



**Date:** August 24, 2015

**To:** Thomas J. Bonfield, City Manager  
**Through:** Keith Chadwell, Deputy City Manager  
**From:** Mark D. Ahrendsen, Transportation Director

**Subject:** Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project

**Executive Summary**

The Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit (DO LRT) project is a 17-mile light rail transit service with 17 stations extending from UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill to Alston Avenue in Durham. GoTriangle was authorized by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) to enter the Project Development phase of the project in February 2014 with the requirement to complete this phase in two years by February 2016. Project Development includes the issuance of a combined Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS)/Record of Decision (ROD) on the project by the FTA.

GoTriangle will provide a presentation on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the DO LRT project. An advance copy of the DEIS was released by GoTriangle for public review on August 21, 2015 with anticipation that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency will likely publish the Notice of Availability in the Federal Register on Friday, August 28, 2015 to begin a 45-day public comment period. The DEIS is available here <http://ourtransitfuture.com/deis/> and the Executive Summary is attached. The City Council is asked to authorize the Mayor to send a letter to GoTriangle endorsing the recommended National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) Preferred Alternative in the DEIS for the DO LRT project.

**Recommendation**

The Department of Transportation recommends that the City Council receive a presentation by GoTriangle on the DO LRT project and authorize the Mayor to send a letter to GoTriangle endorsing the recommended NEPA Preferred Alternative in the DEIS for the DO LRT project.

**Background**

GoTriangle is developing the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project, a 17-mile light rail transit project with 17 stations extending from UNC Hospitals in Chapel Hill to Alston Avenue in Durham. GoTriangle was authorized by the FTA to enter the Project Development phase of the project in February 2014 with the requirement to complete this phase in two years by February 2016. Project Development includes the issuance of a combined FEIS/ROD on the project by the FTA.

GoTriangle and their consultants have prepared the DEIS as required by the NEPA. The DEIS is available here <http://ourtransitfuture.com/deis/> and the Executive Summary is attached. It is

anticipated that the DEIS will be released on August 28, 2015, for a 45-day public comment period. GoTriangle will be holding public workshops on the DEIS:

- Tuesday, September 15, 2015 at the Friday Center from 4-7 pm
- Saturday, September 19, 2015 at Durham Station from 2-5 pm

GoTriangle will also be holding formal public hearings on the DEIS:

- Tuesday, September 29, 2015 at the Friday Center from 4-7 pm
- Thursday, October 1, 2015 at the Durham County Commissioners Chamber from 4-7 pm

During this 45-day public comment period, it is recommended that the City Council authorize the Mayor to send a letter to GoTriangle expressing the Council's endorsement of the recommended NEPA Preferred Alternative in the DEIS.

In October and November 2015, the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization (DCHC MPO) will consider a resolution to endorse the recommended NEPA Preferred Alternative in the DEIS. If approved by the DCHC MPO, it is more likely than not that the FTA would issue a combined FEIS/ROD for the project by the end of February 2016. Once the ROD is issued by the FTA, the project would be eligible to apply to enter the Engineering phase.

The environmental and community data used to prepare the DEIS was presented to the City Council in March 2015 and May 2015. GoTriangle has held numerous public meetings and meetings with community groups and neighborhoods over the past several months to review aspects of the DO LRT project and receive public input.

### **Issues and Analysis**

GoTriangle's presentation will review the DEIS including the recommendation on the five key decisions:

- The alignment over Little Creek: C2A
- The alignment over New Hope Creek: NHC2;
- The station location near Duke/VA Hospitals: Trent/Flowers Station;
- The location of the Rail Operations and Maintenance Facility: Farrington; and
- To build or not build the project: Build.

GoTriangle developed this recommendation based on a variety of factors. The DEIS includes technical reports and analyses of the following factors:

- Natural resources
- Air quality
- Hazardous materials
- Water resources
- Neighborhood and community resources
- Historic resources
- Archaeological resources
- Noise and vibration
- Visual and aesthetics
- Travel demand
- Capital costs
- Operating costs

- Pedestrian and bicycle
- Bus transit
- Traffic analysis

The recommendation to endorse the recommended alternative in the DEIS is based on the following analysis.

The alignment over Little Creek: C2A

- C1 is not a feasible option due to the US Army Corps of Engineers objection to authorizing use of their property given the availability of less damaging alternatives.
- C1A has a circuitous route that is the most costly in terms of capital and operating costs, results in a longer travel time and less ridership.
- The differences between C2 and C2A are within the Town of Chapel Hill and follow the same route within the City of Durham. C2 has more full acquisitions and parkland impacts than C2A. C2 may preclude options for future grade separation of the Barbee Chapel Road and NC 54 intersection.

The alignment over New Hope Creek: NHC2

- The LPA alignment (the alignment most similar to the previously adopted “Locally Preferred Alternative”) introduces a new transportation corridor across New Hope Creek with resulting higher bottomland forest, water resource, and visual and noise impacts to the New Hope Creek Preserve and trails.
- NHC1 is opposed by many businesses along the US 15-501 service road, has more full acquisitions, and requires a less accessible Martin Luther King Jr. Parkway Station.
- NHC2 is lower cost than NHC1 and has fewer natural resource impacts than the LPA.

The station location near Duke/VA Hospitals: Trent/Flowers

- Duke University and the VA support the Trent/Flowers station location.
- Right-of-way is very constrained at the Duke Eye Center station location resulting in less space for pedestrian facilities near the station.

The location of the Rail Operations and Maintenance Facility: Farrington

- The Leigh Village location affects a potential historic resource.
- The Patterson Place location is only viable with the New Hope Creek LPA alignment which is not recommended.
- The Alston Avenue location requires the relocation of Brenntag and its associated higher costs, longer construction timeline, higher risk of hazardous materials clean-up, and higher job displacement if Brenntag cannot be relocated within East Durham.
- The Cornwallis location is more complex and expensive to construct, operate, and maintain due to topography and impacts the Jewish Federation’s potential expansion plans.

To build or not build the project: Build

- The DO LRT has been an element of Durham long-range transportation plan and land use plan for many years. Much of the projected population and employment growth of the region is to be focused near the planned transit stations. The DO LRT allows for further development of these areas, increased transportation choices, and a more time-competitive and reliable alternative to driving in the corridor.

In addition to the five key decisions, there are many other impacts that the project will have on the City of Durham. Staff has read, discussed, and analyzed a compendium of technical reports on the DO LRT project and are providing detailed feedback to GoTriangle. The following general concerns are recommended to be included in the Mayor's letter to GoTriangle.

- GoTriangle is expected to continue to work cooperatively with the Durham City Council and staff on the design of the project as it continues into project engineering.
- GoTriangle will be expected to comply with all City plans and policies in the development and construction of the alignment and station areas.
- GoTriangle should continue to pursue strategies to avoid, minimize, or mitigate adverse impacts to the community, natural, and cultural resources that are caused by the recommended alternative in the DEIS.
- GoTriangle should be especially sensitive to impacts on low income communities along the LRT alignment. Ensuring the continued availability of existing and future development of additional affordable housing near station areas is essential to ensure that all residents of Durham have access to and benefit from the light rail transit investment.
- Safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access to the light rail stations as well as bicycle and pedestrian facilities along the alignment should be included in the project to the maximum extent practicable.
- The City expects that traffic impacts caused by the LRT will be mitigated to the maximum extent practicable with consideration for traffic flow and congestion, safety, bicyclists, pedestrians, bus transit, and travel demand management.

### **Alternatives**

The City Council could authorize the Mayor to send a letter to GoTriangle that does not endorse one or more of the five decisions of the recommended NEPA Preferred Alternative in the DEIS or could choose to take no action.

While the City of Durham is not required to approve the recommended NEPA Preferred Alternative, submitting a letter that does not endorse the recommended NEPA Preferred Alternative or the City Council declining to take a position on the project may present a risk to the project's approval by the DCHC MPO. Should this occur, it is not likely that the FTA would issue a combined FEIS/ROD by February 2016 and the project would be required to withdraw from Project Development. The state funding for the project in the FY 2016-2025 Transportation Improvement Program could be at risk. The project's application to enter Engineering would be delayed until the ROD is issued. Project expenses incurred by GoTriangle to complete supplemental environmental work to resolve the controversy, develop and circulate the FEIS for public comment, and obtain a ROD after withdrawal from Project Development would not be reimbursable by the FTA.

### **Financial Impact**

There is no direct financial impact for the City of Durham related to this decision. However, the presented alternatives have different cost implications that could affect the competitiveness and financial viability of the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit project. The project's local funding share is to be provided by the local sales tax and vehicle fees administered by GoTriangle. There may be additional City of Durham costs related to station area infrastructure, impacts to economic development, impacts to City transportation facilities and utilities, etc.

**SDBE Summary**

Department of Equal Opportunity/Equity Assurance did not review this item for compliance with the Ordinance to Promote Equal Business Opportunities in City Contracting.

**Attachments**

Letter to GoTriangle

DEIS Executive Summary