

## Transit advocates worried about bus talks

By: Bruce Siceloff

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RALEIGH Transit advocates worry that new talk about more sophisticated bus service will undercut years of efforts to build a regional public transportation system that needs trains.

Research Triangle Park is the heart of the region's economy - and it is the sprawling, car-dependent heart of its transportation problems. A master plan for RTP relies on two proposed train stations that would support a dense mix of urban development over the next 50 years, reshaping the park and tripling its workforce.

"That will mean 150,000 people here," said Bob Geolas, president and CEO of the Research Triangle Foundation, which oversees the park. "More roads will simply not provide enough ways for us to move people and get that level of density we want."

The Wake County commissioners will bring three transit experts from Florida and Colorado to Raleigh next week to evaluate a local trains-and-buses plan that commissioners have refused to discuss since 2011.

It starts with beefed-up bus service and a 37-mile commuter rail service that would run at rush hour from Garner to Duke University in Durham, with stops in downtown Raleigh and at N.C. State University, Cary and RTP. Later, there's a light-rail line from Cary through downtown Raleigh to North Raleigh.

The Wake transit plan was criticized recently by an influential business group that lobbies for transportation improvements. The Regional Transportation Alliance, tied to the Greater Raleigh

Chamber of Commerce, said the buses would not provide much improvement and the trains would cost too much. The group called for a new study of bus rapid transit - a hybrid breed of rubber-tire transportation that is less expensive and more flexible than light rail, but faster and more comfortable than regular bus service.

'We need that'

Geolas noted that Orange and Durham county commissioners already have approved their parts of a regional transit plan, including the Garner-to-Durham rush-hour trains. The two counties are collecting a half-cent local sales tax to help pay for the new service. There would be nothing wrong with looking at bus rapid transit as Wake County considers its own plan, he said.

"But in making that choice, my concern is that we not take our commitment away from a dedicated, regional rail system," Geolas said. "We need that."

Geolas is scheduled to join several civic and business leaders making the economic case for transit at a gathering this week in downtown Raleigh. The "Transit Makes \$en\$e Summit," 4-7 p.m. Thursday at the Marbles Museum, is intended to drum up public interest in advance of the Wake commissioners' transit discussion on Nov. 12.

Also on the bill Thursday are Jesse Lipson of Citrix, which is building offices for 450 technology workers next to Raleigh's planned Amtrak depot and downtown transit hub, and Jim Anthony of Colliers International, a commercial real estate firm.

Anthony's transit advocacy comes with an added note of fiscal caution. He wants to postpone the commuter trains and light rail improvements to wait for more growth that will generate more riders.

"Twenty years out, we're more likely to see a more useful, more fiscally responsible rail system," Anthony said. "You've got to understand that the whole community has to underwrite it. You can't build it and bleed to death and have nobody on it, in my opinion."

Serving future needs

Karen Rindge, executive director of WakeUP Wake County, a civic group that lobbies for planned growth and public transportation, is one of the Thursday event's organizers.

Rindge opposes further delay on the Wake plan but, like Anthony, sees rail transit primarily as serving future needs. We'll need trains to help handle the relentless growth that shows no signs of slowing down, she said.

"By 2025 we're going to need 60,000 more housing units," Rindge said. "More multifamily units is where the market is, and fewer single-family homes.

"Transit is not just about how much it's going to cost to move people. It's about the jobs that are going to come, the development that's going to come - not to mention the public health benefits, the clean-air benefits, mobility for senior citizens and the disabled," Rindge said.

Rindge sees the suburban Triangle becoming less car-dependent as it grows more dense and more urban over the next few decades.

That's how Geolas sees Research Triangle Park, too. Building a rail transit plan will help the region keep its competitive edge, he said.

"As an innovation leader, this ought to be so easy for us to make a commitment to do," Geolas said. "I know it's costly. I know it's political. But golly, this ought to be something we can do."