

# Connecting the People through Affordable Housing-Transportation Choices

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Advancing social and economic equity means creating a participatory environment where we can share our ideas and establish a level of cooperation that will allow for greater productivity both individually and collectively. For many Triangle residents, civic engagement and awareness of policy matters related to issues such as the correlation between transportation and affordable

housing is critical in promoting quality of life. City leaders, developers and citizens must engage in productive dialogue to address the needs of working families, particularly those of low to moderate income. Therefore, as future investment decisions regarding mass transit take shape, community members must be given the opportunity to provide their personal input in local and regional governmental decisions regarding access and mobility.

## **Working families and Housing Affordability**

Many working families are faced with the dilemma of paying a greater share of their income for housing or enduring long commutes resulting in high transportation costs that put a strain on household finances. Housing is becoming increasingly unaffordable throughout NC's urban core, particularly in the Triangle where these higher housing costs are forcing low-income and some middle class residents to move farther away to locate affordable housing options. Despite this reality, many residents throughout the Triangle are either currently working or seeking employment in urban job centers.

Preservation and creation of affordable housing in areas serviced by new transit stations provides an alternative to suburban sprawl, which in turn, reduces transportation costs, traffic congestion and air pollution. Typically, investment in new transit systems in urban areas dominated by rental units leads to higher rent prices, gentrification, and displacement of working class, lower-income residents. For this reason, it is important for city and county leaders to take action by addressing affordable housing needs by identifying strategies for land and building acquisition in locations where transit investments are being considered. Access to jobs, schools and services in high opportunity areas help balance the economic and social benefit of public investment in transit while providing working class families the opportunity to live in the areas in which they work.

## **Population Growth and Transportation, Housing Policies**

Increased population growth in the Triangle leading to suburban sprawl is making it increasingly difficult for some residents to also access destinations for shopping, visiting relatives or running routine errands. A smart growth approach to affordable housing and transportation can help both communities and their residents protect the environment while achieving the goal of producing more affordable, livable communities. Housing options available for working families often times are found in areas that are dispersed and low-density. These areas cannot support viable public transit, biking, or pedestrian options making auto ownership a necessity. Therefore, the true cost of housing is the combined cost of housing *plus* transportation. Longer commute times from these neighborhoods end up costing working families, on average, nearly 60 percent of household income when combining the costs of housing and transportation. For those families who choose to bear the higher cost of living in central cities in the Triangle, transportation cost may drop but the increased housing costs creates somewhat of a "treadmill effect" in the pursuit of financial security and upward mobility.

Connecting people to employment opportunities, education and networks enhance social capital and provide the necessary foundation for successful life outcomes. As mass transit systems in the Triangle region seek to expand, so must affordable housing opportunities near new transit stations and without collaborative outreach efforts from city leaders, informed citizens and developers we will miss a golden opportunity to work toward balancing the scale of social and economic equity.