

To: Mayor and Town Council of Chapel Hill  
RE: Revision of the development Ordinance

Our goal as environmentalists is a sustainable community. We are only beginning to understand how to bring about sustainable urban forms. We do know that land and resource conservation are fundamental to sustainability. Therefore, the most compact urban forms are the most sustainable, because they occupy less land, place a greater number of destinations within walking distance of residents, and have enough density to support public transit without an undue tax burden on residents.

Our Rural Buffer and Urban Services Limits create a boundary to growth. We believe it is critically important for the Development Ordinance to support denser growth within the town limits with more mixing of residential, commercial and institutional activities.

Critical stormwater issues make impervious surface limits necessary. We believe the best way to reconcile these limits with the need for increased density is to raise building height limits, increase permissible floor area ratios, and increase the allowable densities as identified in table 3.8-1 of the Dimensional Matrix. More activities could take place within structures having smaller footprints. The town would become denser without necessarily accelerating the increase of impervious surface.

We believe that the "Transit Oriented Development" Special Use District, outlined in paragraph 3.5.4, is of critical importance. We encourage the Council to enact this District without delay. Then, either the new Transit Oriented Development zoning or the existing Town Center zoning should be placed on the parts of Chapel Hill that are already intensely developed: the entire length of Airport Road, Highway 54 east of the bypass, and those parts of Franklin Street east of Estes Drive that are not in a floodplain. In addition, this zoning could be implemented at small nodes in existing residential areas where small traditional neighborhood centers, as described in the Comprehensive Plan, could be developed.

We propose that impervious surface limits be increased for Transit Oriented or Town Center development where there is a stormwater management infrastructure in place, or when acceptable long-term best management practices are put in place. Also, the "transfer" of impervious surface might be allowed so long as the impervious surface budget for the entire town was not exceeded.

For some conditional use projects a total aggregate impervious surface limit would be preferable to a per-lot maximum. In developments where a large number of very small lots are proposed, an aggregate limit would permit open space to be contiguous and thus more meaningful.

The most important work facing our community is to clarify how we want to grow, and then to pursue that goal. Sustainability may not be the stated objective of the Comprehensive plan, but our public conversation has increasingly focused on the need to reduce our ecological footprint. Long before the tragic events of September 11, there were forceful calls for our nation to curb its enormous appetite for resources, particularly energy. Chapel Hill and Carrboro have been in the forefront of support in the region for increased walkability and public transit. But we have made few land-use choices that support transit and walkability.

The pattern of car dependency has prevailed here and throughout the country because we have acted as though fuel and land are unlimited resources. A truly sustainable pattern of

development is very different. To expect that we can somehow continue the course of the last 75 years is unwise; the form of our towns is going to change.

Shutting the door to growth only pushes it elsewhere. People who want to live and work here are forced to sprawl into rural areas far from necessary services, far from employment centers, spread out in a fashion that cannot support public transit. Local constraints on growth make us ever more dependent on the automobile and reduce the stock of affordable housing.

We must deal with our dependence on increasingly expensive energy resources. Our national leaders have failed to enact a meaningful energy policy, or even modest renewable energy and fuel economy standards. But our greatest environmental and fiscal crisis is not unfolding at the federal level. Rather, it is the pattern of local and regional land use and development that makes us utterly dependent on cars.

The sooner we agree, as a community, on how to become a community with abundant mobility and land-use choices, the sooner we will be on a path to a sustainable future, with all the regional, national and global benefits such a path holds for future generations.

Signed:

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