Densifying the Triangle: Examining How the Region is Planning to Reshape its Future

Kyle J. Vangel

Editors’ Note: Every year, faculty from the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC-Chapel Hill determine the best master’s paper developed out of the graduating class. Below is only an extended abstract of the project. To obtain the original, full-length document, please visit the “Electronic Theses and Dissertation Collection” at http://dc.lib.unc.edu.

Extended Abstract

This paper examines how planning processes in the Research Triangle region address the issue of higher density development. Three case studies examine how planning processes have wrestled with higher density development and provide examples of policies and measures that can encourage more compact development. Special consideration is given to how not-for-profit groups participating in these processes were able to advocate for higher density development, and why certain development management solutions to encourage higher densities gained favor in the region. Five strategies for encouraging higher density development are offered.

Introduction

The Research Triangle region of North Carolina is recognized for its high quality of life and dynamic economy, anchored by leading academic institutions and large corporations. Yet it is also recognized for having a particularly sprawling, low-density development pattern. A study by Ewing, Pendall, and Chen (2002), examining which regions in the United States sprawl the most based upon an index of four factors, ranked the Raleigh-Durham MSA as the third most sprawling out of 83 studied metropolitan areas.

A plethora of research indicates that compact development offers a variety of economic, environmental, and public health benefits, in addition to meeting the preferences of an increasingly large segment of the population. Thus, the Triangle’s built environment may hinder its economic competitiveness and the health of its population and ecosystem.

This paper seeks to understand the possibilities and constraints of comprehensive planning as a means to foster more compact development patterns. Raleigh’s 2030 Comprehensive Plan, Morrisville’s Town Center Plan of and Land Use Plan, 2009-2035, and Research Triangle Park’s soon-to-be completed Master Plan serve as case studies. By examining the planning documents themselves and conducting in-depth interviews with key stakeholders who were involved in these processes, this report offers a robust understanding of how the Triangle is planning for a different future.

Kyle Vangel received his Masters in City and Regional Planning from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in May, 2012. While at DCRP, he concentrated in land use planning. Kyle is now a Senior Analyst at HR&A Advisors, an economic development, real estate, and public policy consulting firm in New York, NY.
Methodology

This case study analysis combines the evaluation of planning documents with interviews of key stakeholders. In the case of the Research Triangle Park Master Plan, which has not been yet been publicly released, the analysis relies on secondary sources and interview findings.

Completed plans were evaluated for goals, objectives, policies, and implementation measures related to fostering compact development. Findings were catalogued and synthesized in order to assess the mechanisms by which the plans promote higher density development. Goals and objectives of the Research Triangle Park Master Plan have been discerned from secondary documents produced by the park and local media.

Eleven interviews were conducted using a rigorous protocol in order to gain further insight into the plan creation and decision-making processes. Individuals interviewed belong to one of three categories of professionals: planners, not-for-profit organization employees, and real estate developers.

Raleigh 2030 Comprehensive Plan

The 2030 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Raleigh was adopted by the Raleigh City Council on October 7, 2009, and went into effect on November 1, 2009. According to the document, “The Comprehensive Plan is the key policy document that helps make the city workable, livable, and prosperous (City of Raleigh, 2009, 1).” Raleigh, through its 2030 Comprehensive Plan, offers a strong commitment to higher density, mixed-use development. This support is evident throughout the plan, including within its vision themes and topical elements. Several policies and actions of the plan encourage higher density development as a means to achieve citywide goals. The Growth Framework Map and Future Land Use Map are especially important in providing a spatial framework that provides greater clarity to both community members and developers about the type of development desired in specific locations. While the plan permits higher density development in some locations, it does not attempt to require higher densities. Citizens generally supported the concept of compact development, but were more concerned when it was proposed to be allowed nearby. Given Raleigh’s size and importance within the region, a variety of not-for-profit groups joined citizens in participating in the planning process. ULI – Triangle and Triangle Tomorrow helped frame the regional discussion of higher density development through the concurrent Reality Check process. WakeUp Wake County advocated for smart growth policies and brought citizen concerns over land use patterns to the fore.

Morrisville Town Center Plan and Morrisville Land Use Plan, 2009-2035

The Town of Morrisville completed two land use planning processes, the Morrisville Town Center Plan and Morrisville Land Use Plan, 2009-2035. The Town Center Plan was adopted by the Morrisville Board of Commissioners on January 22, 2007, and the Land Use Plan was adopted on March 24, 2009. The Town Center Plan, “describes a vision for creating a vibrant Town Center at Morrisville’s historic crossroads” (Town of Morrisville, 2007, 5). The Land Use Plan is a broader comprehensive

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<td>1.1</td>
<td>Amend Zoning Ordinance. Ensure that current zoning district descriptions are compatible with the general intent of the land use districts in the plan. Incorporate zoning categories for small-scale mixed use and transit oriented development. Note that this does not imply rezoning properties to match the land uses in this plan - only ensuring that matching zoning categories exist to allow rezoning upon a property owner’s request. This is a short-term solution; development of the Unified Development Ordinance in item 1.4 is the long term solution for amending the zoning ordinance.</td>
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<td>1.4</td>
<td>Create Unified Development Ordinance. This ordinance revision will allow for important updates and clarification of existing codes, making it easier for developers to understand the Town’s needs. It will provide an opportunity to formalize the future land use map presented in this Plan. In particular, the UDO will take a focused look at the design of Regional Activity Centers and address compatibility with and transitions to surrounding uses.</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>Develop Specific Plans for Redevelopment of Koppers (former Superfund Site). This site has an excellent location in Morrisville and holds potential to be an asset to the community. Creating clear options for how it could be redeveloped, as well as reaching out to developers, would hasten reaching the potential of this central property. A Plan should include how transit oriented development might be used to redevelop the site. Related to Item 3.17.</td>
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Table 1. Example Density-Promoting Actions from Morrisville Land Use Plan, 2009-2035
planning document that is intended to be “the foundation of the Town’s land use and development policies” (Town of Morrisville, 2009). Both plans contain aspects that support compact development. The Town Center Plan recommends moderate density increases to support retail uses in the Town Center. Its Land Use Design Map serves as the plan’s primary policy guidance and informed the new Town Center Code. The Land Use Plan is bolder in emphasizing strategic nodes of higher density. The plan advances a set of policies and corresponding actions, with three of the policies explicitly calling for higher density development. The Future Land Use Map is critical in establishing the character of development sought in each area. Given the low-density nature of the Town, clearly defined activity centers and careful transitions between new compact development and existing development were essential to gaining the community’s backing. With the Town’s smaller size, planning efforts attracted little attention from not-for-profit groups operating in the region.

Research Triangle Park Master Plan

Research Triangle Park (RTP) has served as a cornerstone of the Triangle’s economy since 1959. Yet the Park’s development scheme has not been updated in over forty years. Some fear the Park’s competitive position is eroding, and that its distinctly suburban character is at least partially culpable. The Research Triangle Foundation, the non-profit board that manages RTP, decided to embark upon a master planning process to re-envision development in the Park. The pending Master Plan is guided by a commitment to refashioning the Park’s traditional suburban development model in order to make it more competitive in today’s economy. In order to create strategic nodes of higher density within the Park, changes to its zoning regulations, covenants, and bylaws will be sought. This process will require the participation of companies within the Park, Durham and Wake Counties, and the state legislature. While the Research Triangle Foundation is hesitant to adopt regulations that might require higher densities throughout the Park, it may use land it currently owns to develop compact, mixed-use projects in order to catalyze the Park’s transformation. Companies within the Park and stakeholders from around the region have generally supported the Park’s vision. While few special-interest groups have become involved in the process, a ULI advisory services panel recommended higher density development and mixed-uses at the beginning of the Master Planning process.

**Recommendations for Fostering Higher Density**

Five recommendations for fostering higher density development through planning processes are offered.

1. **Construct a Multidimensional Vision for Compact Development.** The Raleigh 2030 Comprehensive Plan in particular provides an excellent example of how compact development can be embedded throughout an entire plan. Topical elements contain policies and actions that encourage developing at higher densities as a means of addressing various issues. Such a strategy firmly entrenches higher density development as a key planning objective and acknowledges the multiple ends which it can achieve. The Morrisville Land Use Plan also provides a compelling overall development framework, acknowledging the importance of vibrant centers.

2. **Provide a Compelling Rationale for Compact Development.** Again, the Raleigh 2030 Comprehensive Plan provides an excellent example of how a plan can promote higher density development in order to address many city issues. The benefits of vibrant and diverse centers are celebrated, particularly in the Downtown Chapter. The Research Triangle Park Master Plan similarly provides a convincing justification for why the Park must evolve its spatial pattern in order to remain competitive. Not-for-profit organizations can also play an invaluable role in shaping the regional conversation. The “Value of Vibrant Centers” handbook produced by ULI – Triangle and the

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<td>1D</td>
<td>Concentrate higher-density, mixed-use development near existing and proposed transit centers, and at activity centers to provide services to Town citizens and daytime employees in a pedestrian-friendly environment.</td>
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<td>3A</td>
<td>Establish development patterns supportive of a walkable, multi-modal community, including higher-density residential development and complementary land uses in the Town Center and around planned and potential transit and activity centers.</td>
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<td>3C</td>
<td>Encourage infill and redevelopment of existing areas as a way to promote compact, efficient development, and support transportation options.</td>
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Table 2. Example Density-Promoting Policies from *Morrisville Land Use Plan, 2009-2035*
Research Triangle Regional Partnership details the multifaceted benefits of higher density development.

3. *Articulate Where Higher Density is Desired.* All three studied planning processes sought to identify nodes where higher density development will be encouraged. This strategy provides predictability to both the community and developers and signals that compact development is welcome in the community. The Raleigh 2030 Comprehensive Plan and Morrisville Land Use Plan provide effective community-wide future land use maps and very clearly articulate the character of development sought in strategic nodes. Given the political difficulty and multijurisdictional complications of restricting development in some areas to stimulate compact growth elsewhere, up-zoning and simplifying the entitlement process where higher density development is desired may be a feasible solution for many communities.

4. *Provide for Appropriate Transitions.* In order to gain neighborhood support for higher density development, it is critical to provide for density transitions to existing neighborhoods. The Raleigh 2030 Comprehensive Plan and Morrisville Town Center Plan and Land Use Plan all articulate the necessity of stepping down density and use intensity from high density nodes to surrounding residential areas. Without this clear policy guidance, gaining public support for an increase in density may be prohibitively difficult.

5. *Seek Opportunities for Higher Density Development in Suburban Communities.* Morrisville’s Land Use Plan charts a bold future for a community that has traditionally been a low-density suburb. Identifying opportunities for retrofitting and vibrant centers within existing suburban communities is crucial to fostering more sustainable development patterns, particularly in a low-density region like the Triangle.