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Light Rail's Gateway Station Could Bring Business, Opportunity to Chapel Hill

On Wednesday night the Chapel Hill Town Council held a joint meeting with the Orange County Board of Commissioners along with members of GoTriangle's light rail planning group. The main topic discussed at the meeting was the light rail's possible benefits in Chapel Hill and Orange County, specifically around the Gateway Station area.

The planned Gateway station will sit near the 15-501 and Interstate 40 interchange. The station will be just east of the county line, sitting on the Durham County side of Chapel Hill, but planners believe the surrounding area will be developed to benefit both counties.

The proposed light rail system will run 17 miles from UNC Hospitals to North Carolina Central University in Durham. There are currently 18 planned stations, with a nineteenth under review for Blackwell Street in Durham. Six stations will be in Chapel Hill.

"We are in the final design and engineering phase," said Bergan Watterson, Chapel Hill Transportation Planning Manager at the meeting Wednesday night.

Gateway Planning, a consultancy firm out of Dallas, Texas was brought in to help plan the 2.4-billion-dollar project and the surrounding areas. Their vision for the Gateway station includes a

core around the station with buildings 12 to 15 stories high that could house offices, stores, and other business enterprises. The area would continue out with lower and lower business buildings until it blends into the surrounding neighborhoods.

“Most people will travel 40 minutes for a good job,” said Patrick McDonough of GoTriangle. He also noted how with the current configuration of roads and buses, 25,000 people live within 45 minutes of the proposed Gateway Station site. After the light rail’s completion, McDonough estimates that just over 100,000 people will live within 45 minutes of this area, drastically improving the sites economic prospects.

“We want to make sure we have the chance to maximize the benefits,” said Ben Hitchings, Director of Planning and Development Services for the town of Chapel Hill. “A particular focus for us has been working to find ways to leverage the project to deliver important community benefits.”

Among business benefits aimed for by the project, affordable housing in the surrounding areas was another community benefit discussed in conjunction with the light rail project.

