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CITIZEN

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Locally Owned & OperatedC2 is the
preferred light
rail alignment

JOHN WILSON

Durham and Orange county citizens and elected officials have until Jan. 11 to express local preferences regarding future light rail transit (LRT) routes linking Durham and Chapel Hill. This right should be taken seriously, as some proposed alignments could have dire environmental consequences if built.

Of concern to a growing number of area citizens and the N.C. Dept. of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is the fact that two possible LRT alignments would cross long sections of state-designated Significant Natural Heritage Areas (SNHAs). Designated by DENR's N.C. Natural Heritage Program, SNHAs are critically important for conservation of the state's biodiversity because they contain rare natural communities, rare species and/or special animal habitats.

The "C1" alignment from UNC's Friday Center in Chapel Hill to southwest Durham would cut a 50-foot-wide corridor through almost three-quarters of a mile of mature forest and wetlands in the Little Creek Bottomlands and Slopes SNHA, which includes federal land managed as wildlife habitat and state game lands. According to the Natural Heritage Program, this area "contains one of the last remnants in the state of the large bottomland forests that once dominated the Triassic Basins and still supports a high diversity of the wildlife typical of this region." An alternative, "C2," would minimize environmental impact by following existing roads (N.C. 54 and George King Road) outside the SNHA.

A recent letter from DENR conservation office director Linda Pearsall stated, "We are particularly concerned about Alternative C1, since it crosses the SNHA along a currently undisturbed alignment and is therefore likely to have a more significant impact on wildlife than C2, which lies within the already disturbed transportation corridor along NC 54." Craig Shoe of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which stewards the Little Creek federal wildlife lands, raised similar concerns about the "adverse impacts to government property" of alignment C1. Shoe described the integral connection between these wetlands and Jordan Lake, the congressionally authorized purposes of which are "flood control, water supply, water quality, recreation, and fish and wildlife conservation."

Area citizens and local officials have made their environmental priorities clear in recent years. The comprehensive plans of Durham City and County, Orange County and Chapel Hill each contain specific language emphasizing protection of critical natural areas. Carrboro, Hillsborough and Chatham County also have high environmental standards. Local governments have made commendable zoning decisions and substantial financial investments to protect SNHAs.

There are also compelling, non-environmental reasons why the C2 alignment is preferable to C1. Triangle Transit's analysis estimates the cost of C2 will be at least \$30 million less than C1, and predicts higher ridership for C2 than C1. C2 has 200 dedicated parking spaces for its proposed Woodmont station on N.C. 54, while C1 has none for its Meadowmont Lane station. Finally, C1 would close most feeder streets into busy Meadowmont Village every five minutes, raising significant traffic and safety concerns.

UNC, UNC Healthcare, the Chapel Hill Planning Department and the Meadowmont Community Association all favor C2.

The Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro Metropolitan Planning Organization will likely select a "Locally Preferred Alternative" in February. Please let these decision-makers know that C2 is the clear local preference.

Send your comments as soon as possible to comments@dchcmo.org, with copies to your municipal- and county-elected officials.

John Wilson is a member of the Friends of the Little Creek Bottomlands and Slopes SNHA.

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Let's do right by those who paid the price

Somewhere in the middle of all that holiday frenzy, amid the travel and visits and meals and games, a war ended.

Last month, the last combat unit drove out of Iraq into Kuwait, leaving behind a sovereign nation with an uncertain future.

For the one million Americans who served in Iraq there is no doubt a range of emotions about the cause and result of the war and the long-term consequences for comrades and civilians alike. The wounded, the wounded families and those bearing the responsibility of rebuilding their country and their lives deserve much from us. Most of all, they deserve not to be forgotten.

When that last convoy rolled out of Iraq, it was barely a blip on the evening news in a nation that long ago compartmentalized the war, its warriors and the country we invaded. Embroiled in sectarian conflict testing its ability to maintain a government, Iraq is a far more complicated and unpredictable place today than when the troops rolled in. Now, no longer a war zone, Iraq is just another country in the Middle East being covered by the diminishing foreign desks of what passes for our national press, and news from there will fight for ink and electrons with the celebrities and primaries and all the other fluff that makes it through the filter of the Great Oz.

Except it's not just another country. It's a place where because of acts done in our name hundreds of thousands of people died, including nearly 4,500 of our sons and daughters lost in service to this country. When you hear someone speak of their sacrifice, try to remember who sacrificed them, because, friend, it was me and you.

We may never know how many civilians were killed or died from deprivations caused by the war. No matter what the final tally, we bear the weight of those losses too. After the shooting stops, there is no such thing as collateral damage. It's all just damage.

I was not in favor of the war, but thought it was inevitable and that it would be horrible and take a long time to end, and I'm sorry to be right. Like a lot of people, I wanted to believe that there was something that caused the conflict other

than the heat of the times being used to settle a score and test out a kind of geopolitical chaos theory. I wanted to believe there were weapons of mass destruction or a secret nuclear program or some hidden reason.

As it became increasingly clear that it was a war of choice, a sobering distinction no matter what your politics, it was hard to tell what to believe. The fallout has spread far and wide. There is not just a deeper, wider mistrust in government, but a paralyzing cynicism. For those of us in the journalism business, the days leading up to the war are dark indeed. Any analysis of media in this era must start with the simple truth that the press failed the country in the run-up to the war.

Throughout the conflict there were strong voices here and elsewhere calling for an end to it, and for the most part the opposition to the war showed that it had learned its own important lesson from Vietnam and did not dishonor those fighting in a war they despised. "Bring 'Em Home" was a universal message. Remember that; we have another one yet to wind up.

North Carolina has a special bond with its military families and we seem to be in a little closer contact with the effects of fighting than some places. As this war dragged on for much longer than most people expected, the consequences became more a part of everyday life. Standing in line at RDU you notice yet another otherwise healthy young man with a missing limb. Driving to the coast you pass another billboard from a clinic specializing in post-traumatic stress syndrome.

The war took nearly a decade, healing will take a lifetime, and some will never be made whole again, nor speak nor walk nor see their children smile.

I don't know how history will ultimately judge this war, but I hope we can learn from it and do right by the people sent in harm's way all these years.

My prayer is that those who have sacrificed, those facing a difficult future, and their families, truly find some peace at the end of this. And that the rest of us never forget them.



Chartering a dangerous path

CHRIS FITZSIMON

These are the days when pundits make their lists of the stories they expect to make headlines this year in North Carolina. Most are understandably talking about the 2012 election, the Democratic National Convention in Charlotte, the ongoing battle between the General Assembly and Gov. Beverly Perdue and, of course, the economy.

But if you are looking for the sleeper issue of 2012, it might be charter schools.

The Republican General Assembly last session lifted the state cap on the number of charter schools that had been set for years at 100.

That prompted the state Board of Education to institute a fast-track approval process for schools that can be ready to open next fall. Twenty-seven schools applied and 11 were selected by the new N.C. Charter School Advisory Commission to come back later this month for a second look.

Many more schools are expected to begin the longer application process with hopes of opening in the 2013-14 school year. But the story hardly ends there.

One of the schools that made the cut proposes to turn over day-to-day operations to a for-profit management company in Michigan that, disturbingly, already runs a few charter schools in the state. For-profit education with your money is here and seems to be expanding.

Former legislator Jeff Barnhart is one of the lobbyists for K-12 Inc., a national for-profit company with a questionable record that operates virtual charter schools. Barnhart is from Cabarrus County and has already approached his local school board about partnering with the company.

K-12 Inc. came under fire in a recent *New York Times* article citing a state audit in Colorado that revealed that taxpayers paid \$800,000 to the company for students that were never enrolled in the virtual school or were not residents of Colorado.

For-profit education with your money that doesn't even pay to educate North Carolina students may be on the way too.

Then there is the new advisory commission that includes members who have direct financial interest in companies that manage or provide services to charter schools. Charters are not only a different way to set up public edu-

cation, they can be a cash cow to private corporations.

And don't look to the law to prevent any problems. It does not require charters to follow any purchasing regulations or bidding processes, even though the charters are spending public money.

You would think legislators would have thought of that before opening the floodgates to virtual charters and for-profit companies running schools. But not this General Assembly.

One sure sign that a lot of money is at stake is the recent split in the charter advocacy world. Former Sen. Eddie Goodall recently left the N.C. Alliance for Public Charter Schools with plans to form the N.C. Public Charter Schools Association.

There are other questions about the forthcoming charter explosion beyond the shifting of millions in public money to private interests, most importantly who is going to be keeping tabs on all the new schools.

Besides the conflicted new advisory commission, there's only a three-person office in the Department of Public Instruction. That's not enough to keep up with the charters currently operating, much less the flurry of new ones that will be coming online.

Then there are questions about the nonprofit boards that run charters and who they are accountable to.

An investigation last year by Sarah Ovaska with N.C. Policy Watch found that the family foundation of an Oregon business executive and education-privatization advocate is a significant donor to a charter school in Rutherford County. Two members of the foundation sit on the school's board and fly in from Oregon for the meetings to decide how to spend our money.

None of this means that there aren't charter schools in North Carolina providing a good education and steering clear of any ethical or questionable practices. There are plenty.

But there are clearly problems too, and it's hard not to think they will only get worse in 2012 with the cap lifted, applications flooding in and lobbyists for corporate education interests circling the General Assembly and local school boards looking for a way to turn a vital public investment into their private gain.

Chris Fitzsimon is executive director of N.C. Policy Watch.

LETTERS

Pet training

Each year, the Association of Pet Dog Trainers, the largest professional association for dog trainers in the world, proclaims January National Train Your Dog Month. This campaign's goal is to promote the importance of training and socialization to all dog owners.

According to the Humane Society of the United States, between six and eight million dogs and cats are turned in to animal shelters each year, and about four million are euthanized for lack of good homes. Studies by the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy have found that most dogs (and cats) are turned in to shelters for common behavior and training issues that could easily be solved with the assistance of a professional. In fact, research has found that training and socializing dogs when they're young can reduce or even eliminate behavior problems in the future.

Since January is the time for New Year's resolutions, it is the perfect time for the dog owners of the Triangle, and those who may be considering getting a dog, to learn about the importance of training for their pet. The APDT website (apdt.com/petowners) has a wealth of helpful information for pet owners. APDT's other sites (trainyourdogmonth.com and mydoghasclass.com) have additional tips and resources for dog owners. Free webinars and social media chats will occur during the month of January as well (a full listing can be found at trainyourdogmonth.com).

APDT and its more than 6,000 member trainers are dedicated to helping keep dogs in homes, showing dog owners how to fully enjoy and have fun with their dogs and experience the joys of having a well-trained dog.

JENN MERRITT
Efland

A dream

On the winds of hope, I heard a dream. It is a dream of a place where everyone shall be treated with respect. It is a dream of a people who treat each other with consideration. It is a dream of a place where all people are known to have been created equal. For decades, I have dreamed of finding this place. All across this country I have traveled, to find this dream-of-place. All of those whom I have met have I asked about the way to this place. A few of them have heard of this dream, but most just looked at me as if I were crazy. How could I even imagine that such a place could exist? After all, it is just a dream.

Still, I seek this place, as if it could offer our salvation. I dream that it is a place where the hungry are fed, whatever their color may be. I dream that it is a place where the homeless are sheltered, however much money they may have. I dream that it is a place where the sick are healed, not just endlessly treated for continued profit. I dream that there we may work together, rather than against each other. I am dismissed as a dreamer, yet I cling to the dream that I heard. What do you dream of? Do you share your dream, even with those who would attack you for it?

If I ever find this dream-of-place, I promise to share the dreamy secret with all who will accept it. After a lifetime of chasing the dream, perhaps I have been looking in all of the wrong places. Maybe this dreamed-of-place isn't out there. Just possibly, this amazing place is within us all. I can only hope, because if the dream is that close, then we are all almost there, already. Just close your eyes, and dream. Do you hear?

CHARLES LITTLE
Chapel Hill

LETTERS POLICY

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