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Let's stay on track with light rail project

This is not the time to set our vision aside or to lose our nerve

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Elected officials charged with the responsibility of overseeing the expenditure of taxpayer dollars on large public works projects are dutifully concerned whenever actual costs run ahead of projections. And although anyone with any experience in construction of any kind has learned to expect cost escalations, citizens also understand the concerns of public officials who feel they have not received the kind of timely, relevant and realistic information needed to exercise proper oversight.

Yet the recent local history of Charlotte's attempt to build the first leg of its light rail system also demonstrates how important it is to remind ourselves -- and our elected representatives -- of that old saying about not throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Communication between the city's staff and the City Council can and should be improved. But our public discourse about light rail must also be more mature.

Long-term investment

We cannot afford to view light rail simply as a cost; we must see it for the long-term investment it represents in the future of this community. It is not solely about transportation; it is also about economic redevelopment. It cannot be viewed only as one of the city's largest financial burdens; it is, in fact, one of its greatest opportunities. This is not the time to set our vision aside or to lose our nerve. When I returned to Charlotte last summer to accept the opportunity to become UNC Charlotte's fourth chancellor, I was excited to see what the university had become during my eight years away in Wyoming. I was equally disappointed to see what had become of University City -- a patchwork of "big box" development, congested four- and six-lane thoroughfares, and shrinking green space.

Indeed, notwithstanding the new academic programs and research accomplishments that have fueled the university's growing reputation, rapid growth and poor planning in University City have left the campus sitting as an island in a pond of gas-guzzling crocodiles.

The challenges threaten to impair the very character of the campus itself, with discussions of our potential value to the region's economic, social and cultural development too often replaced by concerns about parking, congestion and crime in deteriorating neighborhoods along our borders.

It is for these reasons that the university has launched a series of important initiatives to review campus access and circulation patterns, the potential for mixed use development that might help us more closely integrate the campus with University Place across N.C. 29, and to assess neighborhood redevelopment opportunities. With excellent cooperation from Ron Tober and CATS, we have also launched a campus shuttle service to take advantage of the existing but often vacant parking spaces that exist on the periphery of the core campus.

Access to higher education

But nothing could be more important to our long-term future than light rail, and this is why I have supported the notion that any northeast corridor development for light rail must also directly serve the UNC Charlotte campus.

Rational people experiencing any Charlotte area highway at peak hours likely grasp that we need alternatives to more cars, more roads. Build more roads and they do come!

Light rail holds tremendous potential to deliver faculty, staff and students to our campus without their vehicles. Light rail will knit together the main campus and our new \$45.8 million Center City facility at the corner of Ninth and Brevard. And light rail will provide new access to higher education (and great college basketball games and cultural events) for anyone who may board at a South Boulevard station bound for either UNC Charlotte in the Center City or the main campus.

As important as light rail will be to addressing Charlotte's transportation challenges, its more significant implications may be for economic development and public finance. It doesn't take a Ph.D. in economics to realize that the amount and quality of tax-generating private sector development adjacent to the South Boulevard light rail corridor holds fantastic potential both for the renewal of economically distressed neighborhoods and replenishment of the city's coffers.

Economic boost for corridor

Take a simple drive along light rail's projected route on the economically dreary North Tryon Street from Center City to University Place. This is the "before" picture. South End is the "after" picture. The opportunities for economic redevelopment along the northeast corridor route will, in time, substantially surpass the cost of the city's investment in the light rail infrastructure.

I could be wrong, but I doubt that any city has ever built a light rail system with just one leg. Metaphorically, politically, and otherwise, we're at a tipping point. Let's keep light rail on track.

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