

Durham, Orange chart new transportation path away from more and bigger highways

[By Richard Stradling](#) Updated February 24, 2022 4:03 PM



In this file photo from 2016, westbound traffic on Interstate 40 is backed up just east of the N.C. 86 interchange. The N.C Department of Transportation plans to widen this section of I-40 to six lanes. HARRY LYNCH hlynch@newsobserver.com

DURHAM

The organization that does transportation planning for Durham and much of Orange County wants the state to spend less on building new freeways and widening existing

ones.

[The Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization or MPO](#) recently approved a 30-year plan that eliminates some long-anticipated projects, such as widening the Durham Freeway near Research Triangle Park and converting sections of U.S. 70 and U.S. 15-501 into expressways.

In their place, the plan calls for spending more on transit, including increased bus service and new bus rapid transit lines. It also places more emphasis on bike lanes, crosswalks and sidewalks used by cyclists and pedestrians.

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The plan is meant to support goals pushed by the public and adopted by the MPO's board that include eliminating fatal crashes, reducing carbon emissions to zero and ensuring that everyone has access to affordable transportation.

First drafts of the plan included traditional highway expansion projects that seemed to undermine those goals, said Jenn Weaver, the mayor of Hillsborough who heads the MPO board. So the board asked the staff to try again.

"It's a long-range plan, and we saw that in the out years we were going to have more congestion and more emissions and that this was not in alignment with our goals and values

as an MPO or as a region," Weaver said.

New approach to transportation planning

The plan, approved earlier this month, is "transformational" because it reflects a new approach to transportation by an MPO, said Kym Hunter, an attorney for the [Southern Environmental Law Center in Chapel Hill](#). Hunter said her organization hopes to use the Durham-Orange plan as a model for other MPOs, which do transportation planning in urban areas throughout the state.

"I think previously there's been a very constrained thinking about long-range planning that is tied into what's possible today, and it's just a very business-as-usual approach," she said. "And what they did here was say, 'Wait, we have all these goals for climate and equity and safety and this plan is not helping us to get there.'"

The revised plan sets up potential conflicts with the N.C. Department of Transportation, which owns the highways the MPO says it no longer wants expanded.

NCDOT had someone in the room throughout the development of the plan, so it understands the MPO's thinking, said Brandon Jones, the department's regional engineer. Jones said there's always some give-and-take between an MPO and NCDOT when it comes to deciding

what to do along a particular road or on a specific project.

"We're kind of bound by each other's plans; they need to match in the short term," Jones said. "So that kind of brings us to the table to work out differences to make sure that improvements move forward."

Lisa Mathis, [a state Board of Transportation member](#) who sits on the Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro board, called the MPO forward thinking and courageous for crafting a different vision of transportation that "might cause a stir."

But she said the plan represents an ideal that will be modified, as long-range plans usually are, when individual roads and projects are evaluated.

"So will this plan be unchanged? No," she said. "There will be things that are shifted in it. But we're going to try to help them see as much of their vision as we can."

No major highway projects after 2040

MPOs were created by Congress and are required to publish a new 30-year plan every four or five years for projects to receive federal transportation funding. The [DCHC's 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan was published](#) together with a plan for Wake County and other eastern Triangle communities crafted by the [Capital Area Metropolitan](#)

Planning Organization or CAMPO.

The two plans have similar goals but with key differences. For example, where CAMPO wants to “increase the safety of travelers and residents,” DCHC aims for “zero deaths and serious injuries on our transportation system.”

And where CAMPO includes new “major roadway projects” through 2050, DCHC has no new ones starting after 2040.

Not all highway projects in Durham and Orange counties would be eliminated under the DCHC plan. Most notably, [the widening of Interstates 40 and 85 in Orange County from four to six lanes](#) will proceed as previously planned.

But several widening or expressway projects conceived years ago and included in previous versions of the long-range plan have been nixed.

“Every few years, when we had been updating our plans, we had been moving those projects along,” said Andy Henry, the DCHC planner who put together the plan. “This time, they didn’t make the cut.”

Previous decisions based on traffic models

That decision runs counter to the way transportation planning is typically done in North Carolina. NCDOT and MPOs usually look at computer traffic models that predict

future demand for highways, then decide how to increase capacity to try to meet that demand, Jones said.

Critics of that approach say building new roads or adding lanes only attracts more drivers that soon clog things up again. This "induced" demand means NCDOT can't build enough to relieve congestion in growing places such as the Triangle.

John Tallmadge, executive director of the [advocacy group Bike Durham](#), said transit and bicycle and pedestrian projects have been afterthoughts even as the impact of ever more highway spending has gone unquestioned.

"We have not been addressing that fundamental assumption that leads to more vehicle miles traveled which leads to more pollution and that leads to higher speeds which leads to more deaths and serious injuries," Tallmadge said. "And it leads to a system that works if you have a car and traps people in poverty if they don't have a car."

Instead of expanding highways, the DCHC plan now calls for "modernizing," a vague term that can mean something different on each road, Henry said. In some cases, it may mean building a median or new turn lanes or adding bike lanes or sidewalks. On a freeway, it may mean fortifying the shoulder for use by buses.

From U.S. freeway to what?

One stretch of road now pegged for modernization is U.S. 70 from Lynn Road east to the Wake County line.

Previous long-range plans have called for [converting that four-lane highway into a six-lane freeway](#), with an interchange at South Miami Boulevard and Sherron Road. NCDOT had planned the conversion as part of a broader plan to [make U.S. 70 a freeway from I-540 in Raleigh to I-85 in Durham](#).

Now NCDOT and the MPO will have to work out what modernizing the road would entail, if not a freeway. And NCDOT will need to determine how that Durham section fits with the freeways on either end, including [a one-mile section at Brier Creek in Raleigh slated to be built later this decade](#).

The previous plans for U.S. 70 affected people beyond Durham by creating a parallel expressway alternative to I-40. NCDOT will need to determine how to meet the region's transportation needs while adhering as much as possible to the DCHC's vision, said Jones, the regional engineer.

"The key is making sure that we're correctly identifying all the needs for the corridor," he said. "And then seeing how we can meet all of those."

The DCHC plan also eliminated the idea of widening the

Durham Freeway from four to eight lanes between the merge with the East End Connector and I-40 near RTP. That four-lane section of highway is a major commuter route and will likely get busier when the East End Connector opens this spring.

Addressing that congestion will take more creativity than simply adding lanes, said Mathis, the state Board of Transportation member.

"So maybe instead of widening four lanes, we widen and add an HOV lane," she said. "I mean, there's a myriad of solutions to this."

Forgoing large freeway projects should free up money for other types of transportation projects; widening that 4.5-mile stretch of the Durham Freeway was estimated to cost \$251 million.

But a combination of state laws and longstanding policies limit how and how much money can be spent on transit and bicycle and pedestrian projects. The DCHC plan assumes changes in those laws and policies to give urban areas more flexibility in spending transportation money in the future.

Even with all the caveats and work ahead, supporters of the DCHC plan say it expresses the public's desire for a transportation system that is safe, equitable and

environmentally sustainable.

“Even if they don’t get all the way there,” Tallmadge said, “it becomes a document that can be used in public discussion, both with residents and with NCDOT and legislators, about what it’s going to take — the changes in funding, the types of projects that we’re going to be able to do and not going to be able to do — in order to reach those goals.”

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