## Thomas Farmer: Light rail the sensible way to grow

## BY THOMAS FARMER

I would like to congratulate GoTriangle (formerly Triangle Transit) and all their area partners for a carefully conceived Durham-Orange Light Rail Project. I am convinced that it would be an economically disastrous decision not to complete this light rail project.

Our region's continued vitality depends on upgrading our transportation infrastructure, and there is no better way than light rail to achieve sustainable and environmentally friendly growth. While there is no service to RTP in the current plan and projected ridership to RDU does not justify the costs, the current line promises to be one of the more successful light rail projects in the nation.

It is anchored by two growing cities while serving three major medical centers, three universities, several sports venues, an intercity train station, several major shopping destinations, and multiple employment centers. Ridership will be brisk from day 1 and should easily exceed the 23,000 daily weekday riders projected by 2035. It is hard to conceive of a better route for a successful light rail line.

The Triangle's population and traffic continues to grow at a faster rate than our road capacity. The average annual traffic delay has grown to 34 hours per commuter. We burn nearly 10 million gallons of fuel while waiting in traffic. Combining wasted fuel with lost productivity leads to an estimated road congestion cost of over \$700 per commuter each year. (Texas A&M Transportation Institute 2015 Urban Mobility Report)

Having light rail is a benefit even for those who never ride. Each of the projected 23,000 riders potentially represents one less driver on the road. This significantly reduces congestion and pollution while saving tremendous amounts of money in productivity time, fuel costs, highway maintenance, and highway construction. Yes, light rail is expensive to build, but so are highways. Further, light rail is significantly cheaper to maintain than highways and also reduces sprawl by creating focused growth and walkable communities.

Several readers have written to this paper expressing concern over the safety of light rail. The trains will set traffic lights as they approach, and grade crossings are generally no different than any other intersection. Given that GoTriangle projects each light rail car to take between 60 and 125 cars off

the road, I will take my safety chances with less traffic. It will be safer still to be on board the train and enjoy being out of the traffic altogether.

Light rail is new to us, and I realize it is a significant leap. I was living in St. Louis when its first light rail project was built, and many of the same concerns over cost, low ridership, safety, and noise were voiced. The original 14-mile route in St. Louis did not have many of the advantages that we do in our proposed route. Yet, the 10-year ridership projections were exceeded in two years and St. Louis now has a 46-mile light rail network. Such a story is typical of many cities that have built light rail. Once the initial fears are overcome, communities tend to clamor for the focused economic growth that a light rail station brings not to mention the convenience and increased property values.

The Triangle will grow and we can't stop that. What we can control is how it will grow. Do we want to be yet another region of polluted urban sprawl where traffic problems are addressed by adding more lanes to heavily congested roadways? Imagine Durham and Chapel Hill in 2030 if we stop this project. We can't afford not to build light rail.

Thomas Farmer lives in Chapel Hill.

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