The Future of Transit in Mecklenburg County

The “Analysis of CATS Transit Operations and the South Corridor Light Rail Line” report was published April 30, 2007 by the Center for Transportation Policy Studies at UNC Charlotte. The research team consisted of Dr. Edd Hauser, P.E., PhD, Director of the Center, Sherry Elmes, Associate Director, and Nicholas Swartz, Research Associate and PhD Candidate in Public Policy. The Center researched a broad range of sources from national databases to gather information and data concerning the issue of bus transit operations and LRT passenger rail systems. From that information the team conducted an independent study of CATS bus operations and its process in the development of its own light rail (LRT).

The team analyzed a variety of factors in the development of the LRT including: population, commuters, commuting time and congestion, funding for transportation projects, bus operational data, light rail capital investment data, highway and transit expenditures and projections, private investment occurring in Charlotte’s South Corridor, impact on Charlotte transit if the current 1/2-cent sales tax were repealed, and possible courses of action if the sales tax revenue is not available.

To study the operations of Charlotte area transit, the team of researchers wanted to look at comparable cities and their transit practices and how the numbers stacked up against Charlotte’s transit systems. Charlotte was compared to ten similar cities all with a population of less than one million. The cities that were comparable included: Nashville, TN; Buffalo, NY; Memphis, TN; Jacksonville, FL; Dayton, OH; Syracuse, NY; Knoxville, TN; Little Rock, AR; Chattanooga, TN; and Rockford, IL. When comparing these cities, the factors that were observed consisted of the number of buses operating, annual passenger trips on transit systems, cost per revenue mile of transit systems, and cost per passenger trip. Charlotte ranked one of the highest in the number of buses operating and annual passenger trips on transit systems compared to the other ten cities. When comparing the cost per revenue mile of transit systems and cost per passenger trip, Charlotte ranked in the median to lower range of the other ten cities.

After these factors were analyzed, the team assessed from their observations some key findings. Charlotte holds a national ranking as the 22nd most heavily congested city, also being 2nd highest among cities with population ranging from 500,000 to 1 million. Charlotte’s extreme growth has been contributed to the rising job market. Commuters make up approximately 128,000 individuals that drive from other counties into Mecklenburg for work. That number is projected to almost double to 235,000 individuals that commute to work in Mecklenburg County from other counties.

In terms of funding for CATS public transportation, the 1/2-cent sales tax has been a heavy relied upon source for the bus service generating over $65 million in FY 2006, and a projection of $85 million by 2011. When examining costs, twenty cities nationwide were examined taking notice of the cost per passenger trip and operational expenses per passenger mile and per vehicle revenue mile (VRM). The report concluded that CATS compares favorably with cities of the same general size, as well as those over one million [in] population. In comparison to 11 cities with a population over one million, CATS has the lowest operational
expense per VRM, and has the fourth lowest expense per passenger mile. Construction costs are lower than the comparable Phoenix Light Rail at $65 million per mile compared to Charlotte’s $48 million per mile, and construction costs are also lower than four of the six New Start projects included in the analysis. Though the numbers show that the project is 109% above the original project cost estimate, it remains in a reasonable range compared with Charlotte Douglas International Airport’s latest third runway cost 180% above the original projection; furthermore, NCDOT highway projects in the region range from 150% to 500% above their original cost estimates.

When the report was published, it proposed situations that would occur if the 1/2 cent tax were repealed; such alternatives that would have had to compensate for the loss of funding. Elections were held on November 6, 2007, with the 1/2 cent tax up for repeal. At the end of the voting day, it was apparent that “Mecklenburg County voters overwhelmingly backed the transit sales tax Tuesday, dismissing an aggressive grass-roots effort to repeal it and endorsing CATS’ ambitious plans to expand light rail and buses.” After the votes were counted, the margins were astounding with a ratio of “70 percent voted against repeal, [and] with 30 percent in favor of stopping the tax.” CATS expansion plans extend to the year 2030, and the 1/2 cent tax that generated $70 million last year, will help “build a commuter-rail line to the Lake Norman area and to extend the existing light rail Northeast to University City. It also wants to build a street car through central Charlotte and either a bus-way or light rail down Independence Boulevard.”

With the vote against repeal of the 1/2 cent tax, CATS will continue to use those funds in order to address the problems observed in the report. Former CATS chief executive Ron Tober commented on the results, “To have a significant margin – it’s a good feeling. People in the community realize we need to have a good public transportation system.”

Works Cited
Charlotte Observer article, “Tax supporters, foes surprised by margin of victory.”
Written by Steve Harrison, 11/07/2007