Minutes from December 3, 2024 Planning Commission Discussion of Greenways

On December 3, 2024, the Planning Commission, along with invited panelists Arleigh Greenwald and John Rees, discussed the topic of greenways in the context of the LUMO project and the Town's growth and development more broadly. The discussion focused on the five questions below:

- What is the history of greenway development in Chapel Hill?
- What role do transportation greenways play?
- How might the Town's greenway vision be incorporated in the new LUMO and in conditional rezoning negotiations?
- What relationship do we envision between transportation greenways and bus transit?
- Given limited available funding, what options should be explored for delivering greenways at a faster pace?

This document contains key points from the two-hour discussion, organized according to the questions discussed. Recommended action items for the Town can be found under the last header ("V").

I. History of greenway development in Chapel Hill

- The Bolin Creek Trail opened in the late 1990s. More recent work has occurred on the Booker Creek Trail, the Morgan Creek Trail, the Tanyard Branch Trail, the Fan Branch Trail, and the Meadowmont greenway.
- According to this 1998 report, greenways have been under discussion at the Town Council level since the 1960s, with the first pedestrian trail constructed in 1979 (in Cedar Falls Park). The construction of bikeable greenways seems to have picked up in the 1990s.

II. Role of transportation greenways

- It is important to define "greenway." For purposes of this discussion, participants agreed to also treat multi-use sidepaths running next to streets as greenways. It was noted in passing that sidepath projects might be managed by a different department (Parks & Recreation) than other greenways (Office of Mobility and Greenways).
- Greenways play or can play many roles:
    - Enabling non-drivers, both young and old, to freely move about the Town
    - Providing all residents more choice among transportation options

    - Promoting affordability, e.g., by enabling households to reduce car ownership (at a typical cost of over $10,000 per car annually). It was noted that Greensboro has set a goal of becoming a "car-optional" city
    - Curbing emissions
    - Promoting public health and recreation

- Limitations in the Town's ability to install traffic calming devices, particularly on state-maintained streets, render greenways a superior solution compared to on-street bike lanes. For example, even seasoned cyclists exhibit limited willingness to use the unprotected bike lanes on Weaver Dairy Road.
- E-bikes make biking for transportation more accessible. Participants noted the Town's current efforts toward an e-bike "lending library."
- State highway funds generally cannot be deployed for greenway projects unless the non-car component is incidental to a car-focused street construction project.
- From a fairness or equity perspective, it is desirable to increase the scope of the Town's greenway network so that a higher proportion of residents can enjoy ready access instead of being forced to drive to these amenities.

III. Incorporation of greenways in the LUMO and conditional rezonings

- The Town needs to have a clear plan for future greenway routes so that land use applicants can understand expectations. This will be a key output of the Town's current, federally-funded study of greenway feasibility and initial design.
- In the context of by-right development, the Town has very limited legal authority to force developers to construct sections of greenway. However, the Town can incorporate in the LUMO standards requiring developers to accommodate the Town's adopted greenway plans -- in terms of leaving specific corridors open for future publicly-funded greenway development.
- The Town should have clear standards for how individual developments should be connected to adjacent greenways. For example, the initial proposal for 710 N. Estes featured a staircase from the Estes multi-use path and no ramp for bikes to use.
- The Town should revisit the subject of bike parking in connection with the current LUMO revision project. The LUMO should include not only minimum bike parking requirements (in terms of quantity) but also design requirements governing the location, size, and configuration of bike parking. Such requirements should account for e-bikes, which are heavier and often longer than other bikes.
- A public comment received shortly after the discussion recommended incorporating in the new LUMO standards that promote housing density around existing greenways. The comment noted that planned greenway connections from the existing Bolin Creek Trail to

the east (Blue Hill) and west (Broad Street in Carrboro) will enable those who live along it to access many daily needs without a car.

IV. *Relationship between transportation greenways and bus transit*

- These modes go hand-in-hand.
- Some residents will continue to prefer bikes for reasons of access (e.g., the relative infrequency and limited hours of buses on the "G" route and certain other routes, the "last mile" problem).
- The availability of secure, covered bike parking at bus stops, including the Town's park and ride lots, would influence transportation choices.

V. *What's to be done*

- Two fundamental problems are manifest in the Town's current greenway system. Each requires its own solutions.
    - Existing greenways do not connect to each other or to critical destinations.
        - Solution: Identify these gaps and troubleshoot. In some cases, the Town might need to purchase easements (using eminent domain if needed). Many critical gaps are relatively short in length.
    - Arterials such as Fordham Boulevard/15-501 create "canyons" that residents can't or won't cross except by car.
        - Solution: Just as governments maintain wildlife crossing plans, the Town should develop a human crossing plan for these areas. Off-grade crossings (particularly tunnels) are prevalent in towns like Davis, California that achieve high rates of non-car mode share. They obviously cost money, as well as inconvenience to motorists during construction. But the canyon problem poses a major obstacle to connectivity and needs to be addressed somehow.
- In terms of overall governance and process, the Town should:
    - Establish a transportation demand management (TDM) system, or a set of strategies aimed at maximizing traveler choices. The TDM should include specific metrics, tools, strategies, and so on. This would represent a more organized and formal effort to influence and optimize transportation dynamics and behaviors than the Town currently has. The overriding goal would be to reduce single-occupancy vehicle trips -- and to identify and solve for current impediments to doing so at the neighborhood and street level. UNC already has a TDM.

    - Articulate its "minimum viable product" for greenways that reflects the reality of funding constraints. Projects like the Estes Connectivity Project, which cost millions of dollars per mile, are not scalable in the near future. Greenways of a similar nature that ultimately receive federal funding growing out of the current feasibility/design study realistically could take 15 years to start appearing. Articulating a minimum viable product, which could include sidewalks where none currently exist and primitive greenways on water/power easements, is an initial step toward making faster progress in the short term.
    - Commit to numerical targets for miles of new greenway development per year, similar to the way the Town commits to housing production targets.
    - Rekindle discussions with OWASA (and Duke Energy) about using easements for greenways. Participants recalled past discussions where OWASA discouraged the Town from using OWASA's easements in this way. Going forward, the Town should negotiate an outcome that balances the needs of all parties.
    - Consider, in prioritizing projects, both overall impact (how many potential users) and equitable distribution (who needs it the most).
    - Consider staff capacity.
- Section III, above, discusses actionable steps related to the LUMO.