



“Is Light Rail Really Light Years Away: What Are We Thinking?”

By Philip L. Dubois

Shortly after I joined UNC Charlotte in 2005, I agreed with local officials that extending the Northeast Extension of our new Lynx light rail line onto the University campus made all the sense in the world. With an enrollment of more than 35,000 students expected by 2020 or shortly thereafter, light rail promised improved accessibility and visibility for the region’s only four-year public institution of higher education. With the delivery of state and federal matching funds to cover 75% of the costs for planning and construction (and a little luck), light rail would arrive on campus within just a few years.

Since then, of course, the timeline for construction of the light rail line has been extended with each subsequent reporting of lagging revenues from our local sales tax. Although sales tax revenues deliver a small proportion of the dollars available for local government, they are a vital part of light rail’s funding profile both for construction and operations. Today, light rail seems “light years” away.

Yet spend any time reading through the 22 chapters, 9 appendices, and hundreds of pages of the recently-released draft Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed Northeast Extension and you’ll find a comprehensive and well-balanced case for building this vital link that will connect two of the region’s largest centers of economic activity—Center City and University City. What you won’t find is an exploration of how to get it done in these difficult times. And even more startling, at least to me, is that the public discussion of light rail seems to have gone so far off the tracks.

We should be talking about the original economic, environmental, and land use analyses that made the case for light rail to the University so compelling in the first place. Indeed, with specific reference to the Northeast Extension, a 2007 analysis by the Noell Group commissioned by the City of Charlotte estimated that the long-term potential of office space and retail development in the northeast corridor would be significantly higher than what we have already seen begun to happen along the Southern corridor with our own eyes (i.e., 47% higher for office space and 58% higher for retail). None of this counts the near-term impact of construction itself as reported in the draft EIS, including 9,000 created jobs, \$285 million in earnings and payroll expansions, and \$955 million in direct and indirect economic consequences.

A second report (2009) by the Noell Group, focusing only on the development potential associated with the last five (of thirteen) stations serving the northeast corridor, estimated that the long-term value of property development as a result of light rail would be more than \$2 billion when inflation was factored in and as high as \$3 billion considering future property revaluations. The result is a

cumulative \$500 million additional generated in property taxes and \$740 million in sales taxes through 2035.

I'm all for additional study and debate; consider my origins as a life-long academic. But can we really be serious about letting this opportunity go by for another generation? The federal government has accepted the Northeast Extension into the "New Starts" program for preliminary engineering, which is a prelude to construction. The costs of construction will never be lower; we will never see interest rates this low again. What are we thinking?

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