

## Jason Baker: Correcting the record on the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project

July 05, 2016

*This guest post, written by Jason Baker, originally [appeared](#) at [OrangePolitics.org](#). We're reprinting it here with permission. It's a full-throated response to the Indy Week's cover story last week on the Durham-Orange light rail project.*

*As always with guest posts, the opinions expressed here are those of the original author -- but heartily seconded by your editor here. -KSD*

The June 29, 2016, [“Off the Rails” INDY Week piece by David Hudnall](#), which discusses the Durham-Orange light rail transit project (DOLRT) is a poorly researched opinion piece that does a tremendous disservice to INDY Week readers, residents of Durham and Chapel Hill, and—most importantly—current public transit riders in Durham and Orange counties who stand to benefit greatly from a significantly enhanced bus and rail transit network with DOLRT at its core.

Hudnall’s piece mistakes anecdotes for data, ignores significant differences between Wake County and Durham-Chapel Hill, ignores the ways in which current low-income residents travel today—and what that tells us about the usefulness of DOLRT—and, finally, skips reasonable fact-checking of anti-rail project critics’ claims with publicly available documents, including past INDY Week stories on DOLRT.

In an effort to correct many of the misrepresentations of facts, and errors made by Hudnall, below are excerpts from his piece with added context, data, and information so that readers can get an accurate understanding of DOLRT, the benefits it will provide for our community, and why light rail will meet the needs of Durham and Orange Counties and move us forward.

Hudnall:

*To get to work under the envisioned D-O LRT plan, however, Wells would have to take a thirty-minute ride on the Roxboro Street bus to the Dillard Street station. She'd then wait for the light-rail train to arrive, take it approximately forty minutes to Chapel Hill, then walk five minutes to the Wilson Library.*

*Her commute time would nearly triple, from a half hour behind the wheel to an hour and fifteen minutes on public transportation—assuming her arrivals at the bus stop and the train station are well timed. And so she says she's unlikely to wake up at 5 a.m. just so she can take the train to work. Neither would most people.*

Hudnall is eager in his article to criticize the light rail for not doing enough to help low-income residents, yet he continually uses inappropriate metrics to evaluate how the light rail performs. Those who depend most on transit either do not own a car or live in a household with fewer cars than full-time workers. Rather than comparing the DOLRT line to a car trip, the correct metric is to compare a trip on DOLRT to a trip on today's current bus network. For Ms. Wells, the current bus network shows a trip of 1 hour and 20 minutes to 1 hour and 28 minutes, giving light rail (Hudnall cites 1 hour and 15 minutes) a time savings of 5 to 13 minutes each way over the current bus service for this trip. ([View this trip to Wilson Library on Google Maps.](#))

And before you navigate away from Google Maps, [plan a trip by transit from the Holton Center in East Durham to Home Depot in Patterson Place](#). You'll see it is 1 hour and 5 minutes to 1 hour and 11 minutes, with a transfer from one bus to another at Durham Station. [Now consider swapping the 42-minute bus trip from Downtown Durham Multimodal Center to the Home Depot in Patterson Place for a 21-minute trip on light rail](#), both with a 2-3 minute walk to work at the end of the trip. This trip has been shortened to 44 to 50 minutes, a significant time savings over our current transit infrastructure.

Specifically, light rail saves this passenger 21 minutes each way. **What does a shorter commute do for someone? Harvard University says it does more than virtually anything else to help someone escape poverty. The New York Times wrote in 2015:**

In a large, continuing [study](#) of upward mobility based at Harvard, commuting time has emerged as the single strongest factor in the odds of escaping poverty. The longer an average commute in a given county, the worse the chances of low-income families there moving up the ladder.

The relationship between transportation and social mobility is stronger than that between mobility and several other factors, like crime, elementary-school test scores or the percentage of two-parent families in a community, said Nathaniel Hendren, a Harvard economist and one of the researchers on the study.

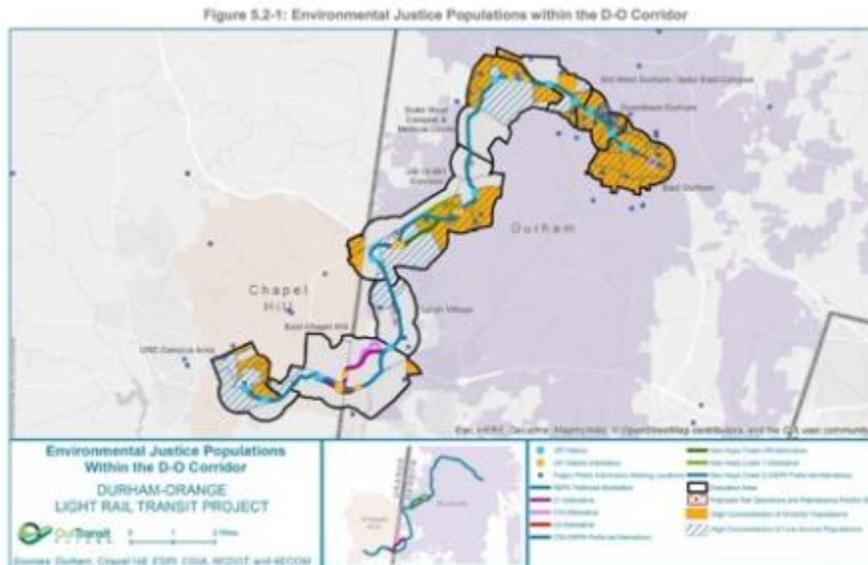
Hudnall:

*The trip into Chapel Hill will be considerably breezier, though, for a future resident of One City Center, the giant hole in the ground in the center of downtown Durham, soon to be a twenty-seven-story mixed-use condo building. For that privileged urban denizen, it's just a two-block walk to Durham Station. Likewise, Duke students will have their pick of three on-campus stops to get them to and from a Bulls game or a show at Cat's Cradle. The Ninth Street stop on the D-O LRT is exploding with nearby apartment options—if you can spend \$1,500 a month for a one-bedroom.*

With these sentences, Hudnall—who, according to LinkedIn, arrived in Durham a mere seven months ago in December 2015—reveals that he knows very little about where low-

income residents live in Durham. Under federal law, GoTriangle was required to document the concentration of low-income and minority populations along the DOLRT corridor. You can see the data and a map on pages 8-9 of chapter 5 of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Here's the map:



The blue cross-hatched areas show high concentrations of low-income residents. Yellow areas show high concentrations of minority residents. While Hudnall focuses on new buildings with high rents, he completely ignores the substantial numbers of low-income residents living in existing buildings in most of the corridor. Both Durham and Orange counties have approximately 25% of their population considered low-income, but the DOLRT corridor is 43% low-income. Hudnall misses public housing developments like the Damar Court and Morrenne Rd communities, just across Erwin Rd from the Duke campus and within walking distance of the LaSalle St rail station. He misses the census block groups near the MLK Blvd and Shannon Rd light rail stations where the [Durham Neighborhood Compass reports a median income of \\$31,037](#) compared to the county average of over \$52,000.

Hudnall:

*...UNC and Duke, whose students are less likely to rely on public transportation...*

This statement is inaccurate. Both the Duke and UNC student bodies are very heavy users of public transportation. The Duke Transit system has roughly 16,000 boardings per day. That's why they have extra-long buses like this:



And experience lines to board like this on East Campus:



To put that ridership in perspective, Duke Transit carries more passengers on most weekdays than the City of Asheville system (population, ~83,000 people), the City of Winston-Salem Transit Authority (population, ~240,000), and roughly the same amount of passengers as the City of Greensboro (population, ~280,000).

Chapel Hill Transit, with the second-largest number of transit boardings in North Carolina after the Charlotte bus and rail system, conducted a ridership survey earlier this year and found that 55% of their 25,000-plus daily boardings were made by students (p.54).

Hudnall:

*Durham County passed a half-cent sales tax for this purpose in 2011, and Orange County followed suit in 2012. But the then-Republican-heavy Wake County Board of Commissioners refused to take action. Durham and Orange pressed forward, collaborating on what is now the D-O LRT. Both counties continue to collect taxes for the project.*

This statement by Hudnall completely omits the fact that the referenda in both counties funded much more than the DOLRT line, and that significant bus service improvements have already been delivered in and between both counties. Improvements made so far on GoDurham, GoTriangle, Chapel Hill Transit, and Orange Public Transit are detailed [here on a GoTriangle website](#).

Additional improvements are coming in August. GoDurham will extend service later on Sunday evenings. GoTriangle will extend regional service to Carrboro for the first time and double the number of trips per hour in the middle of the weekday between Durham and Chapel Hill. The INDY Week covered these improvements recently in [an article written by \(you guessed it\) David Hudnall](#).

Additionally, planning for an Amtrak Station in Hillsborough is also underway as part of the Orange County plan.

Hudnall:

*Nowadays, Ford articulates his gripes about D-O LRT in the context of social justice. "It takes people from one prosperous node—UNC, in Chapel Hill—to another, Duke, to another, downtown Durham," Ford says. "There won't be any real affordable housing on that line, no matter how much local governments try to make that happen. We're putting all this money into a pet project for an elite group of people."*

Just like Hudnall, Dick Ford is not aware that there are low-income residents in places along the DOLRT line other than the Dillard St and Alston Avenue areas.

Hudnall:

*"The ridership projections for the Durham-Orange LRT stretch credulity, with estimated daily boardings of 23,000. This is in contrast to the Charlotte LRT system, with daily boardings of 16,000—which has been static since inception in 2007, while the population has increased 17 percent..."*

It is possible that David Hardman, who wrote this quote that Hudnall cites, does not know the current Charlotte line is shorter than the DOLRT line will be. The existing Charlotte line is about 9 miles long and has 16,000 boardings per day. DOLRT will be 17 miles long and have 23,000 boardings. Longer lines tend to have more passengers. The Charlotte line is currently being extended because of its success, and a new section to UNC-Charlotte will open in 2017.

Hudnall:

*"...These ridership projections are further inflated with the working assumption that 40 percent of households in the Durham-Chapel Hill corridor will not own automobiles in 2040, which flies in the face of current ownership levels and assumes a tectonic shift in public behavior."*

This is another quote from Hardman, and is also another example of failed fact-checking on Hudnall's part. This talking point is a repeat of a misreading of the official DEIS documents by Alex Cabanes, seen here in a Facebook comment on September 29, 2015, made in the comments section of a [News & Observer article](#).



Alex Cabanes

The plan has numerous flawed assumptions that impact the fiscal feasibility and sustainability of this project. One flawed project assumption of 25% state funding has already brought the fiscal feasibility into question and had been capped by the state at 10%. and the recent state budget negotiations have highlighted that even that assumption is highly questionable with the current \$500,000 budget cap

In addition, the projected 23,000 daily boardings is built on [questionable flawed assumptions, such as the assumption that 40% of the area households within the 27 square mile corridor will be zero-vehicle households](#) (DEIS K.2-27). Current zero-vehicle households comprise 10.4% in Durham and 7.4% in Chapel Hill according to the US Census Bureau's 2010-2013 American Community Survey (or Portland at ~15%).

As a matter of fact, material changes in the project including travel times changing from 34 minutes in 2011 to 42-44 minutes in the latest DEIS, or elimination of 700 parking spaces, or changes in alignments such as C1 to CSA alignments which was supposed to be 1 minute shorter and increase 1000 daily boardings, or the original estimated daily boardings being pushed out by 5 years to 2040 despite ALL of these changes, the daily boarding projection has remained unchanged at 23,000 daily boardings.

Fortunately, Jeffrey Billman debunked this claim in [a previous INDY Week article](#), stating:

*"For example, they have claimed that GoTriangle is assuming 40 percent of area residents will be carless by 2035. Not so, he says. Instead, the agency estimates that 40 percent of light-rail riders will be carless, which makes more sense."*

Unfortunately, Hudnall did not take the time to check his own paper's reporting on this controversy. It's this type of basic error that should cause all readers to ask "what else did Hudnall miss?"

Hudnall:

*A Charlotte Observer story from earlier this month noted that Uber is likely contributing to declining ridership in Charlotte. Judith Mellyn, a Downing Creek attorney who grew up using public transportation in New York and voted for the half-cent tax back in 2011, says her son, who lives in Charlotte, used to take light rail to events in the city. Now he uses Uber.*

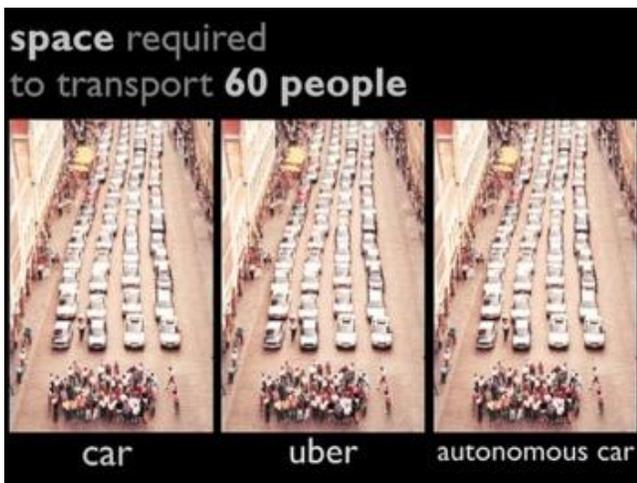
*"And I think that will obviously evolve into things like driverless vehicles, driverless buses—a way of getting around in the future that won't be tied to these fixed stations," Mellyn says.*

Here is an answer to this comment in pictures:



[\(link to original image\)](#)

And:



The point of these photos is to show that access to dense job centers is first and foremost about fitting a lot of people into limited amounts of valuable urban space. High-capacity vehicles get the job done, carrying many people to work without taking up nearly as much space as those people would in cars. Having most people arrive at places like UNC Hospitals and Duke University Medical Center in cars carrying just one or two people is fundamentally a physics problem: You can't fit all the people in if they all bring 2600 pounds of metal around them. Buses overcome this problem to a certain point. Trains will enable us to overcome this problem for generations to come.

Hudnall:

*"...And none of the groups who looked into this came back and said light rail was the right investment for Wake County."*

Gardiner continues:

*"We went into the process from a vulnerable position. If the community would have come back and said, 'We want light rail,' that would have been fine with us. But they didn't. They looked at the facts and said, 'We can't get the mileage and geography and service we need out of our public transportation system if we spend our money on a light-rail line. There's no flexibility. It's a big, growing, sprawling county. And with buses and BRT we can get service out to these places that need it. We would be giving up service goals in exchange for a toy we can feel good about.'"*

Hudnall portrays the comments of a Wake County employee talking about decisionmaking in Wake County as having implications for Orange and Durham counties. The communities, and their transit systems, are quite different. While it is exciting that Wake County finally has a transit plan, it is also worth noting how Wake County's transit system is very, very far behind the system that exists in Durham and Orange counties (which is another great reason for the Wake plan- to catch up!). FiveThirtyEight [did a comparison](#) of how 290 American cities compared by transit usage, dividing trips on area transit systems by annual population to calculate trips per person per year. With 43.4 trips per person, Durham-Chapel Hill placed a very respectable 21st, just ahead of both Denver and Salt Lake City—both of which are much bigger cities with multi-line rail networks. Raleigh, on the other hand, came in 195th, narrowly beating out Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Scranton, Pennsylvania, with 7.2 trips per person.

Orange County has a rural buffer, and Durham has limits on where it will extend water/sewer service. Wake County has comparatively few limits. For a county like Wake, which is not focusing land use planning in urban districts and continues to build new highways like the I-540 toll road, a system that can spread out with less frequent service over more land makes more sense. The same is simply not true for Orange and Durham counties.

In closing, a lot of the mistakes in this article could be chocked up to a new guy in town not doing his homework. But for a paper that proclaims to fight for social justice, and given that most [people riding transit today in Durham and Chapel Hill have incomes well below the median income, \(slide 10\)](#) INDY Week needs to take a harder look in the mirror and ask itself why it couldn't be bothered to talk to low-income residents or people of color who ride transit in Durham and Chapel Hill about how they travel instead of letting several older, wealthier white residents with a clear agenda speak for them.

Given that the Herald-Sun faced [appropriately stiff criticism](#) from Bull City Rising for doing the exact same thing less than a year ago, INDY Week should have done better than this.

Posted by [Kevin Davis](#) on July 05, 2016 at 09:25 AM in [Local Government](#), [News & Media](#), [Roads & Transportation](#) | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(6\)](#)

# The Durham-Orange County Light Rail Line Is on the Ropes Again. That Might Be a Good Thing.

By David Hudnall

**A**nne Wells would seem to be the target demographic for the proposed Durham to Orange Light Rail Transit project. Thirty years old, she moved to the Triangle from Chicago last year to work as an audiovisual archivist at the UNC-Chapel Hill Library. She picked Durham over Chapel Hill or Carrboro because it was more affordable, more of a city. Every weekday, she drives thirty minutes from the house she rents in Northgate Park to the UNC campus.

"I would love to take light rail to work," she says. After a decade in Chicago, she's accustomed to getting around via public transportation. And much about her daily commute—traffic on 15-501, gas expenses, the \$40-a-month cut the university takes out of her paycheck for parking—is a bummer.

To get to work under the envisioned D-O LRT plan, however, Wells would have to take a thirty-minute ride on the Roxboro Street bus to the Dillard Street station. She'd then wait for the light-rail train to arrive, take it approximately forty minutes to Chapel Hill, then walk five minutes to the Wilson Library.

Her commute time would nearly triple, from a half hour behind the wheel to an hour and fifteen minutes on public transportation—assuming her arrivals at the bus stop and the train station are well timed. And so she says she's unlikely to wake up at 5 a.m. just so she can take the train to work. Neither would most people.

The trip into Chapel Hill will be considerably breezier, though, for a future resident of One City Center, the giant hole in the ground in the center of downtown Durham, soon to be a twenty-seven-story mixed-use condo building. For that privileged urban denizen, it's just a two-block walk to Durham Station. Likewise, Duke students will have their pick of three on-campus stops to get them to and from a Bulls game or a show at Cat's Cradle. The Ninth Street stop on the D-O LRT is exploding with nearby apartment options—if you can spend \$1,500 a month for a one-bedroom. And for homeowners down by the proposed Woodmont Station near Downing Creek, where the median household income is \$76,000, a car-free trip to DPAC is just steps away.

The light-rail line briefly dips its toes into lower-income east Durham, terminating at Alston and Pettigrew, but as William Ingram, president of Durham Tech, argued in public comments last year, the light-rail plan "fails to adequately serve the nearly twenty thousand individuals who enroll in at least one class at Durham Tech annually, nor our over eight hundred full-time and part-time employees." UNC and Duke, whose students are less likely to rely on public transportation, have no such complaints.

Virtually every elected official in Durham and Orange County is in favor of the seventeen-mile, \$1.6 billion (at least) line. So, too, it seems, are most ordinary citizens, especially those under the age of forty. There is near-universal gut-level enthusiasm for the concept of light rail in the Triangle.

But that doesn't mean there aren't legitimate questions about the wisdom of the current plan: Does it serve the people who need it? Will emerging technologies render it obsolete by the time it is completed, ten years from whenever the funding finally comes through? Would an enhanced busing system—something like bus rapid

transit—be a more effective, flexible, and cheaper option? And how will local governments come up with the cash to pay for construction overages and shortfalls caused by potentially low ridership?

There's also a very real chance that Republicans in the state legislature might succeed in spiking the rail altogether. On the one hand, this would be more of the same: shortsighted conservatives stalling progress in the very cities that are responsible for North Carolina's economic vibrancy. But there's another possibility here, sort of a stopped-clock-is-right-twice-a-day scenario: What if, this time, those Republicans who oppose light rail for all the wrong reasons—allergy to government spending, resentment of progressive city folk—happen to be right?

This is like a stroll down memory lane," says Durham County Commissioner Ellen Reckhow, recalling the three-decade history of passenger-rail efforts in the Triangle.

Reckhow was elected in 1988 and has served on several transportation-related boards, including the Triangle Transit Authority (now GoTriangle) and the National Association of Counties Transportation Steering Committee. In the late eighties, the discussion was about diesel-powered commuter rail—using existing tracks of the North Carolina Railroad to connect workers in the Triangle. It was the transportation version of the principle behind Research Triangle Park: harness the potential of these close but disconnected cities.

In 1991, local officials created the Triangle Transit Authority to address this issue. In 1995, the TTA settled on a commuter-rail plan that would run on existing tracks between central Raleigh and west Durham. "It was the most cost-effective way to go because we wouldn't have to build much infrastructure," Reckhow says. "The trains would have run every twenty minutes at their peak, then every half hour or forty-five minutes on off-hours."

But the railroad didn't want to share its tracks, and the conversation broke down. In the late nineties, the TTA began looking into building a track parallel to the NCRR for a commuter rail that wouldn't interfere with Amtrak and freight trains. It would have hit twelve stops between Durham and Raleigh. But after years of planning, that, too hit a wall.

GoTriangle spokesman Brad Schulz tells the *INDY* that the cost of concrete and steel rose after Hurricane Katrina, "pushing the project beyond the [Federal Transit Authority's] minimum acceptable threshold for being cost-effective." The ridership projections were also too low for the feds' liking. Federal funding was vital to the project, and the TTA pulled the plug in 2006.

The light-rail plan that's currently on the table began to materialize three years later.

"That's when we started to hear about trying to bring it back," recalls Chapel Hill Town Council member (and GoTriangle board member) Ed Harrison. Discussions and planning between Wake, Orange, and Durham counties ensued, and in 2011 the transit authority completed an "alternatives analysis"—basically a big study about what transportation system would best serve the Triangle. "And what shook out of that was light rail," Harrison says.

The plan called for Wake, Orange, and Durham to cover a quarter of the project's cost, the state another quarter, and the federal government half—the same way construction of light rail in Charlotte, which opened in 2007, was financed.

Durham County passed a half-cent sales tax for this purpose in 2011, and Orange County followed suit in 2012. But the then-Republican-heavy Wake County Board of Commissioners refused to take action. Durham and Orange pressed forward, collaborating on what is now the D-O LRT. Both counties continue to collect taxes for the project.

Three-quarters of the funding remains very much up in the air, however. Governor Pat McCrory, who pushed light rail as mayor of Charlotte, is generally supportive, but his fellow Republicans in the state legislature seem to revel in finding ways not to loosen the purse strings. Last year, they slipped into the budget a last-second provision that capped spending on light rail projects at \$500,000—a preposterously minuscule fraction of the \$400 million needed for the light-rail line.

That cap may be lifted in the session currently underway, but in some ways that's beside the point, because a different cap already exists in state law. It says multicounty transportation services—like light rail—can't receive more than 10 percent of their total cost from the state. That means the state can only spend \$160 million on D-O LRT. Where the other \$240 million will come from is unclear.

Reckhow says a public-private partnership with employers near certain stops could bring in some cash. Debt financing is also an option. Senator Mike Woodard, who represents part of Durham, suggests that the cap "could be lifted by a future General Assembly," but that seems unlikely to happen anytime soon.

Schulz reiterates that D-O LRT scored well enough on the state's nonpartisan strategic transportation investments process for the N.C. Department of Transportation to commit \$138 million to the project in 2013. Beyond that, he offered no insight as to where the money might come from.

"It is common at this phase of a project to be identifying the funding sources for the project," Schulz says.

And that is to say nothing of the \$800 million that the federal government has yet to commit—a gift unlikely to arrive before the state has its financial ducks in a row.

The folks hollering most loudly against light rail are a problematic bunch. Most are baby boomers who live in pretty nice homes near the proposed Woodmont Station, in Downing Creek. They got involved because they didn't want the station to block their access to the highway. They're textbook NIMBYs ("Not in My Backyard"), the scourge of urban planners.

"You know, *NIMBY* is usually used as a negative epithet," says Dick Ford, a Downing Creek resident and a prominent Durham Republican. "But, in fact, things happening in people's neighborhoods is what often motivates them to get engaged in the political process."

Ford didn't like the fact that well-connected members of the adjacent Chapel Hill community of Meadowmont, where a station was originally planned, were able to "push the railroad to our side of the highway" in subsequent plans.

"I have a friend in east Durham who told me, 'Now you have a better idea of what it feels like to be marginalized,'" Ford says. "I started looking at it differently after that."

Nowadays, Ford articulates his gripes about D-O LRT in the context of social justice. "It takes people from one prosperous node—UNC, in Chapel Hill—to another, Duke, to another, downtown Durham," Ford says. "There won't be any real affordable housing on that line, no matter how much local governments try to make that happen. We're putting all this money into a pet project for an elite group of people."

Scroll down to the comments of just about any story on light rail in the Triangle, and you'll find Alex Cabanes, another Downing Creek resident, ticking off statistics and linking to studies that bolster his firmly held belief that light rail is a horrible, no good, very bad idea. He has also, with the help of other opponents, put together an

impressively thorough and regularly updated website, [smartrtransitfuture.org](http://smartrtransitfuture.org), a sort of gathering place for arguments in opposition to D-O LRT.

In person, Cabanes is a patient listener. He calmly but methodically deconstructs and dismisses every argument in favor of light rail. He rattles off numbers on everything from the speed of the D-O LRT ("In 2011, they said it was going to be thirty-four minutes end to end, but now it's forty-four minutes end to end, which is less than what bus rapid transit would take, which is thirty-nine minutes") to its costs ("They're saying ninety-four million per mile, but the recent Charlotte light-rail extension ended up being one hundred twenty-six million per mile, which means local taxpayers would be on the hook for as much as a billion in all"). He closely monitors transit news and seems particularly satisfied with recent developments in Charlotte.

Depending on whom you talk to, Charlotte's rail line is either a symbol of promise or a cautionary tale. A 2010 story in *The New York Times* described the line as "an unexpected and nearly unprecedented success," citing ridership numbers nearly double the original projections. Lately, however, the news isn't so hot. Though the city is extending the line, ridership has declined—4.3 percent in the last year—even as the city's population has grown. And according to *The Charlotte Observer*, "the accelerating gentrification of center city neighborhoods [is] pushing [Charlotte Area Transit System's] core ridership—low-income blue collar workers—further out toward the suburbs."

(Schulz says that Charlotte, like D-O LRT, is a long-term investment, and "the long-term trends are more important than short-term fluctuations in ridership.")

Questions about ridership as it relates to D-O LRT were articulated by David Hardman, a Chapel Hill resident who wrote the following in an op-ed in *The News & Observer* last year: "The ridership projections for the Durham-Orange LRT stretch credulity, with estimated daily boardings of 23,000. This is in contrast to the Charlotte LRT system, with daily boardings of 16,000—which has been static since inception in 2007, while the population has increased 17 percent ... . These ridership projections are further inflated with the working assumption that 40 percent of households in the Durham-Chapel Hill corridor will not own automobiles in 2040, which flies in the face of current ownership levels and assumes a tectonic shift in public behavior."

Hardman is touching on another popular argument among opponents of light rail: that technology is advancing so quickly that a light-rail system will be as useful as a phone booth by the time it's up and running. A *Charlotte Observer* story from earlier this month noted that Uber is likely contributing to declining ridership in Charlotte. Judith Mellyn, a Downing Creek attorney who grew up using public transportation in New York and voted for the half-cent tax back in 2011, says her son, who lives in Charlotte, used to take light rail to events in the city. Now he uses Uber.

"And I think that will obviously evolve into things like driverless vehicles, driverless buses—a way of getting around in the future that won't be tied to these fixed stations," Mellyn says.

Bonnie Hauser, who lost her race for the Orange County Board of Commissioners last year, says she opposes D-O LRT for similar reasons. "It's a question of obsolescence and changing demand patterns," Hauser says. "There's a dynamic going on of people moving toward personalized transportation systems, and that's only going to continue as the technology advances.

"Look at Wake," Hauser continues. "They looked at this [D-O LRT] and said, 'No thanks.'"

Let's look at Wake.

Come November, voters in the county will decide whether to charge themselves a half-cent sales tax and increased vehicle registration fees to help pay for a \$2.3 billion transportation plan. It includes a proposed commuter-rail line that would connect Garner, Raleigh, Cary, Morrisville, RTP, and Durham. But there's no light rail. Mostly, it's a dramatic increase in bus service, estimated to quadruple current service levels, including twenty miles of bus rapid transit lines crisscrossing the county. (Bus rapid transit is akin to light rail in that it runs in dedicated lanes and can bypass traffic signals.)

Several pro-light-rail politicians contacted by the *INDY* attribute Wake's absence from the light-rail plan to the Republican-controlled commission back in 2012. They largely fail to mention that Wake hired an outside consultant in 2014 to assess the county's needs, or that the now-Democratic-controlled commission supported that consultant's BRT-centric recommendation.

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[click to enlarge](#)

"Hundreds of meetings were held over the last eighteen months throughout the county, seeking input from citizens," says Tim Gardiner, Wake County's transportation planner. "We assembled an advisory committee made up of seventy-eight people from all the municipalities in Wake County—council members, commissioners, university leaders, transit planners, business leaders. We had a partnership between GoTriangle, Raleigh, Cary, RTP, RDU, N.C. State, and [the N.C. Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization], which distributes federal money. And none of the groups who looked into this came back and said light rail was the right investment for Wake County."

Gardiner continues: "We went into the process from a vulnerable position. If the community would have come back and said, 'We want light rail,' that would have been fine with us. But they didn't. They looked at the facts and said, 'We can't get the mileage and geography and service we need out of our public transportation system if we spend our money on a light-rail line. There's no flexibility. It's a big, growing, sprawling county. And with buses and BRT we can get service out to these places that need it. We would be giving up service goals in exchange for a toy we can feel good about.'"

Schulz counters that, though light rail costs more to build, BRT costs more to operate. He adds, "In a corridor with as high a level of travel-intensity as the Durham-Chapel Hill corridor, a BRT system cannot deliver the same quality of service and value that LRT can, nor the quantity of service that is needed."

Gardiner argues that those on the suburban fringes of light rail—where lower-income people increasingly reside—would have gotten short shrift with light rail.

"Those communities are willing to support a plan that serves the greater good of the county," he says, "but they don't want to pay a tax for thirty years while they're waiting for a rail line to make it out to where they live. Especially when buses can get there right now."

The impression that the desire for light rail is, in some ways, more emotional than rational is hard to shake. People like Reckhow, Harrison, Senator Floyd McKissick Jr., Durham Mayor Bill Bell, and others have been reaching for light rail for decades now. Is it possible they're too committed to see that so much time has passed that it no longer makes sense?

The first time you see Cabanes's site, you—a good progressive who loves public works projects and wants to support light rail—write him off as a NIMBY crank. But then, perhaps, you start to realize that he might have a point, and you flinch.

For a fraction of the cost, Durham and Orange could devise a flexible bus rapid transit system that serves the transit-needy public and adjusts to technological advances like driverless vehicles. It would not look as cool. But it would be actual public transportation, as opposed to a development tool, or a way to get well-educated people from university to university, or a symbol of Durham and Orange's progressivism.

"If you want people to leave their cars at home, public transportation has to be more convenient than driving," Hauser says. "And it needs to primarily serve the needs of people who don't have the option of driving. And this light-rail plan does neither of those things."

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