

January 26, 2023

Andy Henry,
Principal Transportation Planner
Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization
101 City Hall Plaza
Durham, NC 27701

John E. Sandor, PE,
District Engineer, District 2
North Carolina Department of Transportation
815 Stadium Drive
Durham, NC 27704

Dear Mr. Henry and Mr. Sandor,

The Durham Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission (BPAC) is an advisory board appointed by the Durham City Council and the Durham County Board of Commissioners. BPAC works to make Durham a more walkable, bikeable, and transit-friendly community for all residents.

BPAC expresses the following concerns and recommendations regarding the US 70 East Corridor Plan with the hope that they will be reflected in the design options that are shared with the public later this spring.

Concerns with the justification for increasing car capacity on US 70 East

The expectation for increased car traffic is the main motivation for increasing car capacity along this corridor.¹ BPAC has the following primary concerns with this justification.

Average annual daily traffic (AADT) counts should be updated to understand the impacts of the recently opened East End Connector. Of the two AADT measurement points on US 70 between the East End Connector and S Mineral Springs Boulevard, one has not been measured since 2015, and neither has been measured since the East End Connector

¹ US 70 Corridor Study Public Meeting Slides, December 2022,
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/11U4fDWzpD6IZOp8-7S1dvLUCZUqHOIcf>

opened in 2022.² This is the portion of the corridor with the largest AADT counts, and is the portion most likely to be impacted by the opening of the East End Connector.

The East End Connector cost \$142 million and took seven years to complete.³ It would be a misuse of funds to start another highway project without first understanding how the newly completed, immediately adjacent highway project has impacted this corridor.

AADT growth is negative on most of the corridor in recent years. AADT has gone down since 2019 at all measurement points on US 70 between S Mineral Springs Rd and I-540.⁴ There is currently no justification to spend funds increasing car throughput along this portion of the corridor.

Growth models should be updated to reflect new, post-pandemic commuting behaviors.

To the commission's knowledge, the version of the Triangle Regional Model (TRM) used to predict traffic growth up to the year 2050 has not been updated to reflect the additional uncertainty provided by the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the TRM team, 44% of triangle residents expect that they will be working fully or partly from home moving forward, up from 26% before the pandemic.⁵ If the models in use have been updated to reflect this change in behavior, it should be made apparent how these updates have changed expected outcomes.

Promoting alternative modes of transportation and pedestrian-friendly land uses will do more to improve traffic than increasing car capacity. Increasing the corridor's capacity for cars may provide a temporary improvement for traffic, but the corridor will eventually become a bottleneck for cars again if the proportion of roadway users who drive remains the same. Having pedestrian-friendly land uses reduces the number of trips that require a car, increases the amount of destinations that can be reached in a single car trip, and reduces the driving distance required to reach an amenity. Making it easier to take public transit to major destinations, and making it safer and easier to walk and bike along the corridor will scale much more efficiently with the expected growth of the area.

² NCDOT Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) Mapping Application, accessed January 2023, <https://ncdot.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=964881960f0549de8c3583bf46ef5ed4>

³ NCDOT: East End Connector, accessed January 2023, <https://www.ncdot.gov/projects/east-end-connector/Pages/default.aspx>

⁴ NCDOT Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) Mapping Application, accessed January 2023, <https://ncdot.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=964881960f0549de8c3583bf46ef5ed4>

⁵ The Impact of COVID-19 on Travel Behavior in the Triangle Region, accessed January 2023, <https://itre.ncsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/covid-factsheet-March2022.pdf>

Top priorities for any redesign of US 70 East

This area of Durham has many new developments in various stages of review, including over 1900 housing units abutting this corridor as of January 26, 2023.⁶ Considering this backdrop, BPAC recommends the following priorities be reflected in any design for this corridor.

The first priority should be the needs of current and future residents of the area. As development increases in this region, a redesign of this corridor provides an opportunity to build an environment that is safe and accessible for local residents, whether or not they choose to drive. Designing US 70 to allow dense development along the corridor will create a safer and more prosperous neighborhood for local residents, while generating more revenue for the city when compared to building a highway. There should be designs considered that reduce the design speed of this corridor. Commuter patterns can change as job markets move and as transit options develop, but the local residents will interact with this corridor every day.

Any updates to this corridor should improve pedestrian accessibility and safety. US 70 is currently unsafe and inaccessible for pedestrians. As part of the East End Connector project, sidewalks and ADA ramps were added to the intersection at US 70 and Pleasant Drive, but no pedestrian crossings were built despite BPAC's prior recommendation. The increased development along this corridor only makes the need for sidewalks and safe pedestrian crossings more urgent.

Any updates to this corridor should improve bicycle connectivity. This area is currently a desert for bicycle connectivity in Durham, and a redesign of this corridor is a huge opportunity to improve options for cyclists in the area. Creating protected bicycle facilities along this corridor will allow the many future residents of the area to reach nearby amenities without needing to drive (such as the Harris Teeter or Wal-Mart at Briar Creek), in turn reducing congestion on the roadway. Such bicycle infrastructure would also lay the groundwork for an arterial bicycle connection to Downtown Durham from the east, similar to what the American Tobacco Trail provides from the south. Any redesign should also provide a way to connect any planned trails and neighborhood bike routes to the north and south of this corridor.

Any updates to this corridor should include infrastructure for public transit. I-885, I-40, and I-540 already provide car connectivity between Durham and Raleigh. Instead of being used as a redundant high-speed car connection, this corridor should be used to improve transit access in this region. There is currently no bus route that serves US 70 directly, and the closest routes (2, 3B) are not part of GoDurham's frequent service network. It is important to understand in more detail how these current routes are used before proposing any updates to US 70. This corridor is also a great candidate for a much needed direct bus route from Downtown Durham to RDU. This corridor is also very close to the proposed location of the Ellis Road commuter rail station.

⁶ Durham Growth Management Engagement Initiative, accessed January 2023, <https://durham.mysocialpinpoint.com/growthmanagement/map#/>

The possibility of having such an important transit stop in the vicinity of this corridor makes it even more important to consider transit connections between the corridor and consider ways to connect the corridor to the station. Any project along this corridor should analyze possible transit improvements, and should at least build infrastructure for future transit routes along the corridor.

Update place types to reflect the new possibilities in this corridor and the increased development. The Durham City-County Planning Department should consider updating the place types used along this corridor in the draft Durham Comprehensive Plan to reflect the opportunity for better pedestrian, bicycle, and transit connectivity.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deniz Aydemir". The signature is enclosed within a circular scribble.

Deniz Aydemir
Chair, Durham Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Commission

cc::

Sean Egan, Director of Transportation, City of Durham
Ellen Beckman, Transportation Manager, Durham County
Javiera Caballero, Durham City Council
Heidi Carter, Durham County Board of Commissioners