

Petition to the Chapel Hill Town Council on Transit Planning and Funding

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November 20, 2019

This petition asks the town of Chapel Hill to pursue more influence over local and regional transit planning to assure that our community's needs are met within the county and regional context.

Chapel Hill and Orange County desperately need practical and well planned transit to serve our rapidly growing population and to address increasingly severe traffic congestion.

First we have to dig ourselves out of the deep hole of the failed light rail project. GoTriangle asked the American Public Transit Association to do an expert peer review to help us learn the lessons from the light rail collapse. Here are some of the conclusions of this review, just released last week.

- GoTriangle made a poor decision to take on this very complex, multi billion dollar project without the experience and staffing to manage it successfully.
- GoTriangle was handicapped by poorly defined staff responsibilities and confusion about overlapping responsibilities of multiple consultants.
- Instead of focusing on critical problems and resolving them, GoTriangle “kicked the can down the road” and continued rapid spending while hoping that the problems would somehow be resolved.
- Most important, the Board of GoTriangle should have asked hard questions as serious problems arose, and been willing to pause or stop the project if necessary. Instead of performing this oversight function, both the Board and the Orange and Durham Commissioners were uncritical cheerleaders for the project.

We have to learn from these mistakes and not repeat them. One the lessons is not to allow GoTriangle to manage major projects affecting Orange County until the organizations's board and staff are rebuilt and reformed as the APTA report shows necessary.

The Orange County Commissioners made an attempt at a new transit planning start at their meeting on November 7, setting up two committees for policy and planning and outlining an Orange County plan, but their proposal needs significant improvements.

The following changes to the County's direction are essential:

- Because Chapel Hill is the largest municipality with the greatest contribution to the dedicated sales tax, as well as facing the greatest traffic challenges, Chapel Hill should have at least two votes on the County transit planning committees. In addition, once the plan is complete, the Council should have the opportunity to vote on it. All county planning meetings must be open to the public and planning documentation made available on a web page.
- The new Orange County plan must be driven by good data on current and projected traffic counts and transit ridership. It must consider how emerging technologies and evolving transit preferences will affect transit use in the future.
- The plan must be responsive to Chapel Hill's planning for growth and land use and give a priority to serving transit dependent communities.
- Most important, we must not continue the past arrangement whereby the Orange County plan can be vetoed by GoTriangle and the Metropolitan Planning Organization. These two organizations must be limited to being able to make minor changes only. In the future, Orange County will join regional transit projects with our neighbors as our travel patterns require. We will no doubt have partnerships with Durham, Chatham, and Alamance counties and with GoTriangle. But the decision on the best plan and on the best use of our tax funds should be ours, not subject to veto by two unaccountable bureaucracies.

We cannot afford another false start on transit planning. We ask the Town Council to take an assertive role in the County transit plan to make sure that our needs are met and that our tax revenues are used productively.