

We need an efficient, economical transit system

By Bo Glenn Guest columnist

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The Durham Orange Light Rail (D-OLR) is the spine anchoring a multimodal 21st -century transportation system with advanced electric powered light rail technology, providing faster, more reliable and frequent service to our major universities, medical and employment centers in our most heavily traveled corridor while avoiding the costs of roadway construction and maintenance, dispersed parking lots and auto emissions.

When complete the system will include expanded interconnected high frequency bus service, improved bicycle and pedestrian facilities, park and ride lots at transit stations and neighborhood centers, commuter rail to RTP and Raleigh, with easy and frequent access to the airport.

In 2008, following years of intense analysis, the Special Transit Advisory Commission determined that the highest level of future travel intensity of any of the 18 corridors in Wake, Durham or Orange counties was in the Durham-Orange corridor. The D-O corridor also has the highest concentration of transit-dependent households, is constrained from further road development by the New Hope Creek corridor and the Jordan Lake game lands and has the highest cross-county public transportation usage in the state. This decision has been confirmed by seven more years of study, analysis and public input. It is one that fulfills a community-wide vision of compact, walkable neighborhoods; dense, vibrant downtowns; world-class universities and medical centers and a more environmentally responsible community.

We are at a crossroads due to large population growth. Instead of the old failed solutions that fill short-term needs, the D-OLR will meet the challenges and opportunities of future growth with a modern long-term transportation solution which will set an example for other communities. One that helps move people safely and efficiently to where they need to go, while contributing to cleaner air, making our nation more energy independent and increasing equitable access to training, jobs and vital services.

With our population boom, people and businesses would otherwise be plagued with congestion, long commutes and lack of transportation choices. Unlike Wake County, which has to please 12 municipalities, we have a better choice than building more roads, beltways and parking lots.

The cities that we are competing with for 21st-century commerce and jobs continue to invest in high-capacity light rail transit. For example, based on its recent success, Charlotte will double its light rail line in 2017. For Durham to compete, we need a transit system that will move people, goods and services

quickly, dependably and outside of auto traffic. To compete, we need to demonstrate our continued commitment to innovation and smart growth.

Our past auto-centric focus has resulted in sprawl devouring farm land, forests and open space, polluting our air and water, harming our health and threatening what makes Durham and Chapel Hill great places to live and raise a family.

National and international experience demonstrates that the certainty of a fixed rail line does more to shape land use and encourage and concentrate compact development than any other form of transportation. Charlotte has enjoyed \$1.4 billion in development around its light rail line. We now have 3,000 apartments being developed around the proposed transit stations. Duke has made a greater commitment to downtown Durham following the approval of the D-OLR.

Fifty percent of the cost of the \$1.5 billion price tag for D-OLR will come from a federal transportation grant. These federal dollars, which will be a huge boost to our economy, are only available for the proposed D-OLR. The increased development will grow our tax revenues dramatically.

National studies have shown that every \$1 billion invested in light rail supports and creates 47,500 jobs. Businesses located near light rail have improved productivity due to employee reliability and less turnover, with a larger, more diverse labor pool. As development locates near stations, many more jobs will be available along the transit network.

Our family budgets are being squeezed by the costs of commuting. Many people cannot become productive members of our society because they lack basic transportation. Many cannot afford a car, much less an "intelligent" one. We need a transit system now that will move everyone efficiently and economically. We do not have the luxury to wait for ivory tower solutions as costs continue to rise.

Bo Glenn was the vice chair of the Special Transportation Advisory Commission and was the convener of the Durham-Orange Friends of Transit.