

My name is Kai Nilsen, and I have been chosen by the Planning Commission to present our comments on the Town's Climate Action and Response Plan. I have served as the Youth Liaison to the Planning Commission for the last two years. As Youth Liaison, I was selected by the Youth Council to represent the interests of our generation in land use decisions. I represent the generation which will experience the most severe impacts of climate change. I represent the generation which will never be able to run from this issue, and who will be living with the land uses locked in by this government, for better, or for worse. I represent the generation which will be alive to finally meet the consequences of our actions.

I am before you today to remind you of the significance of our land use decisions on the climate. The town recently released a draft of the Climate Action and Response Plan, which, recognizing the environmental importance of land use, calls on local government to use its planning authority to promote sustainable development.

While the proposed CARP draft is a strong and ambitious plan, it does not convey the sense of urgency appropriate for the Council's stated "top priority." The Town's signals about the gravity of climate issues matter a great deal in convincing our citizens to take action in their own lives. It is imperative that this urgency is present throughout all future planning, including in the FLUM and LUMO rewrite projects, and most importantly, in our actual land use decisions. Unfortunately, the land use decisions made by the Town in recent years have not been reflective of a climate-conscious decision-making process. While we recognize that many of these issues predate the term of the current Council, it is important to recognize that this Town Council has the power to set a new precedent. Even while drafting the CARP, the Council has approved, modified, or voted down projects in a manner inconsistent with our climate goals. Take, for example, any of the new gas stations approved by the Town in the past year. It does not take a 70-page plan to know that building gas stations is completely incompatible with fighting climate change. There is a strong chance that gas stations approved in the year 2021 will still be operational in the year 2040, 10 years before the Town plans to be at net-zero carbon emissions. Even if these gas stations are shut down early, the toxic effects of gasoline leakage will severely restrict future uses of the land, limiting our growth long into the future. Often, the Town believes that it is making decisions for the year 2021, when in fact we are making decisions for the year 2040, 2050, 2060, and beyond. At what point will we actually begin acting like a Town which cares about climate change?

The fact of the matter is that the land use decisions we are making today have a long-lasting pedestrian and bike friendliness, overall livability and, most importantly, carbon footprint of Chapel Hill for decades. Fossil fuel-powered transportation is the single biggest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, and according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, transportation emissions are driven primarily by locally-determined land use patterns. Less dense, sprawling land use patterns which separate living spaces from retail and work spaces and fail to appropriately utilize public transit resources generate increases in vehicle miles traveled, and in turn, carbon emissions. Denser, transit-oriented land-use patterns, such as those found downtown and in the Blue Hill District, on the other hand, minimize greenhouse gas emissions, and, according to the IPCC, offer benefits for air quality, public savings, and mental and physical health.

Downgrading the density of a proposed development is not something which is easily undone. When we reduce the footprint or height of buildings, those decisions are more or less permanent, as it makes no financial sense to retroactively add floors to existing buildings. Furthermore, opting for lower-density uses where higher density is feasible locks in the density of that area far into the future. The Town's FLUM project concedes that the over 80% of land in Chapel Hill used for single-family housing will likely never be touched. Chapel Hill has neither the time nor the land to be approving low-density projects.

As the young people of Chapel Hill, we have a special connection to this place. Many of us were born here. I myself have never lived anywhere else. We, like everyone else, feel an attachment to the way things are here. But we recognize that change and growth is a natural and healthy part of any community. If we want Chapel Hill to continue to exist, if we want to share the town we know and love with future generations, change is absolutely essential.

And this change is not at all a bad thing! A denser, more transit-oriented town is exactly the kind of town that young people want to live in. Density and transit are the key to maintaining the spirit and dynamism characteristic of this community that we all love so much. Imagine for a second a Chapel Hill where you could wake up and walk to your favorite coffee shop for breakfast, or step out of your building into a lush park for your morning workout. A Chapel Hill where you could hop on your bike to head to the grocery store, or to commute to work. Catch a bus with a friend to head downtown for some shopping or to attend FestiFall. Imagine a Chapel Hill where everything you want is a quick walk, bike, or bus ride away. Imagine a Chapel Hill where you can live your life without a car.

The next time you are being pushed to reduce density or to deprioritize transit accessibility, I want you to think back to this meeting and this letter. Remember why you are here, and for whom you are doing this. As leaders, you have a moral responsibility to look past the interests of the moment, and to act boldly to protect the future of our community. In 30 years, we will have long forgotten the contours of today's land use debates. But, for better or for worse, we will be living with the consequences of the decisions made right now, by this government.