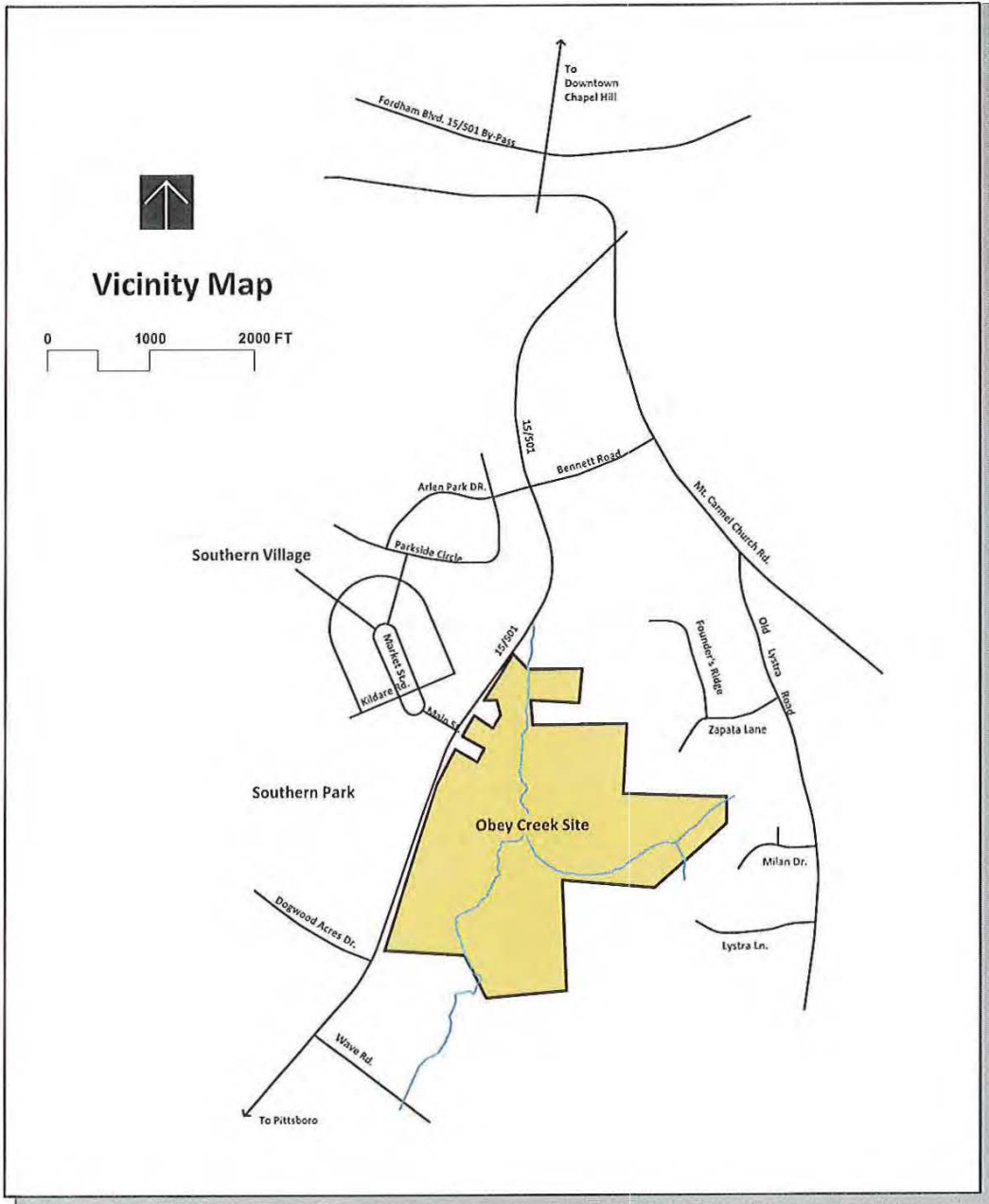


# OBHEY CREEK COMPASS COMMITTEE REPORT TO THE CHAPEL HILL TOWN COUNCIL



DECEMBER 16, 2013

# FOREWORD

## HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

The work of the Obey Creek Compass Committee acknowledges and builds upon prior planning efforts in the southern area:

- The Southern Small Area Plan created in the early 1990s arranged a density-swap between the east and west sides of South 15-501 that resulted in the development of Southern Village and the current zoning for the Obey Creek site (one house per acre).
- The South 15-501 Discussion Group in 2012 acknowledged the desirability of concentrating development on the west side of the Obey Creek site as a means of addressing Town goals for economic development on this environmentally sensitive site, and emphasized emulating the design principles of the Market Street area of Southern Village. The principles developed by this group are currently part of the Town's Comprehensive Plan.



Chapel Hill 2020: South 15-501 Discussion Group Map

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From the outset, the Obey Creek Compass Committee (OCCC) has been aspirational in its thinking about development on this site – striving to understand the complex issues necessary for creating principles that will encourage successful development at Obey Creek – development that meets Town economic development goals and which will connect both sides of South 15-501 economically, physically and visually.

**This report was approved unanimously by the committee.**

## OUR VISION

The development envisioned by the OCCC balances economic, social and environmental goals for both the Town and the southern community in the following ways.

- Provides opportunities for the Town to increase its commercial tax base through a mix of uses that have an “anchored” presence and an urban format that reflects 21st century retail trends.
- Creates synergy with Southern Village Market Street by planning for development on both sides of South 15-501, linking them physically with a well-placed, iconic pedestrian bridge and multiple at-grade crossings. This includes possible re-development of the Town-owned Southern Village Park & Ride as an anchoring presence on the west side of South 15-501.
- Applies urban design standards to create a walkable, human-scale development that allows for greater density than Southern Village at a scale that complements Southern Village Market Street.
- Addresses traffic concerns by carefully considering the mix of uses and mobility concerns by working with NC DOT and the developer to apply Complete Streets standards for transformation of South 15-501 into an Urban/Suburban Boulevard with a frontage road along the east side of the road. (See Appendix B, NC DOT Urban/Suburban Boulevard Guidelines.)
- Protects environmentally sensitive portions of the Obey Creek site by preserving the east side of the property as a destination parkland in perpetuity and by encouraging stormwater management best practices.
- Encourages use of alternative modes of transportation by increasing connectivity throughout southern Chapel Hill and providing convenient connections to other areas of town.



**Obey Creek 101: Presentation by town staff**

## CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

The OCCC recognizes the opportunities for economic development at the site; at the same time, committee discussion and public forums revealed clear areas of concern. A development agreement must strike a balance between the potential benefits and these concerns.

**Traffic.** The currently proposed size and mix of uses is expected to generate substantial additional traffic, but estimates have not been provided to the OCCC, nor have potential mitigations been identified. Committee members agreed that traffic impacts should not overwhelm the area and felt strongly that accommodations for additional traffic must not be at the expense of opportunities for increased connectivity and mobility across South 15-501.

**Connectivity.** Safe access for pedestrians and bicycles and increased opportunities for greenway connections are essential. There is strong objection to creating an internally oriented island of development on this site accessible only by automobile.



Property tour by committee members and community, May 22, 2013

**Environment.** This heavily wooded, steeply sloped site is bisected by Wilson Creek, one of Chapel Hill's premier watercourses for water quality. Transitioning from a natural wooded tract to developed area poses a number of challenges, including protection of water quality, conservation of natural area and tree canopy, and mitigation of noise, light and air pollution impacts.

**Economic benefit.** A thorough and specific economic analysis is required to determine which mix of uses will maximize Town revenue and minimize Town expenses. Analysis must include anticipated revenues, costs of public services and infrastructure, including student population increases and infrastructure improvements needed to accommodate impacts from the proposed development.

**Scale of development.** Committee responses to the current proposal reflect strong concern about the overall scale of the current proposal, with most preferring "human scale" development as defined by density, building heights and footprints, block sizes and other such factors.

## GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

To achieve this vision, the OCCC recommends that the Town and Council do the following.

1. Require the developer to submit plans that align with the principles developed by the committee.
2. Plan for development at this site within the larger context of the southern area.
3. Extend the exploratory phase to include the following:
  - a. Evaluate the scope and direction of work assigned to the Technical Team to ensure that Town Council has a strong negotiation team whose work is geared toward Town goals and the community vision.
  - b. Gather the information necessary for effective negotiations before proceeding.
  - c. Apply economic data, trip generation and traffic analysis data, and OCCC principles to the Concept Plan as a means of establishing a baseline.
  - d. Include all appropriate advisory boards and possible steering committee involvement.
4. Adopt the OCCC Report as part of the Town's Comprehensive Plan.

## ISSUE-SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Issue-specific recommendations are included in each section of the report. The following recommendations are considered immediate in nature, and are therefore repeated in this executive summary.

1. Expand focus of work for Dover, Kohl and Associates to address opportunities on both sides of South 15-501 with particular attention to the Town-owned Southern Village Park & Ride lot. The OCCC understands that this work should not be at the expense of the developer.
2. Retain an urban designer to work on behalf of the Town to “defend the public realm.”
3. Begin discussions among Town staff, Technical Team consultants (Fuss & O’Neill) and NC DOT regarding South 15-501 frontage road and Urban/Suburban Boulevard.

## PROCESS EVALUATION & RECOMMENDATIONS

To explain the limitations of this work product and to help inform the work of similar groups in the future, the OCCC unanimously agreed that it would be useful to acknowledge the strengths and limitations of the process the committee has engaged in for considering development at the Obey Creek site.

### STRENGTHS

- OCCC members represented a broad range of interests and expertise. They were thoughtful and respectful in their discussions and shared their expertise freely.
- Three administrative commitments were especially helpful:
  - \* Having an individual familiar with Chapel Hill and the various stakeholder groups facilitate discussion.
  - \* Assigning a staff member to the committee to facilitate communication.
  - \* Posting all meeting information and OCCC resources to the Town website.
- The OCCC was flexible in its work plan, and adapted that plan to include greater opportunities to consider information, discuss key topics and interact with the developer.

### LIMITATIONS

- Traffic impact studies, economic data and a fiscal impact analysis were not available to the committee; therefore the guiding principles developed by the OCCC were created without benefit and consideration of this vital data.
- Confusion about the role of the Technical Team resulted in non-productive meetings, and the process did not allow for collaborative exchange between the Technical Team and the OCCC.
- The process did not allow for collaborative exchange between the developer and committee, meaning
  - \* Initially, no formal interaction between the developer and the OCCC was scheduled until public presentation of the developer's concept plans. The OCCC requested a change to include at least one session to hear the developer's early ideas about concepts.
  - \* The OCCC had no other opportunity to participate in the formation of concept plans or alternatives to the developer's proposals.
- Absence of information and lack of alternatives meant the OCCC had no opportunity to consider meaningful choices.

## OTHER POINTS TO CONSIDER

- Visiting the site at the beginning of committee deliberations provided some historical context for the potential development. The Council should be afforded the same opportunity, possibly through an animated slide show, to provide them context for this important negotiation with the developer.

## ABOUT THE COMMITTEE

The Chapel Hill Town Council appointed the Obey Creek Compass Committee in June 2013 to represent the Chapel Hill community during the Exploratory Phase of a Development Agreement process for the Obey Creek Development proposal from East-West Partners.

The OCCC's charge included participating in meetings (21 total), serving as a conduit to the public and, ultimately, producing a report that identifies key issues, principles and interests to be considered in the next phase of discussions and negotiations. The Council will use the report in deciding on next steps and in the negotiation of any Development Agreement. A schedule of meetings appears in Appendix A.

## COMMITTEE ROSTER

John Ager	Planning Board member
Kimberly Brewer	Planning Board member
Jeanne Brown	Southern area ETJ resident (ETJ south of NC 54)
William Clark	Chapel Hill business owners, one from Southern Village
Daniel Costello	Southern area resident (south of NC 54, east of Smith Level, within Town limits)
Travis James Crayton	Chapel Hill municipal resident at-large
Susana Dancy	Person knowledgeable in transportation issues
Bobby Funk	Person knowledgeable in business and development issues
Seth Kingsbury	Chapel Hill business owners, one from Southern Village
Susan Lindsay	Southern area ETJ residents (ETJ south of NC 54)
Aaron Nelson	Person knowledgeable in business and development issues
Chris Paul	Person knowledgeable in greenways issues
Alan Rimer	Southern Village residential representative
Danielle Spurlock	Person knowledgeable in bicycle and pedestrian issues
Robert Strauss	Abutting residential landowner
Polly Van de Velde	Chapel Hill municipal residents at-large
Patrick Vernon	Southern area resident (south of NC 54, east of Smith Level, within Town limits)