

An Interview with Governor James B. Hunt Jr.

Brika Eklund and David Daddio, *Carolina Planning* Editors

On December 9, 2010, the Carolina Planning Editors sat down with former North Carolina Governor James “Jim” Baxter Hunt Jr. in his downtown Raleigh office at Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice. Governor Hunt, who continues to be an active voice in state politics, shared experiences from his sixteen years in office and offered his thoughts on the future of transportation in North Carolina. A condensed and edited transcript from that conversation follows.

Given North Carolina’s recent federal stimulus grant of nearly half a billion dollars for high-speed passenger rail, could you provide a brief history of the concept and its early beginning in the state?

Back in 1995, down in Charlotte, we put a second train on the Raleigh-Charlotte [rail] line. The state owns the trains, and Amtrak runs them for us. I went down to announce it ... I was the first governor who really made rail transportation a big, big deal [in North Carolina]. I had to push my DOT people to share my passion because they were road folks, highway folks, which had been the past in North Carolina ... but I converted them.

[In Charlotte] I announced that I wanted to see us have a two-hour train from Raleigh to Charlotte ... that was early on in my campaign for a fourth term in 1996 and it was a significant thing that I talked about at every campaign stop. At that time, the ride was close to four hours and I said let’s do it in two ... But, what I found out was [the State] didn’t own the whole railroad ... We had a private owner of 25% [of the railroad] and he didn’t want to sell – the North Carolina Railroad Company. [At the time] the railroad companies had an interest in freight, not passengers ... they’re beginning to come along a little. My idea [originally was] ‘let’s get in there and change this thing right now’ when we ran into the fact that we didn’t own 25% of the railroad ... I had to get that 25%. We had to be in court, we thought we had it, that didn’t work, we had to go again. [CPJ: In 1998, the State purchased the remaining 25% of private shares. NCRR is now a privately-run company with voting stocks fully owned by the State]. In any event, [the interest in passenger rail started with] my idea of two hours from Raleigh to Charlotte and we’ve been working at it ever since. And we’ll have it down to two hours in another three to four years.

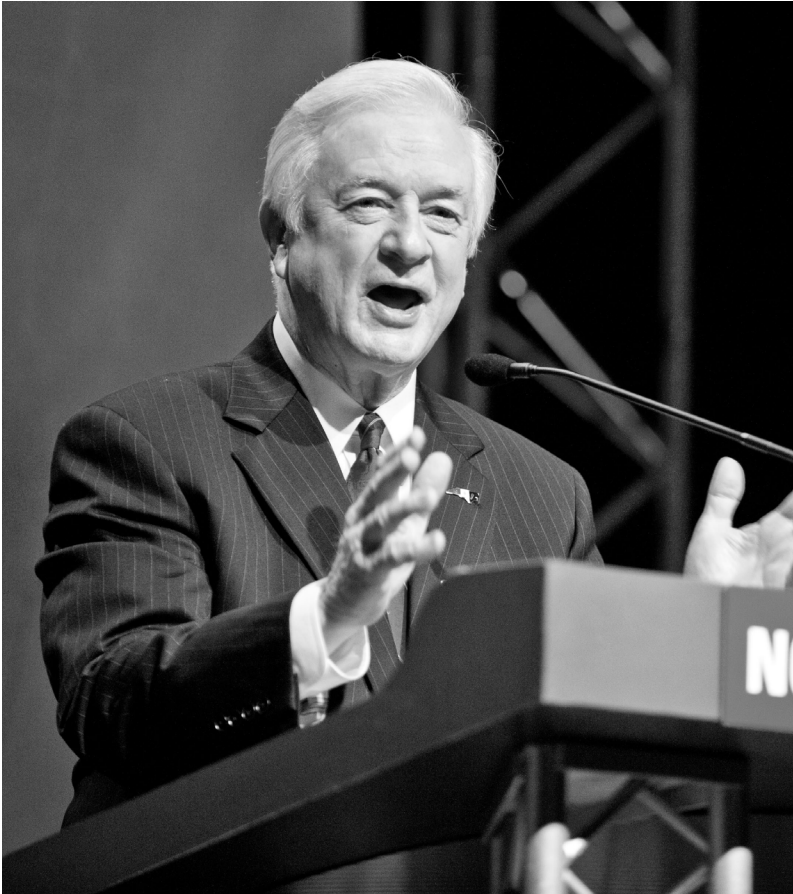
How about the desires to connect North Carolina to other states through high-speed passenger rail? What might this do for economic development in the state?

The Northern Virginia suburbs are there because they’re next to Washington. It’s easy for the people [who live there to commute to D.C.] ... I worked with all these governors in Virginia. About half of them are Republicans. You can see these Republicans promoting all of this economic development, saying “we caused it” ... [The reality is that] they just happen to be next to Washington. Now, some of them have done good things, [but] most of them haven’t.

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***Governor Jim Hunt** served as Governor of North Carolina from 1977 to 1985 and again from 1993 to 2001, during which time he initiated several major transportation projects around the state. Throughout his time in office and today, Governor Hunt is widely recognized for his commitment to early childhood education and to repositioning the state for substantial biotechnology and high-tech industry investments, among other achievements. Governor Hunt is currently a member of the law firm Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, and he works closely with two institutes that he founded – the Hunt Institute for Educational Leadership and Policy (UNC-Chapel Hill) and the Institute for Emerging Issues (N.C. State University).*



Governor Jim Hunt. Image courtesy of the Institute for Emerging Issues. Photograph taken by Steve Exum.

Why don't we make North Carolina a suburb of D.C.? With a three-hour train, you can do it. Talk about economic development ... For us, being that close [to D.C.], with all the other great things we have [to offer], that's a great thing to be able to say to a company. I've recruited more industry to North Carolina than any governor in history and maybe more than all of them put together. I know what [companies] like, what they want, and why they want to get out of [places like] southern California ... Have you ever been on that freeway between San Jose and San Francisco? Getting to work time? Awful. I've had CEOs tell me: 'I want out.'

What do you think the funding implications are of such a regional high-speed rail investment?

Well, we have to get another \$2 billion to get to Richmond, and I guess Richmond to Washington [D.C.] will take care of itself. [The funding] has to be one of our big pushes ... I'd like for North Carolina to be the leader of that.

Now, we have to change Congress back. We got Republican governors trying to turn the money back ... but that won't continue. People are upset now. The economy didn't come back as quickly as we thought and hoped. President Obama is doing something really smart to bring it back, this deal [tax cut extensions for all income brackets] he's got with Republicans is really a second

stimulus. But once the economy starts coming back nicely, we're gonna be thinking about how you build your economy, and all this trouble with driving, and all the complications with it ... We will come back. You know Governor Christie in New Jersey [who turned back money for the interstate ARC train tunnel project to Manhattan] ... he might serve two terms because people are so mad up there ... [but] that won't be the case for long. [With] positive people with real solutions, it'll come back.

Current NCDOT Secretary Gene Conti mentioned at the recent state meeting of the American Planning Association that North Carolina is now the largest state owner of roads in the nation, recently surpassing Texas. What do you see as the future of the rail system across North Carolina compared to roads?

[Rail] should play a major role ... roads and highways will always be the biggest thing in this state as spread out as we are, and we have to continue to improve them. But rail has a very important place, and it is important both for freight and also for passengers, [even if] it's not going to be enormous with regard to passengers. I had a map one time showing all the railroad lines coming into Raleigh ... must be six or seven [lines] coming from every direction. I don't think they're being used anymore ... but we outta find all of these tracks and preserve those corridors. People are really beginning to get interested in riding rail into work.

So, my answer to your question, 75% or better of our efforts, interests, and commitment is going to be to roads, highways and bridges. But rail is going to be a significant part of it ... and we outta have light rail around our major cities ... We should also have a good bit coming in from the east. [The problem is that] there's this right wing group that hates rail ... of course they hate spending public money on anything. And they fought light rail here in Raleigh [in the 1990s] ... on the talk shows you just hear them fuming ... Then, Charlotte got it down there. [Now] all the Republican leadership down in Charlotte is for light rail ... they proved it works and pays for itself ... and then they came up here [to Raleigh] and talked to the Chamber of Commerce about it and so the Republican leadership in this area started liking it.

Do you see any differences in transportation options that the state needs to offer between urban and rural areas?

A lot of our people just live in the country. You know where I live? I live on a cattle farm. I-95 goes through my farm. You can't run a bus out there, we're lucky even to have school buses ... Now, for the smaller towns, buses will be fine. For the countryside, it's going to have to be

cars. We may need to pick up disabled people and some of the elderly people and help them get around ... [but] that's not a transportation system ... it is for them to get to the doctor and grocery store.

With our cities, they're growing, and we should now be putting in light rail. Charlotte, I think is ready to go north. [Raleigh] I don't know exactly what they're thinking about, but light rail should be put here and it should begin to extend out to the Carys and Knightdales and all around as people need it ... people outta have a lot of input into that, by the way ... We need to have a variety of approaches, our people outta help design them, but we need to be able to move relatively quickly and we don't want to have to spend a lot of time sitting in automobiles ... This is a very diverse state and we should have a diverse system.

So, as the state continues to build roads and improve the infrastructure, what do you see as being some of the financial mechanisms that can be used in the future to pay for these improvements?

I think we should continue to have adequate highway gasoline taxes and other taxes, but I also see public-private partnerships as increasingly part of the solution. This is in part because we can't get but so much from taxes ... The need for people to travel more efficiently, along with the economic development boost you get from having good roads, is so important to our economy that we shouldn't wait.

I'll give you an example: the southern beltline around Raleigh. If we didn't do that with a toll road, we'd have to wait twenty or thirty years to build it. By the way, I grew up hating [tolls] ... I now realize we're going to have to do it ... it's the smart thing to do. If we go ahead and [build it now with a toll], not only will it pay for itself over time, but the economic development that will come around that southern route will boost the economy of this state; provide so many more jobs and opportunities for our people. It's a smart investment to go ahead and do it by whatever means we have to ... plus, by the way, it's sort of another way to tax travelers.

There's a lot of conversation in the transportation planning world about how money is funneled from the federal government to local governments. As you know, the Governor's Office and NCDOT have a lot of say over where transportation money goes in this state. Are there opportunities for improving the funding arrangement and what are the economic development implications?

I think the current system is working pretty well ... [but] there was a time when it didn't. During my first two terms, we didn't have any [Raleigh] beltline ... I got the outer beltline put in. We committed to that during my first two terms ... that's way back in the late 70s, early 80s. There was also nothing around Charlotte. We built that,

almost finished that.

In this state, we've always had this debate: do we try to put the money to open up areas where people don't have a fair chance and they don't have any good jobs ... or do you put the money where the people already are and where there are more traffic problems? I have a strong feeling for both of those. I'll tell you a story. When I was first elected governor in 1976, took office in January '77, we were the only state in America that didn't have its port connected

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by the interstate system ... I-40 stopped here in Raleigh. I told my new Secretary of Transportation Tom Bradshaw to go up to Washington, D.C. and I said 'Tom, I want you stay up there every day you need to be there and I want you to get the funding to extend I-40' ... We did get the money and then started planning the route down through a very rural area. The farmers raised hell because we were going through their prime tobacco fields. We went ahead and got it planned and then we condemned the land ... that's tough to do in rural areas. And then we started construction and we built about the first 22 miles down at that end, paved it and named it for Michael Jordan.

So, my point to you is this: that's four or five routes to the east ... Do you know how much money this state gets from revenues from the beaches every year? ... And those areas are beginning to be very attractive for retiring. The next thing you're going to see are people retiring on the west of the sounds ... you know about the beaches, they're just packed. We have kept [the development] low... we don't have the big high rises ... My point is that we helped make both the sound and coastal areas attractive for economic development by building highways down there and helping people be able to go down there faster, more efficiently.

The challenge with transportation is it takes so long to get anything that you have to be able to build that camaraderie among the political groups over 20 years. What's the role of political leadership and bipartisanship?

That's the job of political leaders: to explain to people at the beginning what our needs are [in the state] ... People need to have some reasonable agreement about that ... then you say 'alright, what do we need to do to meet those needs?' You have to explain to people that it is going to be

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a long process ... but you have to start, you gotta have the funding, you gotta make sure that people are reasonably pleased that the process is going to be fair, that they're going to get their needs met to a reasonable degree. And that's the job of leadership ... to manage expectations instead of letting people get all frustrated. And then sometimes you have to show guts and courage to do what's right, even if everybody doesn't understand it and like it.

Any final thoughts you want to convey to the planning community?

If you want economic growth, jobs, and a good future for your family, your state and your country, you've got to

invest in transportation. You gotta be smart about it. We've gotta be fair about it. And we outta be rational about it. We outta plan it well. And we outta involve the people in it. Yeah, they'll raise hell about this road coming through [here and] there. I-95 goes right through my farm ... and I didn't like that, but you've got to have it ... [Figuring out transportation] is not the most complicated issue we're dealing with by any means, [but] it's a very important one. A lot of folks who deal with [transportation issues in the state] are urban-oriented primarily. Well, I speak for the people of the country as well as the rest of them. And we've always gotta keep in mind that there are serious equity and fairness issues across all of North Carolina.



Governor Hunt leads a discussion at the 26th Annual Emerging Issues Forum, February 2011. Image courtesy of the Institute for Emerging Issues. Photograph taken by Steve Exum.