

The H-S and Durham-Orange light rail: if you're analyzing its challenges, look beyond a single back yard

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Development of any sort -- private, public-sector, not-for-profit, you name it -- invariably attracts a disproportionate interest from those in its immediate back yard.

And developers of all ilks are quick to throw around the term "NIMBY" (or Not In My Back Yard) for those who would speak out against their best-laid plans.

All too often, I find it's best to be skeptical of both developers' dreamiest promises as well as the loudest NIMBYs. After all, if Nick Tennyson's age-old advice is the best descriptor of the Bull City's growth -- namely, that if there's one thing Durhamites hate more than sprawl, it's density -- then perhaps the second might be, "Folks move to the community they find perfect as-is, not as it might become."

Monday's Herald-Sun features a deep (three articles! [first](#), [second](#), [third](#)) look at the Durham-Orange Light Rail plan. And, as opposed to much of the natural inside-baseball coverage that we've seen on the project, the H-S here tries to pick up concerns that some project opponents have raised.

But I'm worried that in picking this lens of analysis, Durham's paper of record has picked up only a series of voices that surround one particular back yard: the southern Durham County link between Durham and Chapel Hill that one resident, bizarrely to my mind, calls the "last vestige of green" -- never mind that major hospital/campus just on yonder side!

The H-S misses a chance here to hear both from non-suburban voices with concerns over (or support for) the project, as well as from non-governmental stakeholders involved in the STAC committee and other planning groups.

And quite frankly, that's a big whiff, because when the opponents quoted in the H-S talk about their localized opposition -- what some might call the NIMBY argument -- I find their concerns more relevant (even if I disagree with their positions) than when they make transit arguments writ large.

Let's start with a high-level recap of the project in its current form, and go back in history a bit.

More than a decade ago, the Triangle Transit Authority (today's GoTriangle) had a proposed rail service plan connecting downtown Durham and downtown Raleigh. It

was diesel powered! It largely used existing corridors! And, the argument went, it would cut down on traffic between Raleigh and Durham!

Only problem was, that last little bit of the plan didn't hold up to further scrutiny.

There is travel between the two downtowns and the points between, but not enough to adequately impact I-40 traffic -- and the worst-case scenarios the TTA painted of I-40 crawling along got a skeptical reception from the Federal Transit Administration under the George W. Bush administration.

We've long heard that the FTA heard Charlotte's application for its now-successful Lynx Blue Line a few weeks before the Raleigh-Durham plan was heard, and that the FTA's internal criteria for approval changed between the two projects.

Whether that's accurate or not (and I'm sure an informed commenter or two will chime in here), it spelled a death-knell to the city-to-city plan.

Instead, a regional super-committee known as STAC formed to take a fresh look at improving the transit plan for the region. Among their key findings, as I recall:

- Triangle communities needed dedicated funding for transit -- another FTA weakness, and something Durham/Orange achieved by voter-approved local sales tax referenda.
- While still advocating for Wake-Durham rail transit, STAC also recommended a light rail system connecting Durham-Orange communities, along with enhanced bus service within and between between the two MSAs.
- Improved bus service would augment local rail service.

In recommending the Durham-Orange line, the STAC report puts a big emphasis on the two universities/academic medical centers sitting, as ESPN is fond of reminding us, just eight miles apart along US 15/501.

Interested folks [can read the full STAC report](#) on the OurTransitFuture web site.

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I'd actually highly recommend that folks concerned by the Herald-Sun articles carefully read the STAC report, in particular, since it directly answers some of the concerns raised in the story. To wit:

No Wake connection: The lack of a Wake County connection in this phase draws concerns from a number of the residents who spoke to the Herald-Sun:

There are thoughts that the project in and of itself is the wrong project for the area. Instead of bridging Orange and Durham counties, some believe it should have been built between Durham and Wake counties.

“Especially if it’s a direct line between one and the other,” said Trish Dean said.

But the Durham-Orange line called out in the STAC report was cited as a need above and beyond the Wake-Durham connection the opponents envision.

What's more, under Republican leadership, Wake County was not even willing to entertain the transit tax option that Durham and Orange voters approved. Starting on a local connection in our communities makes sense as the beginning point for connecting the western half of the Triangle, while being able to later connect to a future DMU-based or (as I suspect we're more likely to see) commuter rail spine extending from Alamance or Guilford through to Johnston or beyond.

No RTP connection: Not unexpectedly, opponents cited Research Triangle Park's absence from this phase as a problem. But, I'm not sure I buy into their seeming quoted belief that RTP is the sine qua non for a transit system:

Debbie McCarthy said the light rail line should in essence take people to their jobs.

“You take people to their jobs. Here that would be RTP,” she said.

Only problem is, you need both jobs and density. RTP is a jobs center, yes. But UNC and its hospital; Duke University and its medical center; the VA hospital; and downtown Durham are a much more significant job driver in our region.

Take the photo below, [which came out of the Urban Land Institute's Reality Check project](#) a number of years ago. The yellow blocks denote housing units; red denotes jobs:



The height of the stacks denotes the density of jobs in an area. You'll note that the densest job corridors in the Durham-Orange segment are absolutely, clearly, the UNC-Duke-downtown Durham segment. (Between these three job drivers, there are probably 20%+ more jobs than in all of RTP.)

RTP has plenty of jobs, but they're widely distributed and dispersed compared to Chapel Hill and Durham.

What's more, there ain't no yellow blocks there. That means there's no residential demands upon which to grow a transit system.

The opponents' seeming vision of a system focused on RTP would require transit links all throughout the low-density yellow areas in Wake County especially in order to draw in users. With the historic interconnects between Duke/UNC/Durham/Chapel Hill, there's more local demand immediately.

As the STAC report notes, the light rail line path has the "highest projected trips per acre in the region with intense employment and economic activity at the ends of the corridor."

Once RTP is making progress on its own reinvention, including adding density and mixed-use, the Park will be ideal for transit. But that's far into the future.

No airport connection: This has long been a canard and concern for some about rail corridor planning, not just in the Triangle but elsewhere. It's also perhaps best seen as a red herring.

From the STAC report:

Although widely perceived to be the norm and necessary for generating overall transit system ridership, direct rail access to airports is relatively uncommon in US cities. [...] Decisions about investments are based on the largest, consistent travel market: generally the volume of daily peak hour traffic, most of which is not destined for the airport. Volumes of trips to airports are much smaller and spread over the day so serving them with rail raises per passenger costs. [...] Unquestionably, high quality transit connections to the airport provide convenience for air travelers and a savings on parking costs. However, the benefits of these services must be balanced with the usually much higher trip demands elsewhere in a region.

Where the system meets, or adds, density: Density was a question on the mind of some of the opponents:

A planned rail operation and maintenance facility on Alston Avenue was sidelined, and then the plan for the rail alignment in that portion of East Durham was changed.

“... That’s a transit-dependent community that’s supposed to benefit (from the project),” Alex Cabanes of Downing Creek said. “They’ve shortened the route, it doesn’t get to serve (that area).”

“If you look at the entire 17 miles, the whole premise of light rail is that you need people to ride it,” Cabanes said. “If you don’t have the density, you don’t have the population density ... It makes no sense that you’re going to get a whole lot of ridership.”

I'm not sure what makes the Alston Ave. community "transit-dependent" -- that's a term that could be interpreted as loaded with lots of class assumptions, but it is probably fair that there's a higher bus (and bike/pedestrian) usage in this corridor. Let's take that as a given.

The opponents are absolutely right that GoTriangle needs to find a way to build out as far east as planned to meet the East Durham need. But opponents are ignoring -- or more likely, disagreeing with -- the goal the running the LRT system in the Farrington Rd. area should precisely be meant to generate denser housing around transit stops.

Look again at the density map above. Along the proposed segments of the LRT, you have some areas like Patterson Place that were designed/planned around being in a known, marked transit corridor and already intending to become more heavily mixed-use. In others, you have undeveloped land minutes from the major job centers of the Triangle.

We know more people are coming to our region. Population in the U.S. continues to rise; we have successful job centers creating opportunities; people are leaving slow-growth cities and moving to our region. That's unlikely to change.

And as the map above shows, we can't grow outward. Those two lakes in the map? They block significant growth in north Durham and in other areas adjacent to Wake's (and part of Durham's) future drinking supply.

Denser growth that allows fewer car trips is an excellent way to meet the demand for more housing, while at the same time growing in a more environmentally conscious way.

The STAC report is crystal-clear that this is one of the goals of the project:

Many developers and local officials are showing increasing interest in, and commitment to, the type of land use planning and development needed to ensure the success of a regional transit system. We are seeing signs of substantial revitalization in our major downtowns and in other locations that will be well coordinated with regional transit corridors. Examples include the Plaza Condominiums in Raleigh, Meadowmont and 54 East in Chapel Hill, and West Village II in Durham. Throughout the region we see pockets of density and developments with a mix of activities that can be expected to support transit.

Real estate market research indicates that about 20–30% of people would prefer to live in compact, walkable neighborhoods where people can get to jobs, shopping and recreation without using a car. Where such neighborhoods exist or are built, they typically command a premium over comparable suburban housing, reflecting rising demand and a relatively limited supply of housing in a walkable, transit-oriented pattern. Here in the Triangle, our housing market shows healthy demand for housing in these developments; our residents are paying for the opportunity to live in these places. Our developers and local planning professionals are also demonstrating that these developments can include an affordable housing component that opens up these desirable locations to lower income households.

Opponents rejoin in the articles that they have a vision of their community, though, as a verdant suburban land that would presumably be exempt from this density:

“We’ve been here for 30 years, and have been fighting to preserve the character of Farrington Road as a green belt, as the last vestige of green between Durham and Chapel Hill for those 30 years,” McCarthy added. “Yes, we’re passionate about it, and whether it’s going to happen next week or five years from now, we can’t just sit idly by and do nothing.

Friends, that ship has long sailed.

Meadowmont residents have developed a convenient amnesia on the subject, but that project was designed nearly two decades ago knowing it was in a transit corridor, and justifying its density on same. So has the 54 East project.

I’m always mystified that folks think that when they choose to live *juuuuust* outside an urban area, that it won’t be denser someday. You can go back to London, or Rome, or probably earlier, and see this has never been the case in recorded human history. Especially when you choose an area that’s between cities.

And lest my Farrington friends think I’m picking on them, I’ve long felt the same about the Morrisville residents who pressed town staff years ago to add acreage

restrictions and a municipal golf course to restrict housing supply -- and towards the denizens on the edge of Duke Forest, which is hyper-low density right next to major job centers.

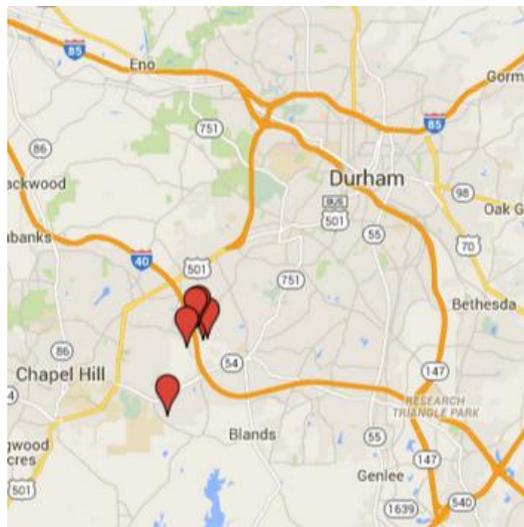
(Some opponents also raise the idea of bus rail transit, or BRT, as an alternative choice. Yes, Wake is looking at BRT. Look, yet again, at the density map. Honestly, BRT makes a lot more sense to me in Wake, where you have low density residential over a much larger area. The downtown-Duke/VA-UNC axis strikes me as perfectly appropriate to use LRT. And, as the STAC report notes, you aren't likely to see the density/development benefits of transit with BRT.)

You care too much about the future residents: One of the more ironic arguments, from Durham's Tom Englund, is that in focusing on the economic development outcomes of transit, local leaders are ignoring current residents:

“Instead of representing the constituents that elected them ... they are choosing to represent people who are not even here yet,” Durham County resident Tom Englund said.

Well, the first question I would ask back is: why, in this lengthy, three-part series of stories, is the Herald-Sun representing only constituents who live in a single area of the Durham-Orange region?

When you map out where those citizens quoted in the story come from, all of the quoted sources seem to emanate from one part of the Orange/Durham area:



Why weren't any of the supporters of the plan -- some of whom live in this area, others of whom are all over the Durham-Orange region -- quoted in the story?

Heck, for that matter: why weren't some of the East Durham stakeholders who've raised concerns over the plan quoted? Their concerns are raised by proxy from some of the Farrington Road contingent, as noted above, an oddity to say the least.

To the folks quoted in the articles: there are plenty of us in the other parts of Durham and Orange who are pleased as punch by the system. I'm perfectly happy for elected officials to listen to my voice, too, and they'll hear a strong note of support when they do.

And there are opponents in my areas and elsewhere along the route, too. We should hear their voices, too. While the H-S raises a number of interesting issues, it's too bad that an opportunity was missed to hear more voices, pro and con, from more than one special (hyper-)interest group.

Change is difficult, and it's hard watching a pastoral area you've grown to love inevitably change.

But mark my words, the change is inevitable.

It can be transit-supported, and thus greener and more appealing (and, probably, more affordable, too.) Or it can be a car-based, traffic-clogged mess.

Folks in Farrington/54 may want to continue to assume that the status quo can just continue, and we can still have low-density suburban/rural areas on the very edge of Interstate highways, major job centers and the like.

History has long proved otherwise. And we need to look at the impact of this project on a wide, community-benefits basis.

A conversation localized to the Downing Creeks of the world is simply a non-starter.