

100 Tweed Place
Chapel Hill, NC 27517
March 22, 2006

Andrew Henry, Planner
Durham Transportation Department
101 City Hall Plaza
Durham, NC 27701

Dear Andy:

This letter is to express my concerns to you and other members of the TAC and MPO staff about the Southwest Durham County and Southeast Chapel Hill Collector Street Plan. I divide my comments into two main parts—comments about the plan and comments about the workshops.

I have three concerns about the proposed plan. Though stressing “connectivity,” the plan exhibits disturbing disconnections that mar what is basically a good and innovative planning effort. The first disconnection is between the collector street lattice-work design and the proposed Southwest Durham Drive alignment. If one looks at the recommended plan, there is no escaping the conclusion that the collector street grid, with spacing between collectors roughly determined by proposed residential densities, is completely independent of the SW Durham Drive alignment. If this were a painting, it is as if two separate artists drew on the same canvass, or the artist’s child drew an arbitrary SW Durham Drive line on the collector street design. In other words, the SW Durham Drive was completely ignored in the collector street design, and vice versa. The SW Durham Drive was even declared “off-limits” for discussion in the workshops—outside the scope of the contract. Is it because no one believes the Drive will be built? Is it shown merely because the alignment has already been “approved” by local governments, but now is deemed outside the scope of a transportation plan collector street plan for the same area, all part of the same transportation system? It makes no planning sense not to address the alignment of that arterial and not to integrate it with the collector street plan, perhaps realigning it with George King Road or Fearington Road. There is a similar issue with the transit line, though the uncertainty surrounding future rail transit makes that less troubling.

A second disconnect is in implementation strategy, between proposed future streets and existing neighborhood streets. The proposed plan shows only the proposed future streets in bold lines, and discusses (vaguely) how to implement that part of the collector street system through development regulations. That seems reasonable so far as it goes, except that those streets are only part of the collector street system. In actuality, the plan and the resulting traffic pattern includes existing streets in Chapel Hill to which the new collectors connect. How do we implement comparable retrofitting of those existing streets? They do not meet the standards properly proposed for new streets in the plan. It is doubtful that local governments will be able to require developers to build the necessary off-site improvements under development regulations. Retrofitting almost

certainly requires a capital improvement program by local governments, particularly in the already built-up Chapel Hill portion of the area. Who will pay for and implement traffic calming measures, bike lanes, sidewalks, landscaping, and the like to make the collector streets work properly in the existing adjacent neighborhoods? Does Chapel Hill agree to take on that responsibility? The proposed plan ignores this issue. I surely hope we are not satisfied with a plan that merely "dumps" new traffic onto existing neighborhood streets that were not designed to the same desirable standards as the proposed new collectors.

The third disconnect is in the emphasis placed on accommodating traffic. The plan holds out the concept of "complete streets," which not only accommodate cars, bikes, and pedestrians, but also become "part of the neighborhood environment." In fact, however, the plan emphasizes the transportation aspect—accommodating cars, bikes, and pedestrians. That is an appropriate concern, but designing and retrofitting streets so that they also work as "part of the neighborhood environment" is equally important to those of us living on those streets.

Now, as to the public participation workshops... The last presentation, on March 21, was the most disappointing of the three workshops. The presentation was almost entirely devoted to generalities about transportation planning principles that repeated earlier meetings and mostly irrelevant photos of streets and highways (e.g., photos showed no cars on the streets that are proposed to become collectors and be loaded with traffic). There was no explanation of the proposed plan, how it followed the general planning principles espoused earlier, how it would achieve objectives, why it was the best alternative, and how exactly it would be implemented. Then the presenter cut off discussion when many of us had our hands raised since the beginning of the commentary period. He did so by, remarking to the last speaker that he had expressed commentary instead of asking a question. Since when is a workshop limited to asking questions? I realize that workshops are difficult to manage and are now water under the bridge, and that we all need to move on, but you should just realize that a number of participants were disappointed. This should not reflect on the MPO staff who maintained easy and wide contact with residents throughout the process; it was the consultant who ran the workshops.

Lastly, let me commend you on undertaking the innovative approach of going beyond thoroughfare planning. I believe you can address flaws in the proposed collector street plan. It still holds the promise of an improvement over the ad hoc, piecemeal, assembly of a collector system, one subdivision or development proposal at a time, which virtually all local governments have been utilizing until now.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Kaiser
Resident of the Southwest Durham Planning Area,
Professor emeritus of planning at UNC-CH

This letter is being sent to: Mayor William Bell, Chair; Alice Gordon, Vice-chair; Mayor Kevin Foy; Durham County Commissioner, Becky Heron; Chapel Hill Council Person, Ed Harrison; and Andrew Henry and David Bonk, staff planners.