

Chapel Hill development issues in a nutshell

by Ken Larsen April 28, 2015, last revised October 15, 2017

Issues and why solutions have been elusive

Topic	What the public wants	Why solutions have been elusive
Traffic	The public wants strong steps taken to minimize traffic congestion.	Developers don't care about traffic. They only care about building as much as they can. Then, they will move on to some other site. They're in the game of making money.
Stormwater	Public wants very strong steps taken to minimize flooding - to protect their homes.	Developers don't want to spend too much on flood control, because the more they spend, the lower their profits will be. Developers want the public to believe that flooding is caused by climate change not their development, but they are wrong. (details)
Drinking water	Public wants adequate amounts of clean water for drinking and bathing	Developers don't care about water quality and quantity. It's not their job to provide those. They only care about making money.
Affordable housing	Public want lots of affordable housing.	Developers prefer not to contribute to solving this issue, because doing so reduces their bottom line. [See Parking, below.]
Shopping	We all want more shopping. We don't want to drive to Durham for basic necessities. Many beloved small family owned stores have fled Chapel Hill.	It costs too much (regulations, time, and money) for big box stores to build in Chapel Hill. Recent rezoning has permitted and motivated EF property owners to double rents. Property owners like rezoning, because it permits them to charge more for property rental. A few of the current TC members prefer upscale posh stores to old buildings. Maria Palmer has characterized EF as blighted.
Public transportation	Public expects the Town to provide ample public transportation. Public transportation helps reduce car traffic.	Developers won't contribute unless it is required.
Parking	The renters/owners need lots of parking to accommodate their families and their guests.	Parking deducts from a developer's profit margin, so developers strive to minimize it. UNC doesn't provide ample parking for its staff and students. Because of this, students prefer to live off campus. Students need cars to get to their jobs. This drives up rental costs ... which reduces the amount of affordable housing. Parking formula approved by 2014 Town Council is too skimpy. [details] [example]
Green space	Public wants lots of green space.	Developers want to minimize it, because it cuts into their profits.
Walking paths and bike paths	The public wants lots of walking paths, pedestrian bridges, and safe bike paths. They promote health and help reduce car traffic.	Developers won't contribute unless it is required.
Public review	The public wants lots of opportunity to review and critique development plans.	Developers would prefer that public comment be minimized, because responding to it is very time consuming.
Impact fees	Development to pay for a share infrastructure costs	Developers are loath to do so, because it negatively impacts their bottom line. (evidence) Note: Chapel charges "development fees" not "impact fees".

Topic	What the public wants	Why solutions have been elusive
Taxes	Lower taxes	<p>Developers and the Chamber of Commerce repeatedly preach that new development should be allowed to “spread the tax base” ... which they assert would lower taxes. Well, if there were any validity to that claim, then dense urban areas like New York and San Francisco would be the cheapest places to live, and a small town (like Siler City, NC) would be the most expensive.</p> <p>UNC is another cause. They and their healthcare system are non-profits. As such, they don’t pay any taxes. This puts pressure on the rest of Chapel Hill to make up the difference. UNC and UNC Healthcare keep expanding. That applies even more pressure. [question: What percentage of Chapel Hill property is UNC/UNC Healthcare? Estimates vary from 20 to 40%.]</p> <p>Cary has SAS. It’s a for-profit company that contributes enormously to Cary’s tax base.</p>
Jobs	Attract other companies to move to Orange County	<p>Taxes and property cost too much. This motivates companies to locate in Durham and Wake Counties instead of Orange.</p> <p>Orange County also has a rural buffer. Wake County doesn’t. Absence of a rural buffer is more appealing to companies, because they have more options on where to build.</p>
Rural buffer	Protect the rural buffer. It’s needed to prevent sprawl.	<p>If a county wants to grow and protect a rural buffer at the same time, then the only way to grow is vertically. However, if you do that, you exacerbate the traffic problem. Also, many citizens don’t like skyscrapers.</p> <p>The downside of a rural buffer is that companies prefer to locate in a county that doesn’t have a rural buffer ... like Wake County.</p>

A version of Form Based Code (FBC) was adopted by the 2014 Town Council, but it differs significantly from that adopted by other towns. The version adopted by Chapel Hill is all pro-developers and anti-citizen. For example, the Chapel Hill FBC:

1. Skimps on parking (see Parking in the above table)
2. Doesn’t permit shared parking between adjacent properties
3. Gives the Town Manager (Roger Stancil) exclusive right to approve or reject development request. There is no more public review.
4. No affordable housing
5. Minimal walkability
6. No provisions for green building/energy efficiency
7. Inadequate green space
8. No stormwater control
9. Inadequate traffic handling
10. Inadequate transit