation Secretary Jim Trogdon said in a statement. “This research will provide North Carolina with data we need to prepare for these changes.”

The research programs, called University Transportation Centers for Excellence, will be based at N.C. State, UNC-Chapel Hill and N.C. A&T, but will include members from other schools, including Duke and N.C. Central.

Each center will have a different focus:

- N.C. A&T will host the N.C. Transportation Center on Connected and Autonomous Vehicle Technology, or NC-CAV. The university will have a test track at Gateway Research Park in Greensboro and will work with the city to build a road between downtown and the university campus exclusively for autonomous vehicles.
- UNC-Chapel Hill's Highway Safety Research Center will focus on the effect of autonomous vehicles and other technologies on safety, accessibility, mobility and public policy.
- N.C. State University's Institute for Transportation Research and Education will research the use of cameras and sensors to predict traffic and reduce congestion. It will also research the management of fleets of autonomous vehicles and look for ways to use transportation to improve access to health care in rural areas.

Trogdon has emphasized the need for North Carolina to prepare for new transportation technologies. In January, NCDOT will co-host a transportation summit on the future of transportation. The featured speaker will be Tony Seba, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who heads a think tank called RethinkX and who predicts that by 2030 nearly all road travel in the U.S. will be done via electric, on-demand autonomous vehicles owned by fleets.

The N.C. Transportation Summit will take place Jan. 8 and 9 in Raleigh. For information, go to www.nctransportationsummit.com.