

## Triangle rail plans chug on, but issues aren't resolved

By: Bruce Siceloff

March 23, 2010

After talking about regional rail transit for more than 20 years, leaders in Wake, Durham and Orange counties are still struggling to agree on plans that would suit each county and also fit together to serve the whole Triangle.

They're forging ahead in hope that the economy will rebound while they map out timetables for laying tracks and beefing up bus service. Meanwhile, they're looking back at one of the first ideas floated for regional rail service, back in the late 1980s.

Those leaders will face a test of regional cooperation this year when they set the date for a three-county referendum, so voters can consider paying for most of the new transit plan by adding a half penny to the 7.75-cent sales tax. The state law authorizing a tax vote says it must be held on a regular election day.

The first feasible date is in October 2011, when Raleigh and Cary hold local elections and Durham has a city primary. In November 2011, there are elections for other Wake and Orange towns, Durham and the Wake school board.

County commissioners, facing their own elections this fall, will get an update Wednesday on public sentiment for a transit sales tax. Joe Milazzo II, executive director of the nonprofit Regional Transportation Alliance, will release three-county poll results he says are "not celebratory, but they are promising" for transit supporters.

The key premise of the failed Triangle Transit rail plan, killed by federal regulators in 2006, was a regional rail link from Durham to Raleigh through Research Triangle Park. Now, the Durham-to-Raleigh link is the central source of disagreement.

Orange and Durham county leaders generally agree on an electric-powered light-rail line that would travel from Chapel Hill along N.C. 54, Interstate 40 and U.S. 15-501 into Durham.

Wake officials see their first light rail running south from Triangle Town Center and I-540 through downtown Raleigh and west to, at least, the State Fairgrounds.

Where it goes from there - and when - is up in the air. There's no agreement on when the trains would reach Cary, RTP, the airport and Durham - or what kind of trains they would be.

Durham Mayor Bill Bell wants to complete the Durham-Raleigh link with light rail, which costs more than \$50 million a mile. But transportation planners say the sprawling RTP and nearby suburbs would not have enough riders to justify frequent light-rail stops.

David King, general manager of Triangle Transit, has advanced the alternative of linking Durham and Raleigh with rush-hour commuter trains. That idea was floated in the late 1980s by Avery Upchurch, the popular Raleigh mayor who died in 1994.

Commuter trains use existing tracks to offer a faster trip with fewer stops than light rail. They could start rolling many years sooner than light rail, for \$12 million to \$15 million a mile.

Tony Gurley, chairman of the Wake County commissioners, says his priority is to work out a transit plan that makes sense for Wake residents - who would be contributing more than 70 percent of the region's sales tax revenue.

"I need to be confident that we're getting something that satisfies the Wake County voters first, and regional voters second," Gurley said.

But Wake's interest doesn't stop at the county line. Thousands of Wake residents commute to jobs in RTP, which is mostly in Durham County.

"A Wake County plan must connect to the Park," Gurley said. "Even if it includes Wake County money being spent for a station that's in Durham County but it's at RTP, that's still a Wake County plan."