

# *Blue Ribbon Committee on the Future of Wake County*

## **Meeting Summary**

**Thursday, October 2, 2008  
Marbles Kids Museum, 8:30 – 11 a.m.**

### **Goals/Objectives**

1. To provide update on progress made since last committee meeting on March 18, 2008.
2. To provide an updated financial outlook.
3. To provide overview and discussion about Wake County's transportation/transit needs.

### **Welcome and Overview**

**BRC Co-Chairman Fred Day** welcomed the committee and outlined the agenda for the day, which included an update from Commissioners' Chairman Joe Bryan, followed by two transportation panels: one providing an overview of the Special Transit Advisory Commission and the other providing perspectives on transit planning and funding from leaders in the business community and at the state and local levels.

### **Wake County Update**

Commissioners' Chairman Joe Bryan provided an overview of what has happened since the group's last meeting, on March 18, 2008. Some highlights include:

- An open space partnership with several agencies and other local governments on the Neuse River Trail, a 28-mile trail that will run along the Neuse River all the way through Wake County.
- Continued progress on the Little River Reservoir, as the City of Raleigh continues to work through the permitting process.
- Continued progress on several justice facilities projects, including the Davie Street parking deck under construction and the new courthouse in the design phase in downtown Raleigh, and expansion of the Hammond Road Detention Center, Phase 2.
- Wake Tech is finishing several projects related to the 2004 bond, and is moving ahead of 2007 bond projects, including recent acquisition of 27 acres in Morrisville for the Western Wake Campus.
- The \$1-billion school construction program is on track, though Commissioners and the Board of Education are examining the timing of some projects due to the slowdown in the economy and its effect on borrowing money.

### **Transportation/Transit Issues – STAC**

*(Note: audio of the transportation panels presenters' remarks is available at [wakegov.com/blueribbon](http://wakegov.com/blueribbon))*

**Smedes York, BRC committee member and Wake County Co-Chair of the Special Transit Advisory Commission (STAC)**, led off a panel addressing STAC's work and recommendations. He noted that communities that will benefit and continue to grow once the economy improves are those that have good planning and infrastructure in place, because they will be better positioned to take advantage of job and population growth. He said that a good transit system is key to maintaining the quality of our community, and that system needs to include buses, light rail and connectors between the RTP and the airport. He also said the plan must be regional in nature, encompassing Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill.

Some keys to success are to think about building and paying for the system in phases, rather than all at once, given that it takes years to build. He recommended starting with areas that would lead to success quickly, such as lines that feed into downtown Raleigh or that go from NC State University to Cary. All segments might not initially connect but would be connected eventually, he noted.

The recommended funding strategy is to gain authority and voter approval for a ½-cent sales tax, and also use existing rental car taxes, vehicle registration fees, tax increment financing near stations and state/federal funding. He said if the ½-cent sales tax is placed on the ballot in Wake, Durham and Orange counties, each county should have authority to use the tax if its voters approve it instead of mandating that the tax pass in all three counties at the same time before becoming effective.

“We need to think about transit as part of the total fabric of our community, that it’s part of the whole and working together with parks, water and sewer, police, fire and other services. Transit is a important part of the community as a whole,” he said.

**Patrick McDonough, AICP, Senior Transportation Planner for Triangle Transit**, reported that ridership is up sharply on Triangle Transit buses – by 50.2% over last year – and that the system was on track to carry 1.2 million people this year. He outlined STAC’s recommendations for bus services, circulators and rail in coming years, showing a map of STAC’s “Regional Transit Vision Plan.” The key recommendations are:

**Bus Service:**

- Vastly Expanded Bus Network through Core Counties (Wake, Durham, Orange)
- Commuter Express Extensions into Collar Counties
- New Park/Ride Lots
- Direct Service to RDU
- Improve Pedestrian/Bike Access to Bus Stop

**Circulators:**

- Serving Short Trips in High-Activity Centers (such as downtowns, universities, hospitals, RTP)
- High-frequency bus service at first
- Could be Streetcar, Bus Rapid Transit in future

**Rail (clean diesel trains and light rail):**

- Provide superior mobility in corridors with highest travel intensity
- Encourage private sector to develop denser, mixed-use communities around rail stops
- Compete economically with other regions
- Higher-density development enabled by transit reduces pressure to develop open space, fragment natural habitats

**Sig Hutchinson, BRC member and Chairman of Triangle Transit**, noted that Wake County is expected to double its population to 1.5 million in the next 20 years, and said the key to maintaining our quality of life is to find “21<sup>st</sup> century instead of 20<sup>th</sup> century solutions” to transportation issues. He said the timing has never been better to push for a transit system because of high gas prices and because people want choices in terms of how they move around.

He outlined the process for approval and funding of a transit system as:

- **Define the Plan** (each county will define its own plan)
- **Enabling Legislation** (a ½-cent sales tax would generate \$90 million a year; the goal is to work with the General Assembly to pass enabling legislation next spring)
- **Put it on the Ballot** (the Board of Commissioners ultimately will decide whether to place the issue before voters)
- **Educate the Voters** (so they know what plan looks like and what they will be getting for their money)
- **Pass the Vote** (once the funding is approved, the bus system would be expanded immediately, and rail would get underway over the next 6-8 years).

**Transportation/Transit Issues – State and Local Views**

**Rep. Deborah K. Ross** kicked off the second transportation panel by providing the state perspective on funding for transportation/transit. She said the issue has bipartisan support in the General Assembly. She pointed out that House Bill 2363, which did not pass this year, is a good starting point for state transit funding because it was the first attempt at exploring how the state might partner with local governments on transit needs, particularly in urban areas. She told the committee that transit would be her “number one priority” in the House next year.

To me, transportation isn't just something we talk about in terms of being good for business," she said. "I consider it something that helps all of the students in this area, and it also will help younger people, under 18, get around, which will make them more resourceful and understand their environment better. It also will help our senior citizens."

She said while some funding options such as property taxes and impact fees are available now, the best approach to use, based on other successful systems around the country is a combination of sales tax revenue along with tax increment financing based on transit-oriented development around stops.

She noted that House Bill 2363 also creates options for state funding for the North Carolina railroad system to increase commuter rail options, and she said that, in combination with "all the good work you're going to do to support this effort and then sell the plan to folks...we are looking at a bright future."

**Jim Captain, site head for the Raleigh Credit-Suisse Center of Excellence, and chairman of the Raleigh Transportation Alliance**, said that RTA is very focused on transit this year and strongly supports the STAC vision. He said the business community is looking for a master plan that shows how the entire region will benefit, though each county would have to implement its own portion of the plan. He also said the business community is interested in both the short- and long-term aspects of the plan, so those should be clearly spelled out. Most important, he said, is clear communication.

"We are looking for a vision and plan that we can sell to our employees, because if we can sell it to them, it can be sold to the public," he said, noting it is crucial that the plan be presented to the public in an easily understood format, which is a challenge. "Our goal is to make this an easy sell for the County Commissioners to put this on the ballot to have people tax themselves, and it is going to be a long road to get there."

He said it's also important to clarify the oversight aspects of the plan as it's being implemented, so that the money is allocated properly and those with authority for it are held accountable.

**Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker** told the group that transit would be a high priority for the community once the economy improves. He said the two things that need to happen are: a) authority for a ½-cent sales tax ("without that, there won't be transit in the Triangle," he said) and b) a good plan in place because "the public needs to know what they'll get for it." He said the county's mayors would be working with CAMPO on a long-range transportation plan, which will have a public transportation element, and that the plan needs to show what can realistically be accomplished with the sales tax within the first 8-10 years.

"When the legislature acts in June or July, hopefully we will have a plan agreed to by the mayors saying 'here's what the money will be used for,' and then commissioners can put it on the ballot in October or November of 2009," he said.

**Commissioners' Chairman Joe Bryan** stressed that the success of any transit plan will center on a bipartisan approach and strong support and leadership from the business community. He said that ultimately, the decision to place a funding proposal like a sales tax on the ballot rests with the Board of Commissioners, so the Board would be closely examining accountability and governance aspects of the plan. He said he is enthusiastic about the multi-modal approach, and believes the public will be interested and supportive, as well. "But a lot of work needs to be done," he said, noting that the business community needs to lead the effort to reach a "concrete plan" with specific information about how it will be implemented.

### **Conclusion and Next Meeting**

Committee Co-Chair Fred Day thanked members for remaining engaged in the community's most pressing needs, particularly the issue of transportation. He invited the group to become involved with Reality Check, a regional planning effort being spearheaded by Triangle Tomorrow using methodology from the Urban Land Institute. The planning exercise will involve 300 participants from a 15-county area, who will meet in February 2009 to brainstorm about where jobs, housing, open space and transportation routes should be located. He encouraged anyone interested in taking part in the effort to visit [www.realitycheck2009.org](http://www.realitycheck2009.org) to learn more.

***Next Meeting: Spring 2009, date and location to be determined.***