

Primer on Carolina North and Transportation

1. Is Carolina North really going to happen?

Yes. The Town of Chapel Hill has voted to proceed with a development agreement which will give UNC approval to build when the agreement is signed – projected date is June 2009. The Town of Chapel Hill is responding to UNC's long term growth plan to create a new campus on the Horace Williams tract. While economic factors could slow construction nation-wide, we expect UNC will move ahead with their plans when conditions improve. See <http://cn.unc.edu/>

2. How big is Carolina North going to be?

The University has proposed a research and mixed-use academic campus which will cover 250 acres of the Horace Williams Tract's 1,000 acres. The new campus will be built in phases over the next 50 years. The first phase will be built over the next 10 – 20 years on 175 acres and will include 3,000,000 square feet of building space, more than twice that of the Streets of Southpoint.

3. What is the Development Agreement that everyone keeps referring to?

The Development Agreement between UNC and the Town is a contract between the parties which guides development over a period of time with certain conditions. This replaces a master plan and the special use permit usually used for projects approved by the Town. UNC Trustees and the Chapel Hill Town Council have put a working draft at http://townhall.townofchapelhill.org/agendas/2009/04/22/background/development_agreement_text_4-22-09.pdf. The next working meeting of UNC and Town officials is on May 21st.

4. What are the potential transportation impacts of Carolina North?

The Traffic Impact Analysis (TIA) is due out on May 4 and will describe the impacts of 3 million square feet for the first phase of Carolina North and make recommendations. If all the thousands of new workers drive to work at Carolina North in single-occupant automobiles, the auto trips could double traffic on our roadways. The heaviest impact would be on Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd (MLK), with smaller but still considerable impacts on nearby collector roads such as Estes Drive, Homestead Rd, and Weaver Dairy Rd. These extra trips are likely to reduce traffic speeds on existing roads, adding congestion and air pollution to the area.

5. Could widening roads, particularly on MLK, help mitigate traffic?

Probably not. In recent years, the Town Council has chosen public transit as a more desirable alternative to widening roadways. Widening roads can provide

initial benefits to motorists, but make it much more difficult for pedestrians and transit riders to cross wide roads with high-speed traffic.

Widening MLK and adding lanes at key intersections would provide additional automobile capacity from Carolina North to I-40 at first. Wider roads would at first tend to raise vehicle speeds, and reduce commuting time and air pollution. However, for the longer term, the faster travel times on widened roads would attract new trips in a phenomenon called “induced demand.” These new trips add to congestion, then traffic speeds fall again, and air pollution and congestion increase once more.

6. Could rail transit help reduce traffic?

Currently there are no plans for rail transit between the UNC campus and hospitals and Carolina North. The feasibility of building rail service between the main UNC campus and Carolina North was studied as part of the Special Transit Advisory Commission (STAC) study for regional public transportation needs in May 2008. The report recommends a light rail connection from Raleigh, Cary, RTP, and Durham to UNC Hospital open by 2023. The STAC did not make a recommendation on a rail connection between UNC campus and Carolina North. <http://www.transitblueprint.org/stac.shtml>

7. Could bus transit reduce traffic?

MLK currently carries high levels of bus service. One draft of the soon to be released Chapel Hill Transit Master Plan recommends bus-only lanes on MLK from I-40 to Estes Drive. Dedicated bus lanes would keep buses moving between Carolina North and northern Chapel Hill even during heavy traffic.

Chapel Hill Transit already carries over 25,000 passengers each weekday in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, with most trips reaching UNC. Over 1,000 UNC employees commuting from Durham, Raleigh, Cary, Hillsborough and other locations use public transit.

8. Could better bicycle and pedestrian facilities help reduce traffic?

Pedestrian improvements on MLK and other streets feeding into it are desperately needed for existing pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users. As traffic increases, public safety risks will increase if the Town and UNC don't provide bike lanes, crosswalks, overpasses and sidewalks where none exist now. One example of a needed improvement would be putting a bike lane on Estes Drive from North Greensboro Street in Carrboro to the Chapel Hill town line.

9. Could expanded housing at Carolina North mitigate traffic?

To the extent that UNC can provide housing at Carolina North for some employees, the university can reduce the need for some trips by car or transit to the area. How much depends on several factors. If transit connections to other employment centers are not improved, the partner of a Carolina North employee commuting from housing on Carolina North to RTP or Durham would add to traffic. On site housing would not reduce trips for grocery shopping and soccer practice unless within walking distance.

Adding a diverse range of housing along existing Chapel Hill Transit routes with frequent busses may allow more individuals to commute by transit to Carolina North and UNC by permitting more employees who live far away to move into town.

The UNC proposal to build affordable housing for faculty on Carolina Commons on Homestead Road is located some distance away without a non-vehicular connection to Carolina North which would appear to increase traffic in the area, not reduce it.

10. Could parking policy at Carolina North mitigate traffic?

Yes. One of the primary reasons why Chapel Hill Transit has such high ridership is that parking on the UNC campus is restricted and has a considerable cost, while transit is free.

If UNC and the Town are diligent and keep the same policy of restricted parking on Carolina North as the central campus, then transit will flourish. Providing unlimited parking at Carolina North would decrease transit use, increase traffic congestion, and discourage biking and walking to Carolina North.

11. How much will your neighborhood traffic increase as a result of Carolina North?

Once the Traffic Impact Analysis (TIA) is available, you can look up the impact of additional traffic on you neighborhood and projected levels of service. The Town will make the TIA available on the Town's Carolina North page.

<http://www.townofchapelhill.org/index.aspx?NID=1821>

12. Who pays for necessary transportation improvements?

Some of local traffic calming improvements will be paid for by UNC, e.g. speed tables. The Town will pay for some of the improvements. Other major transit projects, including park and ride will require state and federal funds, and local funds as well. Transit and parking structures are big ticket items which cost tens of millions of dollars.

13. As the first phase of Carolina North is built out, how can citizens participate in the changes in infrastructure that will be needed?

We don't have an answer. We are looking to the May 3 community meeting to find out your ideas. Visit <http://nrg-nc.net>

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www.nrg-nc.net