

MEMORANDUM

TO: Town of Chapel Hill

FROM: Jennifer L. Hurley, Hurley Franks & Associates with The Keesmaat Group

DATE: 10/25/22

RE: Results from Stakeholder Interviews and Focus Groups for the Complete Communities Strategy

The Town of Chapel Hill is working to building consensus around a new approach to housing that clarifies where and how to build inclusive, sustainable, complete communities and an economically competitive town. The goals for the Complete Communities Strategy are to:

- Begin the process of building consensus about where and how to build,
- Determine where complete communities can be advanced, exploring trade-offs and opportunities, and
- Identify a viable pilot project.

The goals for the stakeholder consultation are to identify community leaders affected by housing, provide them with information about the trade-offs of different smart-growth options, and to foster genuine dialogue about how and where to grow. Stakeholder interviews were the first step in this consultation. The purpose of the interviews was to:

- Understand diverse perspectives in the community about where and how to build housing,
- Pinpoint any perspectives that may be missing from the process and identify someone who can add that perspective, and
- Begin discussions about what criteria we should use to evaluate potential pilot projects.

This memo outlines the synthesis of key themes heard during the stakeholder interviews and focus groups for the Complete Communities Strategy. Details about the interview process appear in the Appendix at the end of this memo. More information about the project can be found on the project website: <https://www.townofchapelhill.org/businesses/complete-community>

KEY THEMES

Key themes are summarized in three categories:

- Community Values and Existing Conditions: Areas of Agreement
- Community Values and Existing Conditions: Areas of Difference
- Emerging Directions and Potential Pilot Projects: Themes

Community Values and Existing Conditions: Areas of Agreement

The interviews revealed several areas where there is broad agreement among the interviewees about existing conditions in Chapel Hill and values that should guide future development:

- Chapel Hill is lacking variety of housing prices and housing types.
- The housing problem is most severe for people with lower incomes, but the lack of housing is also affecting recruitment of higher-paid workers, such as doctors .
- The price of land is high.
- Trees and greenspace are very important in Chapel Hill.
- People like and appreciate the trail system.
- The trail system is currently used more for recreation than for transportation, except for some school children getting to school.
- Many roads in Chapel Hill are dangerous for bike riders, even with bike lanes.
- There is very little by right development
- The current process is very long, with very many steps to the review process, multiple staff reviews and multiple advisory boards (6), and then applicant may hear different requirements when they reach Council. There is very little “by right” development.
- Town Council and staff have made efforts to improve the development review and approval process.

Community Values and Existing Conditions: Areas of Difference

Although there was fairly broad agreement about existing conditions in Chapel Hill and values that should guide future development, there was substantial disagreement about the causes of the affordability problem and the steps that Chapel Hill should take going forward.

- ***Causes of Affordability Gap:*** People have different explanations for what causes the affordability gap, which means they have different ideas for what could improve the situation.
- ***Success or Lack of Success of Current Development Review Process:*** Some people think that the current development review process results in better quality development than would occur without so much discretionary review and negotiation, but others think that the cumbersome and unpredictable review process pushes better developers away from working in Chapel Hill. In addition, sometimes developers give up on the negotiation and build what they can by right, which leaves some affordable housing or other desired improvements “on the table.”

- **Role of Land Use and Management Ordinance (LUMO):** Some people think that specific LUMO requirements (buffers, FAR, etc.) are substantial barriers that prevent more walkable development, while other people think there is enough flexibility in the code to allow these things to get worked out in a beneficial way, but that effort takes a long time, which raises the cost of development.

Emerging Directions and Potential Pilot Projects: Themes

The community input from interviews and focus groups revealed several themes related to emerging directions and proposed pilot projects:

Greenways & Bikeways

- Most people had a positive reaction to the idea of an expanded greenway system that would provide off-road travel for people walking, biking, or using wheelchairs.
- Some people thought that bikeway improvements would not address the core needs in their community (affordable housing, ADA accessibility, better bus service) and that money should be spent on those core needs first. However, even people who did not see expanded greenways as their top priority were not opposed to them in concept.
- Greenways should include ways to keep seniors active, benches along the route with shade, lighting, good connections to transit, safe ways to cross streets, connections between neighborhoods (and not just around them), ongoing maintenance to prevent the spread of invasive plants, and lighting.
- Greenways need to be wide enough to accommodate electric bikes and electric wheelchairs.
- Greenways provide human connectivity but also corridors for wildlife and pollinators.
- Chapel Hill's topography drives up engineering costs because intense runoff can wash away asphalt.
- Buses need to accommodate bicycles.
- Bikeways need to include an equity component.
- Greenways also need to connect to the on-road bike network. Many neighborhood streets that end in cul-de-sacs are quite wide and could accommodate a bike lane.
- One real barrier to building out the greenway system is operational: currently greenways are legally closed after dark, and there's no lighting. In addition, obstructions are not cleared in a timely manner.
- Many people expressed skepticism about the town's ability to secure easements to allow construction of important greenway segments. The town has been reluctant to use eminent domain for transportation projects, even for the sidewalk on Rosemary Street.

Funding and Capacity

- Many people expressed skepticism about the availability of funding for expanded greenways and bikeways.
- Could we crowd source donations for greenways in addition to the bond?

- People expressed concern about town staff capacity for seeking grants and implementing projects.

Programming related to greenways

- There was general support for programming related to the greenways, exposing people to e-bikes, and bringing programming into communities.

Improving Development Review Process

- There was general support for improving the development review process.
- Timeliness of inspections, not just approvals, is a barrier to development.

Sidewalks

- Some people objected to investing more money into the greenway system before improving the sidewalk network. Many locations do not have sidewalks.

Natural Resources

- Protection of greenspace needs to include some areas with a concentrated block of tree canopy that has the full range of mature trees and understory to support biodiversity in one place.

Accessibility

- Chapel Hill's transportation infrastructure, parking, and buildings have many barriers for people with disabilities, particularly people who use wheelchairs. On-street ADA parking spaces need a safe place for people to get out of their cars without being in a travel lane, ADA parking needs clear signage, and buildings need zero-step entries. Many buildings on Franklin Street are inaccessible to someone using a wheelchair.
- All infrastructure should be 100% inclusive: is it something that a first grader in a wheelchair could use? Places to park, loading zones, and paths of travel all need to be safe for people in wheelchairs. These features also help people age in place.
- New construction should provide pickup and drop-off locations out of the rain where there is room for the EZ Rider vehicles.

Affordable Housing

- Participants continued to express a need for more affordable housing and the perspective that the Complete Communities emerging directions do not address that need.

Quote from a participant:

"It's sad to see your town turn in to something that is not for you."

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP DETAILS

Developing the Interview List

To start the interview rounds, Council, staff, and community leaders identified a list of about 30 people to interview to include people with differing perspectives from the following categories:

- Pedestrians, Transit, Cycling and Greenways
- Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
- Equity Advocates
- Environmental Interests
- Development
- Business and Institutional Interests

During each interview, we also asked for suggestions for additional people to interview to fill in missing perspectives, with additional interviews conducted in Round 2.

Interviews Conducted in Round 1

Full Name	Interest Groups
Betsy Harris	Business and Institutional Interests
Lori Doherty	Business and Institutional Interests
Emily Ziegler	Business and Institutional Interests (UNC Health)
Anna Wu	Business and Institutional Interests (UNC)
Gordon Merklein	Business and Institutional Interests (UNC)
Kristen Smith	Business and Institutional Interests (UNC)
Nathan Knuffman	Business and Institutional Interests (UNC)
D.R. Bryan	Development
Jeff Furman	Development
LeAnn Brown	Development
Mariana Molina	Development
Susana Dancy	Development
Julie McClintock	Environmental Interests
Melissa McCullough	Environmental Interests
Riza Jenkins	Environmental Interests
Xilong Zhao	Environmental Interests
Betsy Booth	Equity Advocates
Delores Bailey	Equity Advocates
Mariela Hernandez	Equity Advocates
Chuck Berlin	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
Huina Chen	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
Jamezetta Bedford	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
Jennifer Player	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
John Quintero	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates

Jon Mitchell	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
Lisa Kaylie	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
Susan Lyons	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates

Yichen Sun	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates (Chapel Hill high school student)
Geoff Green	Pedestrians, Transit, Cycling and Greenways
Jeanette Bench	Pedestrians, Transit, Cycling and Greenways

Interview Questions for Round 1

The interviews were conducted as open-ended interviews to encourage participants to speak about what mattered most to them, but the following questions were used as discussion prompts:

- Chapel Hill's motto is "A Place for Everyone," but housing costs make that difficult. Who is getting left out now, and what do you see as the primary barriers to getting a wider variety of housing types and costs and more affordable housing?
- Tell me about what you love about neighborhoods in Chapel Hill and what changes/improvements you would like to see? (more variety of housing, ability to walk to work, bike/ walk trails, more racial diversity, better transit access, different kinds of parks, etc.)?
- One of the goals of this effort is to identify a pilot project that can demonstrate how Chapel Hill can become a more complete community. Neighborhoods that are complete communities have a variety of housing for people with different incomes, different family types, and in different life stages and where people can travel around affordably, using walking, biking, or transit for some of their trips. A good pilot project is something to be voted on in the next several months, that will show the council's commitment to getting something done now. Do you have any ideas about what would make a good pilot project to support the development of complete communities?
- When we start evaluating different possible pilot projects, what do you think are important criteria to figure out both where and how to build? For instance, one criterion that has been suggested is "visible" and another is "quick." What's important to you in a demonstration project?
- It's very important to us that we hear from very diverse perspectives on this issue – is there anyone else you think we should talk to?
- Is there anything I should have asked you that I didn't?

Interviews Conducted in Round 2

Full Name	Interest Groups
Phil Post	Development
Johnny Randall	Environmental Interests

Danita Mason-Hogans	Equity Advocates
Kathryn (Katie) Sorensen	Equity Advocates
Kim Tyler	Equity Advocates
Meagan Clawer	Equity Advocates
Rev. Robert Campbell	Equity Advocates
Meagan Stauffer	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
Stephen Whitlow	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates
Wes McMahon	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates

Questions for Round 2 Interviews and Both Focus Groups

- Chapel Hill's motto is "A Place for Everyone," but housing costs make that difficult. Who is getting left out now, and what do you see as the primary barriers to getting a wider variety of housing types and costs and more affordable housing?
- Here are the emerging directions that are developing from this planning process:
 - Plan for the Future Strategically: Vision-led vs project by project planning
 - Be Green: As you build 500 homes per year to meet your housing needs
 - Plan for Excellence in the Public Realm, everywhere: Focus on city building vs building buildings
 - Provide Transportation Options to Lower Household Costs: Design and Expand Greenways for Everyday Life
- As you think about these emerging directions, what do you see as the pros and cons? How do they meet or not meet the needs of the groups you represent?
- One of the goals of this effort is to identify a pilot project that can demonstrate how Chapel Hill can become a more complete community. Neighborhoods that are complete communities have a variety of housing for people with different incomes, different family types, and in different life stages and where people can travel around affordably, using walking, biking, or transit for some of their trips. A good pilot project is something to be voted on in the next several months, that will show the council's commitment to getting something done now. Here are some beginning ideas for potential pilot projects:
 - Bikeway segment linking higher-density nodes
 - New signage to identify existing Greenway connections
 - Neighborhood park in Central-West
 - Event programming to let people experience E-bikes
 - Demonstration Sidewalk project
 - Small infill project like "Peach" with affordability component
 - Funding "equity" locations for bike share stations

- Planning process re-design
 - Revise development regulations to be less car-centric
- What do you see as the pros and cons of each of these pilot projects?
- What other ideas do you have for potential pilot projects?
- Here are some criteria we have in mind to evaluate pilot projects:
 - Speed of implementation
 - Financial viability
 - Magnitude of impact
 - Visibility
 - Contribution towards Complete Communities
 - Scalability across the Town
 - Informed by the context as understood by the communities
- What criteria do you think are important in prioritizing pilot projects?
- You've seen the emerging directions. In order for implementation of the emerging directions to be successful, what do you think needs to change in Chapel Hill?

Participants in Development Focus Group 10/7/22

Full Name	Interest Groups
D.R. Bryan	Development
Josh Gurlitz	Development
Mariana Molina	Development
Mark Moshier	Development
Susana Dancy	Development
Todd Taylor	Business and Institutional Interests - OWASA
Vishnu Gangadharan	Business and Institutional Interests - OWASA
Phil Post	Development

Participants in Trails + Equity Focus Group 10/7/22

Full Name	Interest Groups
Melissa McCullough	Environmental Interests
Xilong Zhao	Environmental Interests
Kathryn (Katie) Sorensen	Equity Advocates
Mariela Hernandez	Equity Advocates
Jennifer Player	Housing and Quality of Life Advocates

Geoff Green	Pedestrians, Transit, Cycling and Greenways
Jeanette Bench	Pedestrians, Transit, Cycling and Greenways