

## A Carolina Planning Interview With Wib Gulley

*To complement the articles written by practicing planners that appear in this issue, the editors of Carolina Planning interviewed Wib Gulley, chair of the board of the Triangle Transit Authority, a regional public transportation agency for Durham, Wake, and Orange counties. Prior to assuming this position, he was mayor of Durham from 1985 to 1989. Gulley practices law in Durham and is active in a number of other community organizations. This interview took place in February 1991.*



Wib Gulley

**Q:** *What is the Triangle Transit Authority?*

**A:** It is a relatively new organization created by the General Assembly and Wake, Durham, and Orange counties in 1989. The board of directors started meeting in January 1990. Through the winter and spring of 1991, we have been engaged in a strategic planning process which we hope will yield a clear, defined statement of objectives and a work program for achieving those objectives over the next three to five years.

First, the authority is clearly going to try to be a major force for ridesharing in the three-county region. We have taken on responsibility for the Tri-A-Ride program, which had been part of the Triangle J Council of Governments. They made a very good beginning with it, but we want to take that program and lift it to new heights. Rather than one urban core growing out, the Triangle has several smaller cities growing together. There are urban densities, but these are separated by the Research Triangle Park (RTP) and other lightly populated areas. Ridesharing could hold particular promise as a way of alleviating traffic congestion in this region.

Second, there needs to be intercity bus transportation. We've got a wonderful system in Chapel Hill, a good system in Raleigh, and a system that has not been very good in Durham (but, hopefully, with the city taking it over, will get better). But these systems don't link up. In fact, with one

exception, the Blue Line running from Chapel Hill to Duke [in Durham], they don't link at all. It's hard to believe. Also, there's nobody running public transportation regularly to RTP and the airport.

We envision an intercity bus system that would link the three city bus systems with each other and with RTP and the airport, so that citizens would have an affordable, dependable, and quick way of getting around. Later there could be links to some of the outlying areas--Smithfield, Chatham County, Hillsborough, and Granville County.

Intercity transit is not just an interest of people in the communities; the airport authority has a great interest in this as well. They have studied the projected number of arrivals and departures they will have in ten years or so, the massive amount of parking they will need on-site, and the huge cost of providing that parking. That process has made them very conscious of the need for public transportation.

The third area of activity is going to involve strategic corridors and how to work with them. By this I mean high occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane consideration for roads between Raleigh and RTP and between Durham and Chapel Hill. The creation of HOV lanes would allow a more significant reduction in traffic congestion than could be provided by adding another regular lane to the roads. We're also looking at rail corridors in the region. We need to know where these corridors are located and what we can do to help the effort to preserve them as they are, and then perhaps to be able to come back later for some kind of new use.

The fourth area of action involves meeting with government officials, the private sector and business, environmental groups, and citizen groups in the region to discuss the kind of transportation system we want in the year 2010, for example. In twenty years, what do we expect the region to look like, and what transportation options should we have in place? If we are to have some kind of fixed guideway system, whether it is

light rail or an elevated track system, we will have to make that decision region-wide. It will take some number of years, obviously, to raise the funds at the state, local, and federal levels to put that system in place. To begin it we first must reach a consensus that this is something we want to do, and decide exactly what we want to do.

This region is facing large decisions in the next year or two with transportation and transportation choices. From the legislation that passed the North Carolina General Assembly in 1989 there was a large trust fund created for highway improvements. In that trust fund, there is approximately a billion dollars for highway improvements in the Raleigh and Durham areas. That may be an investment that we'll make as a region, but as a region we may want to take another look at that investment. We could talk about a combination of road improvements with some kind of a fixed guideway system that we think would give us a better community.

A fifth area that will be a part of the authority's work is to continue to enhance our understanding and appreciation for the close tie between transportation and land use. That is, you cannot say we're going to have certain roads and modes of transportation that will be in a particular configuration, but we're going to do land use planning as if it's a distinct and separate process. One is going to configure the other, and the two have to go together hand-in-hand. The authority sponsored a conference in November 1990 to begin to focus on that decision. Local governments, which really control land use, realize that their development decisions, zoning patterns, and zoning standards need to be transit-friendly if we are indeed to have some kind of transit system that works. The way that we develop and use the land has to lead our vision of how we want to transport ourselves.

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**Q:** *How can the public be encouraged to adapt their lifestyles to support the type of land use patterns that are required to make a public transportation system work?*

**A:** That's one of the most fundamental questions. I've got several preliminary observations. From listening to people over the last couple of years, I think there is already a great deal of interest and excitement in this area about the possibilities for some kind of light rail transit or fixed guideway system. This is tied to the interest that many people have for preserving the region's open spaces--the parks, the forests, the greenways. It may also stem from an appreciation for how well transit systems work in other parts of the country, and a great deal with avoiding horrible problems of traffic congestion and air and water quality degradation. So, I think there's already a significant level of interest in this area.

There is a growing appreciation that we have not given the transit and public transportation options the same kind of

support that we give to roads and cars. Part of what we're going to have to do is give people a choice. We have spent public money to make roads and automobiles so easy and available and accessible compared to public transit options. There really hasn't been a choice. One of the things I'd love to do is to give people a real choice and then watch what they do.

We do need greater residential and commercial densities in order to have an economically efficient transit system. And

in some cases, that means a lot more density than seems to be the ideal in the Triangle area, where folks seem to want suburban areas sprawling out with quarter-acre or half-acre lots. I feel

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that the willingness to consider greater density is already developing. It's coming from several sources in our region. There is an appreciation that not everyone can afford a half-acre lot and the house that's built on it. In fact, in this region, probably a majority of people cannot afford a home on this size lot.

Citizens understand that the loss of some open space occurs with suburban sprawl. This is pushing people to consider alternatives, to be open to building at greater densities. We have to begin to look around us. There are residential areas in Durham, Cary, and Raleigh where the proper densities exist to make transit or fixed guideway systems work well. There are people living in these areas that are happy with them, but other people probably do not know this. We need to begin to tell people "Look at Trinity Park in Durham, look at the higher density neighborhoods in Raleigh and Cary. These are pleasant living areas that include both single-family, detached homes and some townhouses." People will relax when they see that high-density neighborhoods can be attractive and appealing. They'll see nice neighborhoods. In fact, we have people moving back to downtown areas in Durham, Raleigh, and Chapel Hill because these areas are attractive and offer conveniences that aren't available elsewhere.

When you're talking to local governments that make the decisions, you're asking, "How much money do you want to spend for construction over the next twenty years? How much are you going to spend in road improvements to continue to make suburban sprawl work? How much do you want to spend on measures to deal with air pollution and water pollution? How much more money do you want to spend for increasingly scarce open space land and parks?" Local governments will find it difficult to approve these expenditures when faced with the fact that a lot of tax dollars can be saved by moving to a more thoughtful, attractive, dense living and working environment.

To make this type of development fashionable and attractive, it is necessary to simply make the costs clear. There are a lot of costs to suburban sprawl that people don't always



think of. I'm not just talking about a loss aesthetically or the loss of open space. I'm talking about the cost to our pocket-book and higher taxes. If you make the costs clear, that's going to make the alternatives attractive.

**Q:** *How will the work of the Triangle Transit Authority be funded?*

**A:** We worked for about three years with local government officials from all three counties (including the cities and towns) to fashion the concept of a regional transit authority: the details about how it would be governed, how it would operate, where it is to operate, and how it would be funded. There are several ways to fund the authority. The recommendation that went to the General Assembly contained two funding alternatives. The General Assembly passed that bill in 1989. Unfortunately, the House took out one of the ways to fund it, and the Senate took out the other. We were left with an authority and a chance to get rolling, but no money. So we have been back working with the General Assembly, both last spring and this spring, continually trying to develop some options for legislators to consider, hoping to find something that everyone will be comfortable with. That's been a problem.

In spring 1991, the General Assembly is going to consider a couple of ways to fund the authority. One option that is attractive to the authority and to the General Assembly as well is to have some kind of percentage tax, like a sales tax, on the use of rental cars. I think it is going to get a closer look. This is local funding; all that the General Assembly is going to do is enable the three counties to put some kind of tax in place. The logic is that this tax is transportation related. We put something of a disincentive on the use of rental cars to get around the region, then take the funds and strengthen the public transportation alternatives.

Another alternative is a parking tax. The bill that has been introduced would put some kind of yearly fee on all parking spaces. It's interesting and certainly would be broad-ranging. This option might pose some questions about who pays for what space and how you collect it. I'm not sure how much of that has been worked out. There are some members of the General Assembly who are expressing a concern about this type of fee, but it also has some significant support. In the end there may be a tax on all parking to discourage single-passenger car use. A more narrow refinement of the concept might be a tax on parking at the airport, to discourage parking there and encourage public transit. A tax just at the airport might be an initial step on which to build.

The authority has figured out that to go forward with our program, to start doing some of the things we've been asked to do, we need a \$2.5 to \$3 million annual budget initially. Any funding mechanism that the General Assembly is comfortable with and that seems reasonable, we're open to. We just want to be in the area of \$2.5 to \$3 million to start the job.

[As *Carolina Planning* went to press, a bill to authorize a

tax on rental cars had passed the N.C. House and was being considered by the Senate Finance Committee.]

**Q:** *How has your experience as mayor of Durham influenced your thinking about transportation issues on the regional and state levels?*

**A:** As mayor I began to appreciate several things. One is that Durham is growing, and I saw the need for real control and management of that growth, so that it works to the benefit of the community. That leads to a concern for the mobility options that are available, and to roads and how much is spent on them. I became very conscious of the economics of our transportation alternatives and their impact on the quality of life in our community.

But even more directly I became aware of the fact that we lacked a decent public transportation system in Durham. We had a bus system, but it was barely there. That was hurting our community in many ways, and perhaps most critically it hurt us in our economic development. It's a hindrance because people in Durham are not able to get from their homes to many of the jobs in the area. There is no public transportation to the Research Triangle Park, or to Mitsubishi in the north-eastern part of the county, for instance. That means many Durham people are not getting those jobs. If they have jobs but can't get around to spend their earnings--buy food and meet their family's needs--then that hurts us as well. As mayor I gained an insight into how our lack of decent public transportation options locally was hurting our local economic development opportunities.

In my last couple of years as mayor, I began to work with folks in the region, not just public officials, but also private businessmen. You begin to find that there are significant problems in this region with getting people to where the jobs are. Many businesses are hindered in their ability to expand, and other businesses are hesitant to move to the Triangle because of concerns with work force mobility.

The CEO of Bahlson, W.C. Burkhardt, is vice chair of the board of the Triangle Transit Authority. He talks quite eloquently about his concerns, and those of his fellow corporate executives, in being able to get the work force to where the jobs are, and how critical public transit is going to be for that purpose.

**Q:** *How do you get people in positions of power to work together and make decisions on issues such as regional transportation?*

**A:** The way to do it is to realize that it's a decision and a direction that everyone in the community has to work on together. It is necessary to get to know the different leaders in different parts of the community, to sit down and talk with them. It takes some time to develop a relationship. The authority must try to help them understand how it is to their benefit, in their self-interest, to strengthen our public trans-

portation alternatives and how we're hurting ourselves because we haven't done it.

For a number of groups--such as neighborhood groups and environmental groups--that understanding is already there. In some parts of the business community, that understanding is already there. But you want to continue to reach out to the elected officials, planners, and other parts of the business community to help them understand the costs that they're experiencing personally, how it directly affects them, and the benefits that could be realized.

I have to say that we've had real good experience with that. The Triangle Transit Authority is a special organization and one of its strongest features is a board that has representatives from the region's business community, development community, and private citizens. We've been able to work together and talk about the shared interests that we have.

**Q:** *What else would you like to say?*

**A:** The General Assembly obviously made a large commitment to highways with the \$9 to \$10 billion trust fund that was established, and I know that questions have been raised as to whether that amount of money is necessary to do the job well and whether we're really going to provide for the economic development of the state best by putting all that money in that particular pot.

My preference for talking about public transportation is not to raid anybody else's pot of money, but to point out how massively we have underfunded and neglected the public transportation needs of this state and the significant benefits that would flow from it. Unfortunately, the number of people who work in the Public Transportation Division of the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) is small, but they do a very effective job talking about the benefits of public transit. The North Carolina Railroad Corporation--Steve Stroud and those folks--do a great job of talking about the way we could help the state in so many ways by restoring a good passenger rail system.

I would like to see the General Assembly move to identify funding sources and make a significant commitment to a trust fund for public transportation.

One of the exciting things about the public transportation field is that as you get more involved in it, you begin to see the close link with land use and the transit options that become possible if we use the land wisely. We also see things that are attractive in and of themselves. Everything that I've been able to learn about neo-traditional planning, bringing back the village concept of communities, is very exciting in its own right, and stands on its own. It would get us back on our front porches, seeing each other in the evenings, and perhaps allow us to walk to the grocery or drugstore and get some of those chores done. The neo-traditional concept, however, also

obviously plays back into and reinforces the public transit options that we could then provide to our communities.

So, that's one of the real exciting things for me. The question is not, "Do we have a chance for that in our community?" The Triangle Transit Authority, with NCDOT's Public Transportation Division, engaged some consultants to come in and look at this region and our options for fixed guideway transit. And their report from a couple of months ago [September 1990] couldn't have been clearer. The Barton-Aschman study [*Research Triangle Regional Transit/Land Use Study*] said that this region absolutely has corridors that will work and work well on an economic basis as well as a technical basis for fixed guideway systems--not today, but fifteen to twenty years from now--if we make the commitment as a region to do that and to have our land use patterns support it. It is absolutely possible for all of the communities in the Triangle region to do that. The good news is that we can make it our future if we choose to do so.

**Q:** *How do you get past the political hurdle of investing the money now--which is what's necessary--when the benefits are going to be enjoyed maybe ten to twenty years from now?*

**A:** Part of the answer is that you walk in small steps and you do it step-by-step. I don't think the first step will be finding and then investing massive amounts of money. Instead, the first step is to bring together the communities in the region and to help folks start asking, "What are our options for the future, what are the pros and cons of those options, and which one do we want to choose?" My faith is that people are going to choose to move away from suburban sprawl to more interesting, exciting ways of living and of getting around.

Once that understanding and the sense of the costs and the benefits have been laid out, you can begin to build consensus. We have to continue building it. But once we have the local commitment there, it's simply a choice of identifying what local resources we can commit to it, and then trying to bring in some state resources.

Obviously, as has been true in every community in America, the federal government is going to have to step in and play a major role, and I continue to believe that there will be money there. I've had some assurance from Senator Terry Sanford and some of our representatives that they're quite willing to work hard to provide those funds. Congressmen David Price and Tim Valentine couldn't be better situated for us as a state. [Price is a member of the Transportation Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee; Valentine is a member of the Surface Transportation Subcommittee of the Public Works and Transportation Committee.] The tough part might be getting the communities together to decide as a region where we want to go. After that, I believe we will be able to find the funding. □