

# SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENTAL LAW CENTER

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February 15, 2019

**VIA EMAIL and FEDEX**

President Vincent E. Price  
Office of the President  
Duke University  
207 Allen Building  
Box 90001  
Durham, NC 27708-0001  
[president@duke.edu](mailto:president@duke.edu)

**Re: Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project**

Dear President Price,

As leaders of North Carolina's environmental community we are writing to urge you to sign a cooperative agreement with GoTriangle and allow the Durham-Orange Light Rail Transit Project to move forward. As a key stakeholder in the project, Duke University has the opportunity—and the responsibility—to help see it realized.

There is no more important issue facing our state, and our nation, than climate change. Last year's hurricanes, storms and flooding made clear that the impacts of our changing climate are being felt very close to home. And, moreover, that it is the poorest among us who stand to suffer the most. This fact was underscored by Governor Cooper in November when he signed Executive Order 80 and committed our state to meet the emissions reductions targets set out in the landmark Paris Agreement on climate change.

In the Triangle, where life is generally prosperous, we have a particular responsibility to do our part to curb emissions. This task is made all the more pressing as our region continues to experience exponential growth. To do so we must also pay close attention to the transportation

sector—the leading cause of greenhouse gas emissions nationwide. Decades of unplanned highways and sprawl have led to long commutes and an automobile-driven lifestyle that spews emissions and keeps our citizens disconnected.

There is nowhere better to start than with the Durham-Orange Light Rail project. By providing a new and desirable option, the rail line will help to concentrate growth in a bustling, vibrant corridor. Transit-accessible development, coupled with walkable, bikeable communities will help both to limit emissions and to keep our communities healthy, engaged, and connected.

By limiting sprawl we can also reduce other co-pollutants that make North Carolina’s air unhealthy to breathe and lead to increased levels of childhood asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (“COPD”), and other lung and heart conditions. Furthermore, limiting sprawl reduces the number of impervious surfaces, and thus improves water quality. In addition, light rail will help us to limit the extent to which we pave over beautiful green spaces that are necessary for agriculture, flood control, recreation, and our mental health.

Light-rail travel itself is more energy efficient than individual vehicle travel, meaning that regardless of the source of electricity, light rail corresponds to fewer dirty emissions per person. The light-rail project is expected to result in 27,000 daily boarding on an average weekday—meaning 27,000 cars that are not on the road every day.

As you know, Duke University is in the process of updating its Climate Action Plan (“CAP”), which provides the roadmap for Duke to reach its goal of carbon neutrality by 2024. The light-rail project is essential to meeting this goal. The draft updated CAP states that emissions from employee commuting have increased by 46%, Duke-owned vehicle emissions increased by 8%, and emissions from air travel have decreased by 15% compared to a 2007 baseline, and attributes this in part to a “lack of a culture of public-transportation in Durham area.”<sup>1</sup> The draft updated CAP wisely recommends that Duke “engage on regional transportation issues such as regional transit, light rail/bus rapid transit services, and regional bike routes,” as well as “encourage the utilization of local/regional transit through transit pass subsidy” and “advocating for improved local transit service,”<sup>2</sup> and even specifically recommends advocating “for local transit options (e.g. regional light rail, efficient bus routes, etc.) that connect employees to Duke University.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the environmental benefits, the light-rail project will provide community benefits to a wide range of North Carolinians. The project will serve a large number of households and a variety of neighborhoods, connecting low-income, elderly, and disabled individuals to necessary resources. The project also is set to provide tremendous benefit to Duke itself, connecting the University with other major schools in our region; connecting the hospital with its patients, doctors and other staff; and driving vibrant development in Durham to help the

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<sup>1</sup> 2018 Duke University Climate Action Plan Update at 21, <https://sustainability.duke.edu/sites/default/files/duke2018cap.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 23.

city, and our region, flourish. As a point of reference, the Duke Hospital station is expected to have the second highest number of boardings out of all of the stations on the light rail's route.

It is unfortunate that the North Carolina General Assembly placed artificial deadlines on commitments required to obtain state funding. And we understand that Duke has some legitimate concerns about how the project will interact with the hospital and other facilities. We understand also, however, that GoTriangle has committed to work with the University in good faith to resolve those concerns. That being the case, we urge you to sign the cooperative agreement at this time to ensure that the project can meet all necessary deadlines and move forward as planned.

The challenge of climate change is an epic one, and we must all do what we can to face that challenge. As Duke's draft updated CAP makes clear, it is well aware that the light-rail project is essential to meeting the University's admirable emissions-reduction goals, and has all but committed to supporting the project in word. It is time to support it in deed. Transportation and land use is an important piece of the climate-change mitigation puzzle and we hope that Duke can be a partner in moving our state in the right direction.

Thank you so much,

Sincerely,



Kym Hunter  
Senior Attorney  
*Southern Environmental Law Center*



Molly Diggins  
*Sierra Club*



Drew Ball  
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Brian Buzby  
*NC Conservation Network*

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