

Comments To Chapel Hill Town Council re: Woodmont Development

Date: May 12, 2008
To: Chapel Hill Town Council
From: John Ager
Re: Woodmont Development

Dear Council Members:

I speak to you tonight as an individual citizen. I have been a member of the planning board since last summer. As you all know, the last few months has seen a significant increase in the number and size of development applications presented to the Planning Board. Our chairman, George Cianciolo, appeared here recently to request some changes in the normal application review schedule, to provide more time for proper analysis and evaluation of projects.

I'm here tonight to draw attention the the Traffic Impact Analysis (TIA) report for Woodmont. The TIA is a hefty document. The summary report of 37 pages is supported by 18 appendices containing a vast amount of data. The report is about the size of two large phonebooks. It is technical in nature and hard for the layman to digest.

The fundamental message that the applicant wants to give is that a full analysis has been performed, the professionals are all in agreement that Woodmont will "work" from a traffic perspective, and that their planned road design and improvements, together with some contributions from NCDOT, will ensure that there is no net negative impact on levels of service on Rt 54 or the relevant local intersections.

The Woodmont application incorporates a number of optimistic assumptions about traffic and transit in the future.

1. The plan calls for various improvements and extensions to some local intersections, some within the project perimeter, and some nearby on Rt 54. There is also a planned new intersection to provide entry to Woodmont from Rt 54. The plan states that NCDOT will install signals at this new intersection. It is well understood that NCDOT identified a backlog of approx. \$30 billion in late 2004, which has since increased to around \$65 billion today. In addition, even if they could find the funding, I doubt that they would want to add more signals to this already very busy and congested road. Yet without a signal, I don't think that entrance would work safely or effectively.
2. A baseline assumption of the TIA is that Rt 54 will have compounded annual volume growth of 2%. This is in line with industry figures and NCDOT projections, but I believe it is too low. The opening and evolution of the Meadowmont complex has increased Rt 54 volumes significantly. Rt 54 also serves as a major corridor for commuter traffic exiting the town bound for RTP and Raleigh - this continues to grow as new residential

neighborhoods are added in Chapel Hill and Carrboro and points south and west. There are also several new and projected projects which will add traffic directly to this section of Rt 54 - University Village, Glen Lenox.

This section of Rt 54 is well recognized as one of the most congested roads in the area. NCDOT considers it the "worst" in terms of Level of Service (LOS) and has admitted it has no definable plan for improving LOS in the foreseeable future.

3. Planned development in SW Durham is not incorporated into the TIA data. There are projects in the pipeline that, over the next 8-10 years, will significantly increase the volume on Rt 54.
4. The TIA includes a 10% reduction in volumes in and out of Woodmont due to "Transit" - that is, 10% fewer journeys due to residents and office workers taking public transit or cycling. This would be a high estimate even if a Woodmont transit stop were planned. The current plan calls for the use of a transit stop half a mile away at Meadowmont - users would have to cross Rt 54 during rush hour. This seems unrealistic. On a road of this class, the signal timing is designed for efficient traffic flow – not the safety of pedestrians. I will also point out that the projected traffic volumes have been further reduced because the applicant expects that the technical/professional office workers are more likely to work extended or staggered hours, thus spreading the commuting volume over a wider time interval. Workers of this type are less likely to use transit.

For comparison purposes, the transit reduction factor used for developments in downtown Chapel Hill is 20%. However, many of the jobs downtown are University-related, and UNC has a strong policy of discouraging on-campus parking. A worker downtown could likely perform many errands and find goods and services within walking or cycling distance (restaurants, coffeeshops, grocery, bookstores and other retail). This is far less likely at Woodmont.

The net effect of all this is that Rt 54 will continue to become more congested whether Woodmont goes forward or not, and that Woodmont is likely to degrade the LOS on Rt 54 under the current plan. Given the severity of the existing traffic problems I would hope that any applicant seeking approval would put considerable effort and resources into ensuring that their project would not make things worse. This section of roadway forms a central part of one of the main entry points to the Town. It is vital that we pay close attention to ensure successful development enhancing this gateway.

Council is the designated body with voting power to approve or deny the planned development. You already know that the Planning Board voted heavily against Woodmont in its current form, citing significant concerns about traffic and transit. I urge you to carefully consider the implications of this project for traffic on Rt 54 and the local area.