Bringing a Rail Station Back to Hillsborough: An Analysis of the Process

by

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I. Executive Summary

In recent years, increasingly congested roads and airports have led Americans to seek new ways to travel. This parallels with a growing concern over environmental issues and increasing evidence that auto-oriented, large lot, suburban sprawl is not a sustainable lifestyle. An increasing number of people have begun to look forward to the possibilities presented by one of the oldest transportation modes – passenger rail. The United States once had a peerless national network of high-quality, fast, and frequent trains serving the nation’s population. Passengers could travel most anywhere in the country on a train, whether the destination was a major city, a small town, or a wilderness resort. Passenger rail, however, declined as transportation priorities shifted after World War II in favor of automobiles and airlines to the point where currently passenger rail barely registers as a blip in national modal choice.

Hillsborough, NC actually mirrors this national rail story quite well. Like the rest of the country, rail was instrumental to the early development and economic success of the Town. Further, rail provided the necessary linkages to national locations to keep the Town from being isolated. However, with the growth in importance of autos and roads, passenger rail ridership declined precipitously in Hillsborough and eventually disappeared in 1964. However, prompted by the continued presence of passenger trains on the rail corridor serving the town, economic and energy crises, and current residents who use passenger rail services (embarking from neighboring towns’ stations), Hillsborough has begun a process to bring a rail station back to the Town.

Prompted by community members, town leaders formed a Rail Station Task Force to study the feasibility of a rail station and then to select the site in town best-suited for rail service; the Task Force eventually selected the Collins Tract, a town-owned parcel near the historic downtown. A second Task-Force (still ongoing as of this writing) has neared completion of a conceptual land-use plan for the site.

This paper seeks to analyze the process of bringing a rail station back to Hillsborough to determine whether it has been successful and, to the extent possible, what factors have contributed to that success. In general the process seems to have been a success, although it has been hampered by some problems, such as a lack of funding an occasional sluggishness in process. Factors that have contributed to this success include the competency of the Task Forces, good public support, existing institutional support, leadership from the community, and the political window opened up by the energy crisis and four dollar per gallon gasoline.
II. Passenger Rail in the United States

A hundred years ago, the United States had a sophisticated, far-reaching, efficient, and high-performing passenger rail network. Major cities were linked with fast express service and little towns and cities in between formed the pearls on the necklace of a gleaming national rail network (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 52). This network was once the only viable option for intercity travel in the U.S., but after World War II ridership declined rapidly. Railroads carried 98 percent of America's commercial passenger traffic in 1916; by 1960 that figure had dropped to a mere 27 percent. By 1965 more than half of the nation's rail systems no longer offered passenger service (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). As of 1997, passenger rail accounted for a miniscule modal share of U.S. transportation – just 0.1% according to U.S. Department of Transportation figures (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 195). Some of this decline can be explained by the success of, and public interest in creating national air and auto networks.

A. A Brief History of Rail in the United States

American rail networks were vital to the development of the country and drove the industrialization and economic expansion of the country throughout the 1800’s. Passenger rail travel peaked in the U.S. in 1920, but started to decline with the commercialization of the car during that decade. In 1933, railroads carried “only 42% of the passengers they had carried in 1921” (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 71). But early on, “the railroads were the driving force behind the first age of globalization, in the 19th century” (Brands, 2010). In the 1800’s, railroads connected agricultural markets with population centers, attracted workers, and drew capital investments from developed nations to the developing countries, like the U.S. (Brands, 2010). Railroads were important to the evolution of the United States as an economic driver, a means to ship goods, and a way to connect people in disparate regions.

1. The Rise of a National Network

America in the first quarter of the 20th century enjoyed a truly national rail network. Not only were the large cities linked, but smaller cities in between enjoyed frequent service and the opportunity to connect to any number of major metropolitan areas. Little cities such as Clovis, NM, Pampa, TX, Kiowa, KS, and Lamar CO all enjoyed regular connecting train service offering residents of these small towns easy access to Chicago, California, and New Orleans (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 57). A connection in a major city could provide a resident of these towns a trip to nearly any city in the country, or any of the major national parks. In addition, this service was typically fast and convenient, with much of the travel occurring in comfortable overnight sleeper cars. As evidence of the prevalence and importance of the railroads, John Stilgoe notes that, “when the Pullman Company operated most sleeping cars on United States railroads, it functioned as the largest hotel corporation in the country” (p. 47).
The rise of a truly national network of rail service was particularly a boon to small towns. New York and Chicago were always and will always be accessible to each other, despite the distance, because of their importance. What once was fast, frequent passenger rail service is today fast, frequent airline service. A 1930 study notes that the 16-hour trip from New York to Chicago could be further shortened to a 12-hour trip by electrification (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 172); currently, this same trip takes close to 20-hours on Amtrak. However, neither city suffers greatly from this loss of a fast passenger rail connection, but small towns in between, which don’t benefit from the air service of a major airport do. Stilgoe writes, “The demise of frequent, fast, long-distance train service did less to impoverish large cities than it did to isolate small towns and hamlets” (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 58). Residents of Salt Lake City, Denver, Santa Fe, Las Vegas and other large western cities do not feel the sting of the decline in frequent, national rail service. But countless small towns do; towns like Mack, Ruby, Utaline, Cisco, Elba, Brendel, Grassy, Price, Helper, Solitude and Sphinx once enjoyed a connection to the rest of the country through rail service but now are ‘flyover’ country (Stilgoe, 2007).

2. Technological Advance

Rail blossomed in the middle of the 19th century, coinciding with rapid advances in rail technology. In 1829, passenger trains had limited tracks and operated at a paltry 18 mph; by 1893 service was being provided in places at 112.5 mph (Pacific Southwest Railway Museum, 2008). The areas of the nation with fast service expanded steadily throughout the early part of the 20th century. In 1934, the Zephyr steam train carried passengers nonstop from Denver to Chicago, a thousand mile trip, at an average speed of 78 miles per hour and even hitting 112 miles per hour for stretches (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 70). This speedy service, replicated in other areas, provided vital connections for Americans. In many parts of the country, passenger rail service has gotten significantly slower between major cities since the 1930’s despite enormous technological advance in other areas (see, i.e. New York to Chicago, above).

Despite the technological success of railroads in the early part of the 20th century, investment in new technology waned, especially as transportation dollars flowed to auto and air modes. One reason was that, despite serving as a primary means of military transport in World War I, “rail technology was seen as offering little or no further military payoff, especially compared to aerospace and motor vehicles” (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 5). Even though technological advance has stagnated in the U.S. over the last half century, other countries have seen significant technological gains in their rail networks. France and Japan, in particular, have very successful high-speed rail networks, but most of Europe and more recently China, also have been building their own. High-speed rail service in these countries can operate at speeds up to 186 to 188 miles/hr and even up to 199 miles/hr in France (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2009, p. 7).
3. Luxury, Comfort, and Class

Not only was passenger rail service in the first quarter of the century fast and expansive, the well-heeled rider was provided any number of amenities on a journey by train. Rail travel offered a luxurious ride with sleeper cars and even the option to have a private car towed by a train. In addition, access to exclusive resorts and getaways was available by train only. Often business travelers would schedule a stop in a resort or national park on the way to or from a business meeting for a day or two as a mini-vacation. Because train trips across large distances could occupy significant amounts of time, railroads turned the experience into a high-class one; the California Limited, in 1892, had a flower boy who gave every lady a bouquet of roses, lilies, or violets and every male passenger an alligator wallet (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 109). Further, trains offered high-dining experiences with fine china and crystal glasses (Stilgoe, 2007). While not as decadent as earlier service, modern trains still offer a considerably more luxurious experience than air or car travel in many ways.

Passenger trains were so popular as a means to reach resorts and retreats from city life that they helped shape whole regions. The history of Florida as a tourist destination can be traced back to 1887 when the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad opened the Ponce De Leon Hotel in St. Augustine as a destination for its Florida Special (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 101). Railroad hotels were often splendid luxury hotels in and of themselves, but were also frequently located in or near areas of exceptional beauty like the Grand Canyon. For families, the ability to get around without a car thanks to rail service also meant enough money was saved to afford more than one vacation (Stilgoe, 2007). Additionally, for skiers and others traveling to destinations with inclement weather, trains offered dependable schedules in bad weather more dependable than auto or air travel (Stilgoe, 2007).

4. The Decline of Passenger Rail Travel

Passenger rail service declined rapidly after World War II. Figure 1 shows the astronomic growth of auto and air travel and the diminution of passenger rail travel since 1929 (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2009). Anthony Perl sums it up succinctly: “[The passenger train] has gone from being absolutely central to the economic and social life of this continent to being of marginal utility and relevance to most people” (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 1). This decline is part policy and part economic. A major component of the policy reasons for the decline in passenger rail networks is a shift among leaders to the view that military necessity demands the construction of national auto and air networks. Rail technology was viewed as antiquated and offering little to no military payoff, whereas the auto and plane were viewed as offering significant benefits. The speed of aviation and the flexibility of auto travel were viewed as important drivers of economic growth and social progress (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 5). Thus, huge sums of money were funneled into the building of highways and airports in the 50’s,
60’s and 70’s, while rail infrastructure remained largely private. Figure 2 shows this funding disparity (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2009).

Figure 1: U.S. Intercity Travel Trends by Modal Share, 1929-2004
Other policies also contributed to the decline of passenger rail service. In 1947, the U.S. became the only country to deliberately limit the operating speed of passenger trains by mandating that passenger train travel cannot exceed 79 miles per hour except on track equipped with automatic train control (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 72). Further, the regulatory policy of institutions such as the U.S. Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) facilitated the decline of passenger travel by allowing it to disengage from the private carriers. The Transportation Act of 1958 shifted rail governance for most intercity travel away from state boards and to the ICC, which was then tasked with competing goals of weighing both the public importance and convenience of service with the possibility that continued service might place an undue burden on interstate commerce. Under this arrangement, railroads made their exit from passenger rail service (Perl, New Departures, 2002, pp. 80-81). Between 1958 and 1971, while under a national regulatory regime, railroads abandoned 75% of their passenger train mileage as compared to base mileage in 1939 (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 82).

The reason that the railroads were so anxious to abandon passenger service, just a few decades after enjoying profitability, is partly economic. The huge public investment in air and auto infrastructure significantly lowered the price of these competing modes of travel. The speed of air travel was improved greatly with the jet engine, a military invention translated to civilian use. The railroads did not enjoy the same benefits of public investment in research in
technological improvements. As more and more of the rail network was abandoned by railroads and the road network was expanded, ease of travel, flexibility, mobility, and cost shifted in favor of Americans choosing the auto and plane as the preferred modes.

In 1971, Congress created Amtrak to try to salvage the national passenger rail network. In many ways, however, Amtrak was merely a political football, designed to satisfy a variety of competing interests rather than truly address the problems of national passenger rail policy. Amtrak satisfied rail industry demands to exit passenger service, satisfied public rail proponents by designating and preserving a national rail network, and satisfied the Nixon administration’s desire to ensure service was “for-profit” (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 85). Amtrak also offered Congress (one that Stilgoe views as controlled by road, airline and military interests) the opportunity to exert control over national rail service (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 84). Indeed, by keeping the funding for Amtrak as an ad hoc, annual event, it has allowed Congress to all get their wish: proponents can champion each year how their efforts have “saved” passenger rail, while foes can blame Amtrak as “exemplars of wasteful government spending” (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 108). In response to the political games played with the creation of Amtrak and its operation and mission, Perl wittily describes Amtrak as “an entity that was fundamentally compromised by this need to compromise” (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 85).

B. The Benefits of Rail Travel

Travel by rail has many advantages over other modes of travel. First, many of the elements of luxury and class still remain for train passengers. As airlines increasingly seek to squeeze more passengers into less space and further reduce extras (snacks, meals, magazines), travel by train offers comparative luxury. Seats are typically wide and comfortable; leg room is ample; power cords are provided for electronic devices; phone calls can be placed and taken; dining cars and bar cars serve hot meals, snacks, and beverages; security is much less of a hassle than for flights; and the Acela even offers wireless internet access now in the Northeast Corridor (Jones, 2010).

Rail also has the potential to have a very positive impact on the area around a station. Jon Hilkovitch in an article titled “High-speed rail seen as economic engine in Illinois,” notes the ability for a train station to attract development to the area immediately surrounding the station (2010). This type of Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) has become very popular recently with several benefits like cheaper municipal services and lower carbon footprints from the denser development and more transportation choices. Stilgoe points out that railroads tend to concentrate people while planes and autos spread people out - the typical sprawling pattern of American city development (2007). Clustering of activity around a rail station “is considered socially beneficial because it increases transit patronage, curbs urban sprawl,
generates higher tax revenues for fiscally stressed central cities, and expands the employment opportunities of people who are transit dependent (Bollinger & Ihlanfeldt, 1997).

Rail can also be a driver for economic development. On the West Side of Chicago, business leaders and community activists “are welcoming railroading in all its forms because of the great potential for economic expansion” (Hilkovitch, 2010). Many communities are looking forward to the resurgence in rail as a way to create jobs of various types, from operations to support to manufacturing the parts needed for an overhaul of the nation’s rail system. The Fort Wayne News-Sentinel notes “rail has the potential of creating thousands of jobs for people who will build the hardware” (Organ, 2010).

For cities that are within about 500 miles, rail can also be very good for connectivity. At these distances drives can be tedious but flights are often not long enough to justify the hour or two needed to check in and clear security. President Obama, in announcing his budget allocation for high-speed rail, remarked, “In France, high-speed rail has pulled regions from isolation, ignited growth [and], remade quiet towns into thriving tourist destinations” (Wagner, 2010). The ability to increase accessibility for isolated regions, which currently are merely “fly-over” areas, can be very positive, especially for smaller towns, which in turn can be good for social cohesion and economic development. ESPON (the European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion), in a recent report, noted that high-speed rail has increased the accessibility (defined as the ability of people in one region to reach people in another region) of Europe’s more isolated areas (Wagner, 2010).

Freight rail, too, can have positive benefits for the country. Congestion from trucking clogs our nation’s highways in many places. Also, shipping by truck is significantly worse for the environment on a per ton basis when compared to rail. A recently released report from the American Association of Railroads notes that freight rail generates $265 billion in economic activity per year while emitting 75% less pollutants per year than similar shipments carried by truck (Schor, A Day After Their TIGER Win, Freight Railroads Carve Out More Turf, 2010). The recently TIGER-funded Norfolk Southern Crescent Corridor would seek to improve freight service in a corridor running along I-81 where currently up to 40% of traffic consists of heavy trucks (Perl, New Departures, 2002, p. 242). Trains can also take trucks off the roads as “10 unit trains carry an equivalent amount of goods as 2,464 tractor-trailers” (North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2005, p. 14). The environmental benefits of rail hold true for passenger service as well; the Oak Ridge National Laboratory’s latest Transportation Energy Data Book shows that in 2005 Amtrak consumed 17% less energy per passenger mile than domestic airlines and 21.4% less energy than cars (American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, 2009, p. 3).
In the end, as other modes of travel become increasingly congested, rail offers economic development potential as well as social and environmental benefits. New York State Senator Malcolm A. Smith wrote in the Albany Times-Union that, “numerous studies depict the inability of airports and roads to accommodate our population growth, and the devastating environmental and international (oil, for example) consequences of trying” (Smith, 2010). John Stilgoe’s ultimate point in his book *Train Time* is that the resurgence in rail will lead to drastic changes in land use, as rail becomes more important. He writes, “at some point soon, the grittiness of commuting time, mortgage costs, and rising parallel expenses, including gasoline prices, will reverse suburban sprawl permanently and accelerate staggering spatial and cultural change” (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 10). He views passenger rail as more than just a transportation mode, but a force with the ability to affect economic development, spatial growth, and even culture.

C. The Coming Resurgence in Rail

The state of American passenger rail was not very good as of the turn of the 21st century. As noted above, it barely registered as a blip in mode selection, accounting in 1997 for 0.9% of U.S. common carrier passengers and 0.1% of U.S. transportation, with mode share declining under Amtrak’s leadership (Perl, New Departures, pp. 194-195). Ridership on Amtrak bounced around a bit from a low of 19 million in 1982 to a high of 22.2 million in 1990, but the trend is flat over time (in 1980, Amtrak carried 21.2 million passengers vs. 21.5 million in 1999) (Perl, New Departures, p. 189).

Further, Amtrak is plagued by a horrible public image, somewhat deserved, somewhat not. Amtrak does have some problems providing on-time, fast, affordable service, owing in large part to its organizational and infrastructure situation. Annual funding battles highlight the public subsidy Amtrak receives, whereas auto and air travel have dedicated separate funding mechanisms set up to sustain them. The ad hoc nature of Amtrak funding allows opponents to use it as a political punching bag. Other modes also benefit from the image of being funded, at least largely, by user fees. In reality, Amtrak is a relatively small expense for American taxpayers, receiving a total of $25.4 billion in federal operating subsidies and capital grants between 1971 and 1999 (Perl, New Departures, 2002, pp. 77-78). This is roughly the amount of money flowing into the Federal Highway Trust Fund in 1997 alone ($23.1 billion) (United States Department of Transportation, 1999). These are of course very different constructs of public transportation support, but it shows the scale difference in funding.

However, in spite of the paltry mode share and image issues plaguing Amtrak, there have been an increasing number of bright spots in recent years. From 2001 to 2008 Amtrak’s national ridership grew each year (National Railroad Passenger Corporation, 2008). Even
though ridership dipped in FY 2009 from 2008 (the most recent annual figures available), ridership during 2009 was still the second highest in Amtrak history and 5.1% higher than 2007 (Lowy, 2009). As John Stilgoe notes, “in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, one bit of encouraging data emerged: Amtrak handled surging ridership with aplomb” (Stilgoe, 2007, p. 18). These encouraging trends in ridership also intersect with a new Presidential administration that, early on at least, seems much more willing to provide funding to passenger rail transportation.

There is also an emotional connection to rail that is helping to fuel its resurgence. Americans may typically be described as “in love with the automobile,” but the train was America’s first love. In describing Detroit’s Grand Central Station, now crumbling after going unused and under-maintained over the last 20 years (“the industrial age’s most gracious relic, a Beaux Arts gem turned gothic from neglect but steeped in haunting beauty”), the New York Times quotes Mickey Blashfield, an official with CenTra, Inc., the station’s owner, as saying, “architecturally and historically, it has more of an emotional connection with people than virtually any building in the city” (Saulny, 2010). John Stilgoe evokes the emotional draw of trains when, predicting the resurgence of rail, he writes, “now a train is often only a whistle heard far off on a sleepless night. But romantic or foreboding or empowering, the whistle announces both return and change to those who listen” (p. xiv, 2007). However, the push for better rail is far more than just a nostalgic nod to the past or a wistful look to Europe, it is “a potential centerpiece of a revival of American infrastructure” (Smith, 2010).

1. The Once and Future King

As ridership grows, passenger rail service has begun to be a more prominent player in regional transportation. This is most evident in the Northeast Corridor from Washington to Boston. USA Today notes that “from September 2004 through June 2009, Amtrak's share of the market between New York and Washington, compared with the airlines, rose to 61% from 50%. Its share of the market between New York and Boston rose to 50% from 39%” (Jones, 2010). For now, the Northeast corridor is one of the few profitable Amtrak lines, but as ridership increases, Amtrak is increasing service nationwide. Anthony Perl writes,

“Amtrak’s undeniable success with its Metroliner in the Northeast Corridor; the strong demand for new Acela Express service; and a demonstrated ability to grow ridership and revenues in California, the Pacific Northwest, and other regional markets offer persuasive evidence that the relationship among distance, speed, urban population, and inter-city rail’s commercial success evidenced in Europe and Japan also holds true in the United States” (Perl, Buying into Amtrak: One Way to Fit American Railroads into Government’s Transportation Spending, 2002).
These successful portions of Amtrak hint at the larger potential for commercial success throughout the system, particularly for cities located roughly within 600 miles of each other.

It’s also not just passenger rail that is seeing a resurgence and potential return to national prominence. Freight rail companies are also seeing record profits, record tons shipped, and increased investment. Arguably the world’s most famous investor, Warren Buffett, made a $26 billion dollar bullish bet on the freight rail industry when his company, Berkshire Hathaway, acquired the nation’s largest freight rail company, Burlington Northern Santa Fe, in November (Patterson & Blackmon, 2009). The move was viewed as more than just a bet on a single company, but rather a bet that the whole industry will perform well and that “in an era of high fuel costs, railroads will perform better than the trucking industry” (Patterson & Blackmon, 2009).

Further, the three largest recipients of TIGER grants were freight rail corridor projects; also, several smaller TIGER projects were aimed at freight rail. The TIGER Grants (TIGER stands for Transportation Investments Generating Economic Recovery) were a highly competitive $1.5 billion grant program aimed at putting all transportation modes on equal footing rather than in bureaucratic silos that single out roads from other transportation funds (Schor, Freight Rail, Streetcars Are Tops in Stimulus’ TIGER Chase, 2010). The three largest TIGER grants were $105 million for Norfolk Southern’s Crescent Corridor freight rail project, $100 million for Chicago’s CREATE program aimed at easing freight congestion around Chicago, and $98 million for CSX’s National Gateway Freight Rail Corridor infrastructure project (Lafsky, 2010).

2. **Excitement for High-Speed Rail**

In the last year, the Obama administration announced $8 billion in stimulus funding for high-speed rail projects nationwide. They also released a map of high-speed rail corridors nationwide highlighting the areas where high-speed train service could be competitive with auto and air travel and economically viable (Lee, 2009); Figure 3 shows these corridors (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2009). The administration has outlined a clear vision in favor of high-speed rail, in addition to the relatively large allocation of $8 billion dollars this year and several more billion in the coming years. Transportation Secretary LaHood stated the administration’s support for high-speed rail in comments he recently made to airline industry members. Responding to a question asking why rail service got so much funding and airlines did not get the same, LaHood replied, “let me give you a little bit of political advice: Don’t be against high-speed rail. It’s coming to America. This is the president’s vision, this is the vice president’s vision, this is America’s vision.... We’re going to get into the high-speed rail business” (McCartney, 2010).
High-speed rail is not just the president’s vision, however. The recent bidding for the $8 billion in funding attracted a large amount of interest from cities and regions. The Federal Railroad Administration announced that over $55 billion in applications had been received for the initial $8 billion allocation (Alair, 2010). This first round of $8 billion is not the only funding that high-speed rail will receive, however. In a move that indicates it is serious and not simply making a one-time investment, the House and Senate approved an additional $2.5 billion in high-speed rail spending in the omnibus spending plan for Fiscal Year 2010 (Schor, House and Senate Agree on $2.5B for High-Speed Rail, And More, 2009).

Not only did cities and state rail agencies get excited about high-speed rail, but also regular citizens and the media. Leading up to the announcement of awards numerous articles and editorials covered the coming sea change in transportation and what high-speed rail could mean for the country. After the announcement of the funding awards, editorial pages in newspapers nationwide lit up with comments celebrating wins, lamenting losses, and analyzing the potential effects. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, 800 citizens showed up for a “Rally for Rail,” a huge number of people to rally for, essentially, transportation infrastructure and service (Organ, 2010).
III. The Hillsborough Story: A Piece of the National Puzzle

A. Passenger Rail Service in Hillsborough

North Carolina was an early adopter of rail technology and tracks were quickly laid across the state. In 1848, the state legislature approved a rail route linking the piedmont with the coast. A year later, the North Carolina Railroad (NCRR) was chartered which today is the state’s oldest corporation (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). In 1851, workers began constructing the rail line in Greensboro, and by 1856 the route was operational between Charlotte and Goldsboro, passing through Hillsborough in between. A prominent Hillsborough resident, Paul Carrington Cameron, served as the president of NCRR during the Civil War (Rail Station Task Force, 2009).

Hillsborough enjoyed passenger rail service for over 100 years, from just prior to the Civil War until March 18, 1964 when the last passenger train stopped at the town (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). As in most American communities, the railroad was vital to the early success and economic development of the town. Having a rail station provided Hillsborough with access to other cities nationally and prevented the town from becoming too isolated. With the rise of private automobiles, however, travel by passenger train rapidly declined. Ridership at the Hillsborough station declined precipitously after World War II, culminating with the closing of the station in 1964. A decade later the station was torn down (Rail Station Task Force, 2009).

However, passenger trains still operate along the tracks going through town. Hillsborough sits on the 178-mile corridor from Charlotte to Raleigh, currently served by two Amtrak passenger trains, the Piedmont and the Carolinian. Both trains pass by the town twice a day, once each in the morning and evening for a total of four trains a day. A third Charlotte-Raleigh round trip route is expected to start mid-day service in early 2010 (Making Tracks: Hillsborough Rail Station Small Area Plan, 2009, p. 1). The Piedmont and the Carolinian are two of Amtrak’s most important, profitable, and popular routes. A 2006 USA Today article listed the Piedmont as one of the nation’s fastest growing lines, second only to the Maine-Massachusetts Downeaster (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). In 2008, these two lines brought in more than $17 million in ticket revenue and jointly carried 361,368 passengers. The New York to Charlotte Carolinian carried 295,427 passengers, a 15.3% increase year over year; the Raleigh to Charlotte Piedmont carried 65,941 passengers, an unprecedented 30.4% increase from the previous year (American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, 2009).

In addition to the success of Amtrak’s Carolinian and Piedmont trains, North Carolina Railroad eventually plans to operate commuter rail service in the Greensboro to Goldsboro corridor, which includes Hillsborough. In a 2008 Feasibility Study, NCRR concluded that commuter rail, consisting of four rush hour commuter trains in the morning and afternoon peak
periods would be possible in the future (North Carolina Railroad Company, 2008). Although not proposing exact station locations, the NCRR commuter rail study envisioned at least one stop in Hillsborough. Currently, NCRR is a billion dollar asset for the State of North Carolina that would be “nearly impossible to assemble today” (North Carolina Railroad Company, 2008). NCRR owns a whopping 200-foot right-of-way for the full 317-mile rail corridor extending from the Port at Morehead City to Charlotte (on which Hillsborough sits) (North Carolina Railroad Company, 2008). This corridor positions North Carolina for success in the future as the biggest hurdle often faced with rail projects is the cost and difficulty of right-of-way acquisition.

Benefits of rail in Hillsborough could be further extended as service areas expand; a 2001 NCDOT study looked at the feasibility of resuming passenger rail service to western North Carolina and cities like Asheville (North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2001). A similar 2005 study looked at the possibility of bringing passenger rail service back to southeastern North Carolina and Wilmington (North Carolina Department of Transportation, 2005). While these services are only on the horizon as of now, as destinations increase so does the utility of rail service. Similarly, as other towns and cities nationwide seek to improve transportation options for their residents by reconnecting with the rail network, the list of possible destinations for Hillsborough residents grows ever longer.

Not only does Hillsborough stand to benefit from commuter rail service in the future and the potential of a widened network of passenger rail service in North Carolina, but the rail corridor the town is situated on is designated as a high-speed rail corridor in the U.S. Department of Transportation’s vision for a national high-speed rail service. The Southeast High-Speed Rail Corridor would initially link Charlotte with Richmond and then eventually provide fast service north to all the major cities of the northeast and south to important metropolitan areas like Atlanta and New Orleans. NCDOT was awarded $545 million for various improvements to the Charlotte to Raleigh corridor including realignment, at-grade crossing closures, and double tracking (Siceloff, 2010). However, the Hillsborough station was not among the improvements funded in this award (A. Paul Interview, 3/9/10).

Bringing a rail station back to Hillsborough also addresses key findings of several regional transportation plans. The Special Transit Advisory Commission, a broad-based citizen group from across the Triangle, in 2008 developed a plan for regional transit service in the Triangle, anchored by rail service (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). This report also emphasized the importance of walkable, compact development around rail stations, hallmarks of transit-oriented development (TOD). The Orange County 2030 Comprehensive Plan also highlights the desire of community leaders to bring rail service and TOD development to Orange County. Among the stated transportation goals in this plan are “Revive rail transportation in Orange
County and the Triangle” and “Direct development to higher density mixed-use districts along transit corridors” (Rail Station Task Force, 2009).

A train station in Hillsborough would thus “tap both town and county into an economic artery that feeds some of the largest metropolitan regions in the southeast and Atlantic seaboard” (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). In addition to providing a fast, reliable, and comfortable alternative to long-distance car travel, a rail station also offers residents a new way to commute to work in places like Research Triangle Park, Durham, Raleigh, Greensboro, Burlington, Chapel Hill, and Carrboro once NCRR launches its planned commuter rail service. A rail station will provide great benefits to residents by expanding transportation options, providing an alternative to automobile travel, and serving as a node of development and activity.

B. The Idea for a Passenger Station in Hillsborough

Despite the discontinuance of service in 1964, residents of Hillsborough have remained interested in passenger rail service for the town. Residents attempted to revive service to Hillsborough in the 1970’s in an effort that was ultimately unsuccessful. However, this effort is indicative of the continued interest in passenger rail service among town residents. Community members have remained regular riders on the Amtrak service in the rail corridor but currently must drive to either the Burlington or Durham stations.

Recently, the idea for a new rail station in Hillsborough really began as a conversation over coffee between town residents. In 2003 and 2004, Thomas J. Campanella and Art Mines, two Hillsborough residents, had several discussions about the benefits a rail station could bring to the town and county. These early discussions led Campanella, a professor of urban design and planning at UNC Chapel Hill, to explore the possibilities for a Hillsborough station with his graduate students. In the fall of 2004 he had students in his Theory and Principles of Urban Design course develop plans for a future station and related development on the old depot site in West Hillsborough.

In 2007, American Asset Corporation, a nationwide real estate and development corporation, applied for a Special use Permit for a mixed-use development on the Collins property and the Daniel Boone shopping center that included commercial uses as well as single-family and multi-family residential uses (Town of Hillsborough, Making Tracks, 2009). The Collins property is a large property bounded by Interstate 85 to the south, the railroad corridor to the east and north, and the Daniel Boone shopping center and other retail uses to the west. The parcel is also situated near two main arterial roads – Churton Street to the west and U.S. 70-A to the north. The American Asset development proposal was fairly intensive and very
controversial in town. In the end, American Asset withdrew their application for a Special Use Permit before the process finished, leaving the Collins property undeveloped.

Thomas Campanella was serving on the Planning Board at the time of the American Asset application, and over the course of the application process, he noticed that the Collins property was a terrific site for a rail station in town. The site had several inherent advantages – its lack of development, location along major arterial roads, and proximity to downtown (only a ten to fifteen minute walk from the northern edge of the property). In both 2007 and 2008, Campanella had his graduate students in one of his courses, Principles of Site Planning and Urban Design, create conceptual plans for a mixed-use development on the Collins property. The 2007 student projects were presented to a group of Hillsborough officials and citizens, and were featured in the local press.

In 2008, the Town of Hillsborough decided to purchase the 20-acre Collins parcel (the northwest corner of the larger Collins property) when it came on the market and “bank” it for future use, possibly as a site for a train station. The student work from Campanella’s classes was instrumental in encouraging the town to make this purchase by highlighting the potential benefits to the town of owning the property. Additionally, the American Asset proposal had noted that the 20-acre Collins parcel (hereafter referred to as the Collins Tract) was an ideal location for municipal uses. Although no rail station had been planned for Hillsborough as of this time, the work of Campanella’s students showed in 2007 that the Collins Tract was a potentially good location for a station.

The local Hillsborough effort did not evolve in a vacuum, however. NCDOT Rail, NCRR, Triangle Transit, and Amtrak had all been independently studying the possibility of a rail station in Hillsborough since at least 2007. For the Charlotte-Raleigh corridor, NCDOT Rail desires having stops roughly every 18 miles with at least one stop in each county (A. Paul interview, 3/9/10). Currently, Davidson and Orange counties are the only two in the corridor without stops; however, Lexington and Hillsborough were identified as possibly good places for stops. Hillsborough lies about 21 miles from the Burlington station (closest to the west) and about 13 miles from the Durham station (closest to the east) (A. Paul interview, 3/9/10). Further, Hillsborough offers the best access to the Chapel Hill and Carrboro markets and the large number of students and other residents in those two towns (A. Paul interview, 3/9/10). NCRR staff had also identified that there was no need for a Chapel Hill station, with the Hillsborough station serving as the access point (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 12/5/08, p. 2). Triangle Transit also recently studied the possibility of regional light-rail in the Triangle region which could potentially run along the existing rail right-of-way; this possibility might become a reality if a half-cent sales tax is passed in Orange, Durham, and Wake Counties in the coming years.
Amtrak also had identified Hillsborough as a potential site for passenger rail service. In a feasibility study conducted in early 2007, Amtrak projected potentially 2,600 annual passengers, revenues of $75,000, and a net gain of $56,000 by adding a stop in Hillsborough (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). This assumed minimal operating costs of only stopping at the station and maintaining a Quik-Trak ticket kiosk. It was believed that some of the expected riders would be poached from the surrounding Burlington and Durham station although it was not clear exactly how many of the riders would be attracted away from those stations. Owing to the age of the study, Amtrak no longer stands behind the exact numbers cited; however, the study shows that there is potential for a Hillsborough station. The support for Hillsborough and the desire of NCRR, Amtrak, and NCDOT Rail to provide passenger rail service to the town is critical to the success of the project.

These separate efforts by local citizens, NCRR, NCDOT Rail, and Amtrak all converged in the summer of 2008 when gasoline hit four dollars a gallon. During that summer, commuters nationwide suddenly faced paying twice as much per gallon as they had expected. Automobile use nationwide dropped, and people focused with renewed enthusiasm on alternative and more sustainable forms of transportation. In July 2008, Amtrak ridership peaked at 2.75 million passengers – “the most passengers carried in any single month in Amtrak’s 37-year history.” The *Piedmont* itself reported a 43 percent increase in ridership that month with a 48 percent jump in revenues (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). NCRR in their 2008 commuter rail study noted that four dollar gasoline had helped precipitate “a remarkable shift in public perception of passenger train travel” (North Carolina Railroad, 2008).

Hillsborough residents felt the sting of four dollar gasoline along with the rest of the country. Art Mines, who frequently commutes to Greensboro on Amtrak, drafted a petition seeking public support for a rail station in Hillsborough which he posted in the Cup A Joe coffee shop on West King Street, a popular community gathering place. There and about town, he talked to residents about a future train station to gauge interest. By July 2008, when gasoline prices peaked, Mine’s petition was being signed by scores of interested citizens. Mines then approached the mayor of Hillsborough and the Town Board with his signatures and asked the town to examine the feasibility of a rail station in the area. The political pressure of high gas prices and the clear show of community support convinced the Town Board to approve a Rail Station Task Force in the fall of 2008 to look into feasibility and to determine possible sites along the tracks in town that would be acceptable for a station.
IV. The Rail Station Task Forces

A. Site Selection

The Town Board created the first Rail Station Task Force in the fall of 2008, which initially met on November 14, 2008. This Task Force, chaired by Tom Campanella and including interested citizens such as Art Mines as well as representatives from county and regional transportation planning agencies, was tasked with two primary responsibilities: “first, to identify and apply site selection criteria to recommend the best location in Hillsborough for a rail station and second, to identify next steps toward implementing a stop at the recommended location including looking at funding sources and the methods used by rail providers to select and support rail stop locations” (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 11/14/08, p. 1). Further, the Task Force was to complete the first portion in time to present it to the joint town/county meeting in February, 2009. The second portion would be a written report that would be produced before May.

The first meeting of the Task Force identified seven possible sites for a rail station along the rail corridor near Hillsborough. These sites were Efland, Bellevue Ave. rail crossing, former depot site on Calvin Street, Faribault Lane, Collins property, reserved site behind Home Depot on Hampton Pointe, and the University Station spur line (see Figure 4 (Rail Station Task Force, 2009)) (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 11/14/08, pp. 1-2). Most of the next two meetings were spent discussing the appropriate criteria to use in station selection. The committee members also hosted a public open house and some members attended a Hy-rail trip with an engineer from HNTB and staff from NCRR to further examine the seven possible sites.
Figure 4: Potential Hillsborough Rail Station Sites

1. **Station Selection Criteria**

The second meeting of the Task Force on December 5, 2008, largely dealt with developing a set of station site evaluation criteria; this discussion also spilled over into the following meeting on January 9, 2009. The Task Force debated the various merits of the original 21-item list of criteria, eliminating several, editing several, creating a first-cut set of criteria, and eventually regrouping the remaining second-cut criteria into categories based on type. The four first cut criteria were:

1. Does the site offer the necessary rail frontage to facilitate construction of a station platform?
2. Would development of the site adversely impact significant natural or cultural resources?
3. Track in front of the station should be tangent, i.e. not curved, in order to comply with ADA standards (Kessler Interview).
4. The track should also be at a fairly level grade – generally less than 1% (Kessler Interview) (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 12/5/08, pp. 4-5).
The classifications for the remaining criteria were (see the Appendix for full list of criteria):

- a. Engineering Considerations
- b. Potential Future Development
- c. Access and Transportation
- d. Environmental Impacts
- e. Cultural Considerations
- f. Economic Impacts
- g. Social Justice Impacts (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 12/5/08, p. 5)

Much of the discussion of station site selection criteria centered on choosing a site that accurately reflected town values as expressed in various documents and public statements by the Town Board. Further discussion centered on the exact uses of the station (i.e., is it just an Amtrak station, or is it also a commuter rail station and how does high-speed rail potentially impact station selection choices). A lot of discussion also was generated on how to implement the criteria (i.e., Will there be weighting? Will the eventual decision be subjective or based on mathematical outputs of ranking criteria?). The eventual result was to apply weights to the criteria to generate the top several scoring being recommended to the Town Board with explanations.

2. The Seven Sites

Much of the discussions at the December and January meetings, as well as at the open house and on the Hy-rail trip, were focused on the advantages and disadvantages of the seven possible rail station sites. The open house generated comments from 51 people and had even more people in attendance (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). Each site is presented below along with the eventual decision on the site. Only two sites were presented to the Town Board in February: the Collins Tract and the Old Depot site, although it was noted that the Collins Tract had an edge over the Old Depot site (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 11). Public comments generated at the January 14 Open Houses and the feasibility scores assigned by Jim Kessler, an engineer with HNTB who conducted the January 19th Hy-rail trip were major considerations.

a) Efland

The Efland site was found to have very straight track, but was near a street crossing and vehicle storage at the crossing during a train stop was a potential concern. The site used to be a loading area for stops in the past. Jim Kessler scored the feasibility of the site as a 7-8 (on a scale of 10 with 10 being most feasible and 1 being least feasible) (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 3). Only one Open House attendee had identified it as a good site while seven had identified it as a bad site and thirty-three considered it too far away. The
site was eliminated at the 1/29/09 meeting as being too close to Burlington’s station and too far from Hillsborough’s town center (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 6).

b) **Eno/Bellevue**

This site had several deficiencies, first and foremost that the site is currently too small to hold a station and parking; however, the site could be enlarged. The site also had some grading issues and the road crossing was currently being considered for closing. As a positive, it was noted that the track was straight. Jim Kessler assigned it a feasibility score of 8 or 9 (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 3). This was the last site to be eliminated at the meeting on 1/29/09 before the eventual recommendation of the Collins Tract and Old Depot sites. The site did not have the nostalgic and cultural importance of the Old Depot site, was further from the town center, was located in West Hillsborough (an area identified as not wanting substantial growth), and had some size restrictions (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, pp. 8-10).

c) **Old Depot**

The Old Depot site was the location of the train station in Hillsborough the last time the town had passenger rail service. Despite having been appropriate for a passenger rail station at an earlier time, the site had a number of engineering difficulties. Critically, track curvature was cited as a major problem; the track at this point is super-elevated, meaning it is banked or tilted and this banking is away from a potential station site which would leave a gap between the platform and the train (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 4). Further, it was noted that the track was 24 inches lower when the site housed a working rail station than it is now, accounting for some of the engineering issues (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 4). The Old Depot site was also poorly accessible for larger transportation service (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 8). However, this site was noted for being, despite its engineering challenges, culturally significant because of its history and popularity with community members at the open house. The Task Force “agreed that a station at the Old Depot site would become a prominent town landmark and add much to the character and quality of the historic townscape (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). Jim Kessler gave the site a feasibility score of 1 or 2 but did note that it is a doable site (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 4). Eventually, the Task Force recommended the Old Depot site to the Town Board as one of two possible sites; however, it was recommended as a 2nd place choice due to the engineering challenges.

d) **Faribault Lane**

This site was riddled with issues. In addition to track curvature problems, there was no access to the larger transportation system; severe slopes were present at on the site including
an outcropping of sheer rock; and there were watershed issues because of its close proximity to the Eno River. Jim Kessler gave the site a feasibility score of -1 (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 4). The site was eliminated at the 1/29/09 meeting (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 6).

e) Collins Tract

This site was one of the most promising from the beginning. As described above, in a fortuitous coincidence, the town had recently acquired the property when the idea for a rail station began to be pursued. Thomas Campanella’s students had also demonstrated the suitability of the site in their designs which had been presented to the Town Board. The town’s acquisition of the property and the students’ site plans for a station at the property, although done without the full expectation of a train station eventually being at the site, helped to demonstrate the desirability and suitability of the site.

In addition to being town owned, the Collins site had a number of positive features including an arrow-straight run of track, proximity to major arterial roads, proximity to the Hillsborough historic downtown, and being one of the last remaining large, undeveloped parcels near the town center (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 4). The site was noted as a potentially good site for TOD, and appropriate for municipal uses such as an arts center and a park (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/9/09, p. 8). Jim Kessler gave the site a feasibility score of 9 to 10, his highest score for any site (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 4). This site also had the advantage of potentially linking tourism to the historic downtown and serving as a gateway feature to the historic downtown that could architecturally mirror the Hillsborough’s town center. This site was sent to the Town Board as the Task Force’s top recommendation for a future rail site.

f) Hampton Pointe

Although some issues existed with grade change at the site, it was noted as being very feasible from an engineering standpoint. Parking would not be a problem at the site, and Jim Kessler graded it 8 to 9 from a feasibility standpoint. However, it was also noted as a car-oriented site that lacked charm and would be the least desirable as a gateway into the city. The Hampton Pointe site was eliminated from consideration at the January 29 meeting (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, p. 9).

g) University Station

This site was the furthest east considered by the Task Force and located at the junction of a spur line to UNC-CH. Jim Kessler scored this site a 4 or 5 for engineering feasibility. The Task Force quickly eliminated this site, however, as it was viewed as being too far from
Hillsborough’s town center to lead to any beneficial economic development or tourism for the town. It was also too close to Durham’s recently renovated station. This site, along with Efland, were the first removed from consideration at the January 29 meeting (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary, 1/29/09, pp. 5-6).

3. The Final Site Choice

The Collins Tract and the Old Depot site were recommended to the Town Board, with the Collins Tract being the top choice of the Task Force. The Town Board chose the Collins Tract as the location for a future rail station. Figure 5 shows the layout of the Collins Property and its location near Churton Street and U.S. 70-A (Rail Station Task Force, 2009). Despite the nostalgia and popular support for the Old Depot site, the Collins Tract presented several distinct advantages. The engineering was much easier for the Collins Tract: the land was already cleared for HYAA baseball fields, the track was straighter, and the track didn’t have any super-elevation issues. Also, the site connected better with the existing transportation infrastructure in town, and the site could better serve as a larger TOD development to complement Hillsborough’s historic downtown.
The Rail Station Task Force entered a second phase after the site selection process was complete. In June of 2009, this second iteration of the Task Force was formed with the goal of determining what land uses would be at the rail station site. The official mandate from the Town of Hillsborough was to:

1. Recommend a set of land uses that will complement a multi-modal (rail, bus, car, bike and pedestrian) transportation hub on the Collins Tract,

2. Recommend a set of desirable land uses for the greater Collins property, and
3. Formulate a transportation network within the confines of the plan area boundary to support numbers one and two. A consultant may be needed to assist with this part of the project (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 6/24/09, p. 2).

The Task Force was given a rough timeline of June 2009 through March/April 2010 for completion of these tasks; however, because of the broad nature of the Task Force’s work, a longer period of time could be needed.

The Task Force considered several options to proceed with their work: 1) hire a consultant to do all the design work, 2) have another volunteer Board prepare a site plan, or 3) a middle ground approach. The Task Force is basically proceeding with a #3 approach (M. Gering Interview, 3/11/10). The Task Force handled most issues on their own in their volunteer capacity; however, some outside consulting was sought on the road network and the eventual final engineering design of the station area will need to be done by a consultant. The Task Force used the first couple of meetings as, essentially, brainstorming sessions to generate the rough scope of work to be handled. Over the remaining meetings, these issues were addressed.

The Task Force handled several major issues relating to the Collins Tract and the site plan for the station area. The Task Force 1) confirmed and discussed the environmental suitability and constraints of the site, 2) considered the basic transportation elements and impacts to the site including changes to the rail lines, 3) determined the basic list of municipal uses to reside at the station site, 4) created a draft site design plan, and 5) discussed the future of larger Collins property. It is important to note that as of this writing, the Task Force is still a couple months away from completing the final report of their progress. Therefore, this section is admittedly incomplete; however, enough progress has been made to report the findings so far.

1. Environmental Suitability of the Collins Tract

The Task Force had a considerable head start on assessing environmental issues for the site. American Asset’s development proposal to the Town in 2007 for the Collins property and the nearby Daniel Boone Shopping Center, although later withdrawn, provided some of the environmental due diligence for the site (M. Gering Interview, 3/11/10). One of the unresolved issues was an intermittent stream on the site. The current assessment of the stream defining it as an intermittent stream without the need for additional buffer protections was set to expire soon after the Task Force was formed. Town staff performed a Surface Water Identification Determination (SWID) confirming that the stream does not require buffer protections (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 7/29/09).
Task Force members brought up additional environmental concerns about the site. The Collins Tract contains a few steep slopes that potentially inhibit development. Some of the slope issues are potentially beneficial, however. One item commonly discussed on the Task Force was the desire to close the at-grade rail crossing for the access road at the eastern edge of the site that links a manufactured home park with US-70A (more on this in the next section). The steep grade leading to a valley in the middle of the parcel actually could actual benefit the town by making it significantly cheaper to tunnel under the railroad and provide multiple access points to the site while also allowing for the closure of this at-grade crossing. Additionally, a significant amount of the Collins Tract is already cleared and used for HYAA baseball fields, which will help reduce construction costs.

2. Transportation Elements

The Task Force spent a considerable amount of time dealing with the transportation constraints, challenges, and opportunities of the site. The Task Force had a number of wide ranging and difficult transportation elements to consider for the site, complicated by a high degree of uncertainty. The Task Force planned for several vehicle access points; access for buses and multiple transportation modes; walkability and access to the traditional downtown; at-grade crossing closures; intra-site traffic circulation; tunneling under the railroad tracks; future potential double-tracking of the railroad tracks; the provision of public parking at the station; and ridership forecasting. Many of these items were discussed at multiple meetings and some remain unresolved or not fully fleshed out prior to the Task Force’s final report.

Of the issues handled by the Task Force, some were resolved quickly and incorporated into draft plans for the site. For instance, after a small amount of discussion, it was accepted that the planning for the road network and station site would anticipate buses using the station as a multi-modal hub at some point (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 8/26/09, p. 7). Task Force members also readily accepted that multiple access points would need to be provided.

Some issues were easier to resolve than others. The Task Force quickly accepted the desirability of having the station be a multi-modal hub with bus service and the need for multiple access points to the site for both emergency response and traffic flow. The Task Force also decided to essentially use an educated guess for ridership and parking spaces. Despite its unwillingness to stand by its numbers, Amtrak had provided a professional estimate of annual ridership in their 2007 study which the Task Force used with the understanding that the study has limitations. Similarly, parking concerns were solved by using counts of other nearby stations (Burlington, Kannapolis, Cary) as a guide for determining the needed parking spaces.
Many transportation issues took multiple meetings to resolve. The basic premise of closing the at-grade crossing at the eastern edge of the site and tunneling under the railroad to connect Orange Grove Street to Highway 70-A East was accepted after a presentation by Jim Parker, an engineer with Summit Consulting. Mr. Parker’s firm had prepared a study looking at three alternatives for access to the site, with the tunnel being by far the best choice (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 8/26/09). However, the exact alignment of this tunnel and how it would be impacted by double-tracking continued to be discussed at subsequent meetings, but will require engineering work in the future.

Some of the Task Force’s most difficult transportation problems were challenging because there was so much uncertainty surrounding them. The transportation network internal to the site is highly dependent on what land uses and buildings are actually located on the site and who builds it. This uncertainty is partially because of the funding uncertainty for the site development and the extent to which it will be publicly funded vs. privately funded. Also, it is unclear what stipulations or requirements might be made by NCDOT.

Additionally, there has been a degree of uncertainty concerning future plans by NCDOT Rail and NCRR with respect to future rail service in the corridor. NCRR would like to expand to double-track at some point in the future, and potentially more depending on the needs of high-speed rail traveling in the corridor. Further, NCDOT Rail wants to straighten the curve on the eastern edge of the Collins Tract near the manufactured home park. It is unclear the extent to which these track improvements impact the station or the plans of the Task Force. Also, the timeline is unclear, owing in part to funding uncertainty for NCDOT and NCRR.

3. Municipal Uses

One of the primary expected uses of the Collins Tract beyond just a train station was area for an expansion of municipal space for the town. The Task Force initially identified a new police branch station and fire station as likely uses of the property. Art Mines noted that having a police station at the Burlington rail station was “considered a plus for train users concerned about crime and vagrants” (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 7/29/09, p. 3). Town Staff followed up with the police department, and the police chief confirmed the police department’s interest in being at the Collins tract as well as land area, building square footage, and parking needs (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 10/28/09).
Similarly, the Task Force was interested in having a fire station located at the new development within the Collins Tract. One potential benefit of having a fire station located at the new Collins tract would be that the old fire station property located in the historic downtown would then be usable for other businesses. A fire station on the Collins Tract could be a newer facility in an area more suitable as a fire station. There was some initial confusion on the Task Force concerning whether the fire department would actually desire to have a station at the Collins Tract, but the Fire Chief confirmed the fire department’s desire along with land area, building square footage, and parking needs (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 10/28/09).

The Task Force also looked at using part of the Collins Tract for a performing arts center and town meeting space. The Task Force examined the suitability of the Collins Tract as a place for a performing arts center including potential square footage and parking needs (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 10/28/09). However, there is some doubt over whether the Arts Committee would desire a performing arts center on the Collins Tract; the current conceptual plan includes the performing arts center as a future use but not a certainty (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 1/20/10, p. 4). Town meeting space would likely be provided in the station building itself.

4. Draft Conceptual Site Plan

The Task Force prepared a number of draft site plans with the ultimate goal of having something visual to present to the public of feedback. Beginning with a presentation at the November meeting, Task Force member Thomas Campanella, a member of both iterations of the Task Force, presented a number of potential site plans for development of the Collins tract with members submitting their feedback. Additionally, the Task Force reviewed a number of conceptual site plans created by Campanella’s students in his site and urban design classes from 2007 and 2008.

One of the Task Force’s biggest challenges has been the future of the HYAA ball fields currently at the site. This has been a part of every single Task Force meeting since the first one when it was noted that the Town had agreed to help HYAA relocate the fields to a permanent location (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 6/24/09). After extensive discussion, the Task Force decided that a station platform and the HYAA fields could coexist together well, potentially; however, for a more complete build-out of the site the ball fields would need to be relocated. An idea the Task Force discussed was temporarily relocating the ball fields from the western to the eastern side of the Collins Tract, which could cost $100,00 to $350,00 in re-grading (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 1/20/10). The conceptual plan presented at
the public meeting moved the ball fields in phases, reconfiguring them on the cleared western part of the lot during Phase 1 of construction (station, platform, roads, parking) and then relocating them off-site for Phase 2 of construction (fire and police stations, more parking, more complete build-out) (M. Cochran Meeting Notes, 2/15/10).

The conceptual plans have been created with a lot of uncertainty regarding funding. The Task Force initially hoped to be awarded $5 million in high-speed rail stimulus funds as part of an application submitted by NCDOT Rail. However, the funding for the Hillsborough rail station was not included in the $545 million that the State of North Carolina was awarded when high-speed rail funds were announced recently (A. Paul Interview, 3/9/10). NCDOT has stated that they will continue applying for federal funds to build the station. In the absence of federal funding, the timing of the site’s development is somewhat unknown, presenting a challenge for developing a site plan. Part of the money could be raised by selling a portion of the property to a private developer (M. Cochran Meeting Notes, 2/15/10). Also, an earmark request may be made to Rep. David Price for $450,000 for design work for the station while an attempt is made to secure other funding sources (A. Paul Interview, 3/9/10).

5. The Larger Collins Property

The Task Force has debated a number of times what land uses would be appropriate for the larger Collins property. The Town only owns the 20-acre Collins Tract, but the larger property is around 200 acres. The debate on this wider Collins property is complicated by the fact that the Town does not own the full property and cannot exercise complete control over the development of that property. The eventual development of the full Collins property will most likely not occur for several years (Town of Hillsborough, Meeting Summary 12/16/09). The Task Force also debated at several meetings whether making any recommendations regarding the wider Collins property was within the scope of the Task Force or not. The Task Force eventually produced a rough sketch of potential land uses and a skeletal road network. The ultimate success of train station and the planned TOD development there hinges partially on the quality of development on the larger Collins property.

6. Public Open House and Next Steps

On March 31, 2010, the Task Force held a public open house in the community meeting room at the Orange County Library. The meeting was well-attended with roughly 50 community members present (M. Cochran notes, 3/31/10). Thomas Campanella presented the conceptual plans and phasing for the site. Although this report was prepared before public comments were compiled and reported, the vocal comments at the meeting were generally positive; the main concern was securing funding not any issue with the conceptual plan or basic idea of a rail station in town. A Chapel Hill News article about the meeting described local
residents as “enthusiastic” about the station project, but wary of the cost and funding uncertainty (Grubb, 2010). A Herald-Sun article described the atmosphere as exciting with a buzz in the air (Way, 2010).

The next steps for the town after the conclusion of this Task Force will be to, first and foremost, address the funding issue. This was overwhelmingly the major concern of residents at the March, 2010 open house and remains as the major roadblock and cause of uncertainty. A third Task Force may need to be formed to address the funding issues. The town is submitting a request for a $450,000 earmark with Representative David Price’s office to finance engineering and design work. That is the next step in the process, but afterward the project would be ready for construction.

V. Research Questions

This research paper focuses on several different questions, all essentially seeking to determine whether the process to bring a rail station back to Hillsborough has been successful and what factors have contributed to that success. This paper relies on document review, interviews with officials and community members familiar with the process, and my own observations. The specific research questions I am examining are:

1. Has the process to bring a rail station back to Hillsborough been successful?
2. To the extent this was a successful project, was it driven by top-down or bottom-up support?
3. Was there a champion or group of champions that drove success?
4. How much did exogenous factors affect the outcome? Was there a window of opportunity that opened (i.e., high gas prices, national sentiment in favor of rail, regional institutional support, or popular support for passenger rail)?

VI. Determinants of Success in Planning Processes

John Kingdon outlines the process of agenda setting and how issues come to be discussed and tackled by decisions makers. He describes the policy making process as a four-step process:

“(1) the setting of the agenda, (2) the specification of alternatives from which a choice is to be made, (3) an authoritative choice among the specified alternatives, as in a legislative vote or in a presidential decision, and (4) the implementation of a decision” (Kingdon, 2003, p. 3).

Although Kingdon’s work focuses only on the first two aspects of the policy formation process, his insights are relevant to the Hillsborough process, partly because the Hillsborough process is
still ongoing. Also, by nature of the policy agenda, the most critical parts are the steps leading up to when an authoritative decision can be made and effects felt. This is the stage where the process has a high chance of failure.

Kingdon identifies three separate streams that contribute to agenda setting in the policy arena, 1) problem recognition, 2) the formation and refining of policy proposals, and 3) politics (Kingdon, 2003, p. 87). Each of these three streams needs to intersect for a policy to reach the point of an authority being able to decide on a policy prescription. Kingdon first defines the problem recognition process stream. There are, at any time, hundreds of potential problems that any policy setter must deal with, but only certain ones are addressed. Often these problems come to the attention of policy makers because some systemic indicator shows there is a problem, or there is a crisis or prominent event indicating the presence of a problem (Kingdon, 2003, pp. 90, 16).

The second policy stream is the formation of alternatives. Once, a problem is identified, any number of actors may promulgate a proposed solution to that problem, but only certain ones are considered. Often, this process can involve a policy entrepreneur – someone willing to invest resources, be it time, energy, reputation, or money, in the hope of a future return (Kingdon, 2003, p. 122). Other ideas are simply recognized and promoted in existing policy communities. Once the long list of ideas is generated, they are, in effect, vetted based on criteria like technical and political feasibility, values, or concepts like equity and efficiency to determine which ideas survive (Kingdon, 2003, p. 143). In short, “the policy stream thus produces a short list of proposals” (Kingdon, 2003, p. 144).

The third policy stream Kingdon identifies is the political stream, which itself has three major components: 1) swings of national mood, 2) the balance of organized political forces, and 3) the government itself, particularly in the form of administration change or turnover (Kingdon, 2003, p. 153). People in and around government pay attention to and can sense a national mood, which in turn can promote some problems or ideas (Kingdon, 2003, pp. 146-147). In the political stream, a window of opportunity can open allowing problems to be addressed or policy proposals considered that otherwise would not be.

Kingdon argues that the greatest policy changes grow out of the coupling of these three streams (Kingdon, 2003, p. 19). This coupling creates a policy window through which policy change can occur because all contributing factors align. He writes, “a problem is recognized, a solution is developed and available in the policy community, a political change makes it the right time for policy change, and potential constraints are not severe” (Kingdon, 2003, p. 165). Kingdon also notes that it is often the policy entrepreneurs who make coupling possible. They are able to recognize the problem and then “hook solutions to problems, proposals to political momentum, and political events to policy problems” (Kingdon, 2003, p. 182).
entrepreneurs help highlight the problem, construct the sets of alternatives considered, and tie these policy prescriptions to political factors to create policy.

In addition to the success of the agenda setting aspects of the Hillsborough rail station process, the extent, nature, and value of public participation is important to consider. Being a public process, stakeholder and community buy-in have been important aspects of the Hillsborough process. However, it is important to analyze whether the public support has been productive and supportive of the process. Public participation can be important to add legitimacy to decisions, achieve better results, and increase policy ideas as lay persons and non-experts may be able to see problems, issues and solutions that experts miss (Bickerstaff & Walker, 2001).

Other authors point to factors that contribute to the success of public participatory processes. One factor noted was the quality and maturity of social capital, or the ability of citizens to organize and express ideas and steer the policy process (Gedikli, 2009). Although describing a developing country, Turkey, Gedikli further describes two types of processes for success in planning. One, a bottom-up approach is heavily dependent on quality social capital and strong civic organizations and engagement. The other, a top-down approach, can be equally successful, but is more reliant on an institutional leader to generate and coordinate public participation in the process (Gedikli, 2009). In a top-down process, a strong leader can substitute for the social capital which otherwise would be critical by centrally coordinating public participation, establishing networks, and creating cooperation (Gedikli, 2009).

VII. Success and the Hillsborough Process

The Hillsborough rail station process closely mirrors the agenda setting process that John Kingdon outlined. The national mood towards rail and alternative transportation opened a policy window during the summer of 2008. During that summer, gasoline prices infamously spiked to four dollars a gallon nationally, which was a crisis event. Gas prices were a daily news item during that summer; this made politicians acutely aware of transportation problems and receptive to transportation solutions. Even though NCDOT already had been, by the summer of 2008, working for some 4 years on bringing a station to the Hillsborough area, it seems likely that high gas prices quickened the process substantially. The high gas price event can certainly be seen as providing momentum to the local effort to bring passenger rail back to Hillsborough.

If the crisis in gas prices signaled the presence of a problem and the shift in national mood from this crisis opened up a policy window, then the coupling of the policy stream occurred with the informal petition for a rail station in the Cup A Joe coffee shop. Art Mines acted as the policy entrepreneur, using his time, energy, and to an extent reputation, to
advocate on behalf of his policy proposal – a rail station in Hillsborough. Mr. Mines described himself as an “Unintentional Instigator” and later “Major Advocate” of the project (A. Mines Interview, 3/10/10), and he helped to muster public support. Of all the possible policy solutions to high gas prices Mines and community members were able to bring passenger rail service to the forefront of ideas considered by the town’s political leaders. That the Town Board agreed to look into the feasibility of this proposal and eventually decided to pursue a train station represents the successful confluence of the three policy streams.

However, the fact that the Hillsborough process fits fairly well with Kingdon’s model does not necessarily mean it has been a wholly successful process nor does this tell the full story of the process to date. A long time has passed and a lot of work has been put into the process since the summer of 2008. To what extent has the Hillsborough process been a success? How has the pace of this process been? In order to determine the success of the Hillsborough process, I interviewed a number of people familiar with the process including a member of the Rail Station Task Force, an official at NCDOT Rail, and several citizens who were familiar with the project.

My interviewees were somewhat mixed on whether the Hillsborough process was progressing at a good pace but ultimately felt that it was moving swiftly. Nearly all interviewees were willing to accept that at some points the process has gotten bogged; however most interviewees felt the process was moving at a brisk pace. Some interviewees felt that the Task Force took too long arriving at decisions and should have delegated more work to professional staff, but this was not a majority opinion. Allan Paul with NCDOT rail noted that a typical small station can take 6-10 years to develop, with 4-6 years for planning and up to 2 years each for design and construction (A. Paul Interview, 3/9/10). In that vein, this process has done well. NCDOT Rail has been involved with looking at Hillsborough for a station for six years but the local process has only been going for roughly two years. The first Task Force certainly moved incredibly quickly; their first meeting was in November, 2008 and by February, 2009 they had chosen seven potential sites, created a set of site selection criteria, applied these criteria to all seven sites, solicited public feedback, and evaluated the engineering feasibility of each site. However, there is still a substantial amount of work to be done (currently only a site is selected and a draft conceptual plan is nearly complete); design and construction work still needs to be done with funding remaining as a huge complicating factor and potential major hurdle.

As far as whether the process, on the whole, has been successful, my interviewees felt that on the whole it was successful. The impression was that the process involved good coordination with town staff, the Task Forces, and officials at NCRR, NCDOT, and Amtrak. The interviewees also noted that the process is far from complete and all judgments at this point
are premature. The lack of secured funding stuck out as a major hurdle with potential to derail or significantly hamper the project going forward.

The most common factors that came up as possibly contributing to the success of the project were the competency of the Task Force members and the quality of public involvement. Several interviewees noted that the Task Force has been helped along by having professionals in relevant fields on the Task Force; the current Task Force includes two architects, an urban planning professor at UNC, several members of the Planning Board, a member of the Orange Unified Transportation Board, an urban planning PhD student at UNC Chapel Hill, a member of the Town Board of Commissioners, and a member of the Alliance for Historic Hillsborough. The fact that most Task Force members have some experience in planning seems to have helped curb the amount of education and preparation time needed. Additionally, one interviewee noted the presence of UNC Chapel Hill and its resources as well as the highly educated citizenry of Hillsborough as positives in the process. This is evident in the important role that student work played in the town’s eventual purchase of the Collins Tract.

Many interviewees similarly noted that they felt public involvement had been good. The process as a whole seems to fit more with Gedikli’s description of a bottom-up approach more than a top-down approach, at least early in the process. Hillsborough is an area with high levels of social capital and a well-informed, well-organized, highly-educated population. The idea for the station originated at the grass-roots level and support was built, informally, through networking at the citizen level, before leadership was largely transferred to Town actors. The two open houses that the Task Forces have held have been well-attended and generated significant public input into the process.

However, public participation has not necessarily been stellar. At most, only a handful of members of the public attend the monthly meetings of the Task Force, and usually these are the same few people. Also, some interviewees felt that public involvement could have been more robust throughout the process. Public participation was good for the first Task Force with a significant amount of public input at the open house meeting. Unfortunately, it is premature to fully evaluate public involvement because, as of the writing of this paper, the Task Force has not met to review all public comments received at the recent open.

Despite it being listed as a factor contributing to the success of the Task Force several interviewees described the composition of the Task Force as being a liability as well. Some interviewees felt that the experience of the Task Force led it to occasionally stray beyond its mandate and discuss issues not immediately pertinent to the stated objectives of the Task Force. This idea seemed to express itself, also, in how interviewees noted that the Task Force would occasionally get bogged down on issues. Some felt the Task Force has been good at generating ideas, just not as productive as working to develop a plan as they could be. Other
interviewees felt that the public process itself was not as constructive as hiring professionals to do the work. These interviewees thought the Task Force spent too much time deciding everything by committee and had spent several sessions dealing with issues that could have been solved in many fewer meetings by delegating more work to staff or hiring professionals. However, the interviewees overall felt that the Task Force had performed very well, especially considering the large number of uncertainties in the process.

In aggregate, the interviewees felt the process has been successful up to this point. Universally, funding was cited as the major issue for the project. When asked whether media coverage had played a role, no interviewees were willing to ascribe it much if any significance in the process, despite positive press coverage throughout the process. A couple interviewees noted exogenous factors as a contributor to the process. High gas prices were mentioned as a factor in the process. The economic collapse was also noted by one interviewee as perhaps a counter-intuitive contributor because of the stimulus funding for high-speed rail and its prominence in national discussions. Additionally, institutional support, from Amtrak, NCDOT Rail, and NCRR was listed as a positive contributor to the process.

VIII. Conclusion

The history of passenger rail service in the U.S. situates Hillsborough neatly within the larger national storyline. Once an economic driver, rail service declined in importance to Hillsborough around World War II, coinciding with the rise in importance of auto and air travel. In 1964, the last passenger train to serve Hillsborough pulled out of the station, which was subsequently torn down. However, Hillsborough currently is positioned on a vitally important rail line in a rapidly growing region. Passenger rail service has the potential to once again play an important role in the life of the town as traffic congestion increasingly leads residents of the region to look for new ways to reach destinations. With proposed commuter rail service; increased frequencies and improved service times along the Raleigh to Charlotte corridor; and the corridor’s designation as one of the main high-speed rail corridors in the country, Hillsborough stands to benefit substantially from building a new rail station.

Although the interviewees were not unanimous, on the whole the process seems to have been largely successful. There have been times when the process has dragged or lost focus on the ultimate goal, but the town and Task Force have made an enviable amount of progress in less than two years. The process has been a bottom-up approach with significant advocacy and support from town residents. The most important factors early on were the presence of champions for the idea and the political shift in favor of passenger rail service caused partially by the crisis event of high gas prices. Four dollar a gallon gasoline is the event that opened a political window that created an environment very receptive to transportation
ideas aimed at ameliorating auto dependency. Both Art Mines and Thomas Campanella were particularly instrumental in generating early support for the rail station, but many town residents were involved and important to the process.

Later in the process, the competency of the Task Force was the biggest factor contributing to success; however, this paradoxically also was a negative factor. Working in an environment with significant unknowns, the Task Force sometimes strayed off topic or spent too much time generating ideas instead of pressing forward with the ultimate goals of the project. Institutional support from the rail agencies seems to also have helped the process move along smoothly, especially considering the agencies were all looking at a site in Hillsborough before the local effort had its formal nascence. The buy-in from the major institutional players is vital because if NCDOT, NCRR, or Amtrak had decided that Hillsborough was not a suitable location for passenger rail service, the project would have ended before it had a chance to begin. Much like Kingdon’s agenda setting framework, this process seems to have been a successful blending of opportunity, idea, and political support.
IX. Appendix: Site Selection Criteria

Engineering and Technical

- Are their factors related to site engineering—such as steep slopes or presence of soils unsuitable for construction—that might exclude station development, or make it prohibitively expensive?

- Is the section of track at or close to grade across a significant portion of the site?

- Does the site offer the necessary track frontage to allow construction of a platform of sufficient length (500 - 1,200 feet)?

- Does the section of track on the site meet the curvature and gradient requirements for current and anticipated rolling stock?

- Is the site sufficiently distance from existing stations up and down the line?

- Is the site free of any spur or branch lines?

- Does the site meet the engineering requirements for future high-speed rail?

Future Development

- Does the site have potential to accommodate a mixed-use "transit-oriented" development in the future, either on-site or in the immediate vicinity of the station?

- Does such future development conform to aims and objectives of the Hillsborough Strategic Growth Plan?

Access and Transportation

- Can the site be readily accessed by existing roads that connect it to the regional transportation network?

- Is access to the site dependent upon the construction of new roads, or the extension of existing roads?

- Are there multiple linkages between the site and the larger road network? For example, if an accident blocks one route, can the station still be accessed by buses and automobiles or emergency vehicles?

- Is the site robust enough to function as a regional transportation hub in the future, accommodating bus lines and a potentially large number of daily users parking on site?

- Is the site contiguous with and/or within easy walking distance (one mile or less) of an historic town center?
Environmental

- Will development of the station require the elimination of cultivated, forested or otherwise undeveloped "greenfield" land?

- Will development of the site adversely impact any significant plant or wildlife resources?

- Does any part of the site include a stream or water body protected by the Neuse River watershed buffers?

Social and Cultural

- Will development of the site displace or adversely impact a minority or low-income community?

- Will development of the site place an undue burden on adjacent neighborhoods?

- Will development of the site result in the elimination or diminution of a significant community amenity?

- Will development of the site result in the loss or destruction of significant archeological resources or buildings of historical merit?

- Will the site yield a station that will be a prominent feature or landmark in the townscape?

Economic Development

- Will the station serve a catalyst for economic growth and development in an underinvested or economically disadvantaged part of the town or county?

- Does development of a station on the site further the goals of the Orange County Economic Development Commission’s Five-Year Strategic Plan?
X. Works Cited


Jones, C. (2010, January 13). Amtrak to add Wi-Fi to some trains free, for now. USA Today.


