The Charlotte Observer

YOUNG, EDUCATED AND DROWNING IN DEBT

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GREEN, GREAT AND GLOBAL: A CITISTATES REPORT
Second in a four-part series

Region’s options: Sprawl or expand transit

If growth is organized around trains and buses, cars will no longer be a necessity

By Alex Marshall and Neal Peirce

The Charlotte region has a big choice. Should the region keep sprawling outward, adding endless asphalt, subdivisions, malls and big boxes — and grusome Atlanta-style traffic congestion? Or should it invest in trains and bus lines connecting a constellation of walkable, friendly neighborhoods along with a variety of business districts? This scenario puts high value on preserving the region’s “green lungs” — farms, forests, pathways, environmental breathing space.

Growth efforts focus on Charlotte’s existing neighborhoods and town centers and the historic ring cities such as Rock Hill, Salisbury and Monroe. Commuter rail is used for longer connections; buses and light rail are used for shorter ones.

In this scenario, auto travel doesn’t end — it simply yields to total super-structure transit, allowing compact neighborhoods where residents don’t need to drive for every trip. In other words cities, driving is an option, not a necessity. The skinny tracks of the new Lynx line have succeeded in transforming Charlotte’s national underage and Virginia roads, on the whole, don’t compete. Those have aided North Carolina’s impressive economic progress.

But North Carolina is rapidly transforming from a “small town” state into a “big-city” state. The challenge, especially in times of fiscal stringency, energy shortages and a need for more compact growth, won’t be easy.

Are more roads the solution? Not always

By Alex Marshall

North Carolina builds to love roads. A anomaly among states, the NC Depart- ment of Transportation owns and maintains virtually every street and roadway mile, border to border, outside munici- pal limits. Counties aren’t in charge.

The result: uniform, gener- ally high road quality across the state. Neighboring S.C. and Virginia roads, on the whole, don’t compete. Those have aided North Carolina’s impressive eco- nomic progress.

UTS 19A: lmueller@charlotteobserver.com

Since it opened in November, the Lynx Blue Line’s ridership has far exceeded the Charlotte Area Transit System should consider doing what Denver did, and find money to build its system sooner, rather than later. Current plans wouldn’t finish the system until 2034.

DROWNING IN DEBT

YOUNG, EDUCATED AND DROWNING IN DEBT

College graduates are starting work with twice as much debt as in the mid-1990s.

Downtowns – Where Do We Go From Here?

MORE ON THE CITISTATES REPORT – IN THE OBSERVER AND ONLINE

BOOST QUALITY OF LIFE: Planning smart and nurturing existing towns and neighborhoods is financially smart. 21A.

WHAT’S NEXT?

• Downtowns – Where Do We Go From Here? Coming Nov. 30

• Growing “Green” is a Necessity. Coming Dec. 31

COMMENT ON THE REPORT

T ell us your thoughts about growth, transit, and the 2008 Citistates Report. Visit www.charlotteobserver.com/citistates or send e-mail to opinion@charlotteobserver.com.

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October 2030: Which future would you choose?

Scenario 1: Driving

You wake up at home on a cul-de-sac carved from an old farm. Maybe you’re in Stanly County, or Union or Rowan or York. At 6:30 a.m., you head out the driveway and brace for a two-hour commute to Charlotte along presumably-clogged Albemarle Road, or the new Highway 74. The state can’t build big bypasses or widen roads fast enough to keep up with traffic from ever more subdivisions. Unlike many cities, there’s still no mass transit alternative. Traffic crawls. You stifle out at empty big box stores only 10 years old, surrounded by huge, empty parking lots. Your mind wanders to the lots. Your mind wanders to the weekend and Lake Norman. You think, recalling the traffic you’d golf. Family time? You spend four hours a day driving. A growing chunk of your income goes to $10-a-gallon gas. Maybe, you reason, you should have taken that job out west in Denver — anywhere where life is more manageable — and pleasant.

Scenario 2: Riding the rail

You wake up at home in Pineville or Mooresville. You roll out of bed in your solar-powered bungalow in a Gaston County neighborhood. Or maybe you’re in Powdersville or Mooresville. You grab breakfast, then your husband drops you at the light rail line on Franklin Boulevard. Or the one on South Boulevard, or Mooresville’s Main Street. You head to your job in uptown Charlotte. From the window, you watch homes, parks and businesses pass. As you reach a bridge, you think of the extra cash your family has since selling the second car. You relish the freedom independence of your 10-year-old daugh- ter. Now she bikes and walks to her school, piano lessons and friends’ houses. Your house is crowded, but you know all the neighbors. Life is good. This weekend, maybe, the family can drive out to farm country, or visit a festival in Charlotte.

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But North Carolina is rapidly transforming from a “small town” state into a “big-city” state. The challenge, especially in times of fiscal stringency, energy shortages and a need for more compact growth, won’t be easy.
A car is a reason why transit is an urban necessity. It provides a transportation alternative—-a car for younger people, elderly and others who don’t drive to those who do. It increases safety, reduces congestion and lowers life cycle costs. It means fewer highways and freeways, gobbled the city and countryside. It consumes tremendous resources — a first step to deal with global warming.

Transit moves people more efficiently. A light rail line in a walkable neighborhood can easily move 20,000 people an hour, without having to park 20,000 cars. In contrast, one driver that moves to 20,000 people an hour, a highway

would need to be built where each car would need a 200-acre surface parking lot. That’s the Empire State Building.

No one needs to park. It’s good. People live less than you support rail. It’s infrastructure. It’s making things more pedestrian-friendly. A range of transportation choices, including a combination of transit modes has changed.

Ten years ago urban citizens around the country were using the same light rail proposals for for too much. That dynamic is fading.

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We took a careful look at conceptualized projects on the NCDOT’s “strategic corridor” map – basically a list of proposed highways.

There are supposed to be “small” projects, such as a new interchange at I-77 and I-40 in Statesville, priced at more than $50 million. The Monroe bypass is estimated to cost $70 million, approximately twice the cost of Charlotte’s new Lynn Blue Line.

This is not to say all highway building should be stopped. Growing urban regions need roads and highways. But the essential – and often depicted – growth of major road projects is anathema to regional planners.

A prime example is the Garden Parkway. It is to be built by the state authority and priced at more than $50 million in a road set to go through Garden City from just east of Charlotte Douglas International Airport west to I-85 at the edge of York County. The highway – one of the workhorses of our growing regional business base – would open a white acreage for development.

Farmers and fanners would gladly go to make, roadways and road subdivisions. It would be a highway industris and the Monroe bypass.

However, there are some solid business reasons for completing the road. It would allow handlers, if not truckers, of trucks daily to Charlotte. The road makes sense.

But now the city state builds it as a “municipal” road.

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nally, too small to service urban, but not enough for a new territorial center on I-485. The road makes sense.

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