



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL  
Office of the Chancellor

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The Honorable Kevin C. Foy  
Mayor, Town of Chapel Hill  
306 N. Columbia St.  
Chapel Hill, NC 27516

Dear Mayor Foy:

On March 1, 2002, I wrote to you seeking the support of the Chapel Hill Town Council to jointly re-examine the issues surrounding the major congestion along South Columbia Street. Since that time, a meeting has been held with the neighbors to discuss University and Health Care System interest in a study to improve South Columbia Street. We believe that the road improvements, as presently planned, do not meet all the needs of the community. The University and Health Care System support a study that will determine appropriate improvements to meet projected traffic needs and that will create a beautiful entryway to the Town and the University.

We recognize the sensitivity in the adjoining neighborhoods and the concern that road improvements may bring increased traffic. But we believe that the traffic is already here. The latest traffic counts as distributed to the Council on May 20th again showed this problem as one that will become increasingly worse as time goes on. We believe we would be remiss in not raising this issue now, and that the shared interests of the Town and the University would be served by further consideration of this issue.

We have recommended a joint study to assess if there is a way to meet the concerns of the neighbors and improve traffic flow. We strongly believe that any modification of the roadway should create a beautiful entryway to the Town of Chapel Hill and the campus. We also recognize the need for the N.C. Department of Transportation to use its resources wisely. At the same time, our belief is that the roadway project as currently envisioned will not meet community needs now or into the future. We have asked for a study to encourage reconsideration of the project, and we seek to work jointly with the Town Council and the N.C. Department of Transportation to rapidly address these issues. We will have only one opportunity to fix this situation for decades to come.

Chapel Hill is a community that places great value on the aesthetics of the built environment. South Columbia Street is a major entranceway into Chapel Hill and the University, and we believe it should be a beautiful approach to our community. Much as the low stonewalls and landscaping of campus are trademarks of Chapel Hill, we believe that the visual approach to Town from the south should be the same. We are sure that there are numerous opinions

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about how best to accomplish this, and that is one of the discussion items we hope we can study jointly with the Town, neighbors and N.C. Department of Transportation. The University's interest in taking another look at South Columbia Street is integral to our joint effort to plan wisely for future growth in all of our community's transportation systems. We look forward to the study with the Council, the neighbors and the NC Department of Transportation to address this very important roadway issue.

At the Town Council meeting on May 13th, a series of issues were raised, and the University was asked to respond. The attached document presents our responses to the issues we understand were raised at that meeting.

Sincerely,



James Moeser

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
and the UNC Health Care System

Responses to Issues Raised by the Chapel Hill Town Council  
on the Request to Study Improvements on South Columbia Street

May 24, 2002

**1. Is the University backing off on its commitment to have the campus be more pedestrian friendly?**

The University strongly supports pedestrian friendly efforts, and will continue to do so in the future. The request to study South Columbia Street does not change the efforts on the campus to improve pedestrian access and safety. In fact, the study could show how pedestrian safety and access along South Columbia Street could be improved over the plan as presently envisioned. The current plan for a sidewalk on only one side of the roadway could be re-evaluated if the study were to move forward.

An expanded transit system that is fare-free, a park-and-ride system, and on-campus housing are and will remain critical components of the University's transportation strategy. One concern that we have is that buses used in the park-and-ride system will be delayed in traffic congestion along South Columbia Street and to the south. This will discourage use, which does not meet the goal of the University or the Town.

Our commuter alternatives program debuted a few weeks ago and is just one example of the programs under way or in planning that will help make this strategy effective. To the best of our knowledge, Carolina is at the forefront of the Triangle in promoting alternatives to change commuting behaviors. A pedestrian friendly campus is integral to the overall plan.

**2. Why do we need the additional road capacity, including Manning Drive, South Columbia, and the proposed changes to Mason Farm?**

The intersection of Manning Drive and Fordham Blvd. is often at capacity during the day. In addition, the character and uses of Manning Drive will change over time, because the Town asked that the University house more students on campus. The University is responding to this request in a manner beyond its original commitment. The only place to construct additional residence halls and family housing is on South Campus, and this was an integral component of the University's Master Plan. Our goal is to make Manning Drive more pedestrian friendly, largely because of this growth in student housing. The traffic flow and capacity on Manning Drive will not be reduced but will only be slowed and "calmed" over the next few years. Manning Drive needs to be maintained with its current capacity, but this change, in combination with the current failure of the Manning Drive and Fordham Blvd. intersection, suggests that additional capacity is required if we are to maintain access to South Campus.

The data distributed at the Council Meeting for May 20<sup>th</sup> shows that South Columbia Street is over capacity today and will worsen over time. The section of South Columbia Street south of Mason Farm Road now carries 18,500 vehicles on a typical weekday,

whereas the capacity of a two-lane road (with left-turning lanes) is less than 14,000 vehicles per day at level of service E. Daily traffic is projected to exceed 25,000 vehicles within the next 10 years. Motorists will experience even longer delays than today. The adopted improvements will add only minimal capacity.

The proposed changes to Mason Farm Road will not be completely developed to its full length to serve the UNC Health Care System for many years into the future.

**3. What is the new data that generated this request?**

The University has not generated new data in making this request. We are asking for a study, and the study would generate the data needed to assess this situation. We have done the traffic counts as required by the Development Plan, but not specifically for this purpose. The most recent traffic counts and the traffic projections prepared for the Development Plan update confirmed that traffic on South Columbia Street has been steadily increasing over the years, and will continue to do so. The widening of US 15-501 will encourage more development in Chatham County and therefore more traffic can be expected to come from the south.

**4. What are the issues with the project that is presently under consideration by the DOT?**

The changes as presently envisioned do not provide sufficient capacity on South Columbia Street. When the adopted improvement was developed, the University did not anticipate the growth to the south that would be occurring, in the next 10 years and in the longer term.

The sidewalk on only one side is also a concern.

**5. Why is the University asking for this change now?**

We recognize the need for the NCDOT to make judicious use of its funding. While it is unfortunate to delay the approved upgrade of the two-lane section of South Columbia Street, we believe that proceeding with the current project will use limited state funds on a project that will not meet community needs sufficiently far into the future. We will have only one opportunity to fix this situation for decades to come and we feel it is *critical* to use this opportunity to improve our full range of transportation needs: access by car, bus, bike and foot.

Our observations of growth in the region, particularly in Chatham County and to the south, and the widening of 15-501 from Pittsboro to Chapel Hill, indicate that external conditions have changed since the present plan for South Columbia Street was developed. The request for a study is not a surprise. The concerns that the University and the UNC Health Care System have for South Columbia Street were publicly raised more than a year ago, and were widely reported in the press.

**6. Why doesn't the Development Plan include the proposal to improve South Columbia Street?**

South Columbia Street is a roadway that serves the community, the campus and the region. During the preparation of the Campus Master Plan, South Columbia Street was discussed, and concerns were raised. However, the Board of Trustees recognized the importance of this roadway to the campus, and to the community, and asked that the Town and the University address this roadway jointly at a later date.

The traffic data have shown for years that a two-lane road, even with the planned improvements, would not provide the necessary capacity. Data is not the issue, but policy issues are. The growth to the south, in the community, and on campus will continue to increase the congestion on this 2-lane roadway. We believe it is worthy of study before we commit to a plan that will not resolve important access problems.