

Senate Banking Committee Testimony  
Strengthening the Ability of Public Transportation to Reduce Our Dependence on  
Foreign Oil  
9-9-08  
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Thank you Senator Dole. It is a great pleasure to work so closely with you, Senator Burr and your staffs to bring valuable public transportation projects to the Charlotte region. On behalf of CATS, we thank you for your continued support.

Chairman Dodd, Ranking Member Shelby and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to discuss the significance of public transportation and the importance of ensuring its funding in the years to come. I am pleased to be here to share with you the transit phenomenon that is occurring in Charlotte.

According to a recent published report, Charlotte is the best place to live in America. Another recent report indicated Charlotte's housing market, even during these troubled times, is one of the strongest in the Country. And yet another report listed Charlotte as having one of the lowest downtown office vacancy rates in the Nation. Not surprisingly, these successes have convinced many people to move to the area, establishing Charlotte as one of the fastest growing cities in our Country. Charlotte is projected to grow another 50 percent by the year 2030 - the equivalent of adding the entire population of Pittsburgh within our borders.

Unfortunately, these newcomers will not be bringing their roads with them. To deal with our growth, about a decade ago the visionary citizens of the City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County made a commitment to public transportation. The voters instituted a half percent sales tax to expand mass transportation in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. The investment has proven to be wise.

In addition to investing in transit, Charlotte voters passed two bond referendums totaling \$50 million for access improvements for transit oriented development and neighborhoods along the LYNX Blue Line. Some of the completed improvements include 100 pedestrian crossings, 16 miles of sidewalk, seven miles of bicycle lanes, 300 accessible ramps and one mile of new medians. Transit oriented development is a key component in Charlotte's growth strategy. In fact, property values along the LYNX Blue Line grew at a rate of 12 percent faster than the overall land values in Charlotte. Thousands of residential and commercial development is anticipated along the line.

CATS' ridership has risen almost 100 percent since the sales tax was introduced. In just this past year, July 2007 to July 2008, CATS ridership has increased over 40 percent, possibly establishing us as the fastest growing transit system in America. Our public transit users are helping Mecklenburg County save over 20,000 gallons of gas a day.

CATS ridership is growing among nearly all segments. Local services, express services, seniors, and people with disabilities are all riding the bus in record numbers. However, our greatest growth segment is what we call the choice rider. A choice rider often has two cars or more at home and travels in from the surrounding suburbs. These riders have a choice and they are choosing to take public transportation. In fact ridership on our buses that serve the six counties adjacent to Charlotte has grown so dramatically, that we often have people standing in the aisles because all the seats are taken. Just a few years ago, it would have been unfathomable that middle-class

suburbanites would make a choice to ride public transit, even if it means they have to stand the entire trip.

To deal with the ridership growth on the bus system, we are ordering more vehicles. In our most recent bus order, we committed nearly 25 percent of the bus order to hybrid vehicles. We would like to order all hybrid vehicles, but hybrids cost 50 percent more than standard buses and like many transit systems, we have to make a tough choice of either going green or getting more buses on the road to meet the growing demands of the riding public.

Incentives from the federal government would help more transit systems to purchase greener buses. The hybrids CATS has on order are possible due to Congestion Mitigation for Air Quality (CMAQ) funds.

To make our transit system more efficient, CATS has made a commitment to technological improvements. For example, we have installed Automatic Vehicle Locator (AVL) devices on all our buses. AVL has allowed us to improve reliability, reduce or eliminate low performing routes, and enhance the overall customer experience. A little known feature of AVL is that it monitors how the bus is driven; including how much time the bus spends idling. Since implementing a tough anti-idling policy in concert with AVL, CATS has increased its fuel efficiency by over 20 percent, saving taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars. Federal assistance for transit systems to increase technology investments can be a real benefit and bring back a solid return.

While we are very proud of the overall success of the bus system, the segment that has received the most attention in Charlotte has been LYNX Light Rail. Again we want to thank Senator Dole, Senator Burr and the Federal Transit Administration for

helping us get the line built. This new transportation option for the citizens of our region has truly been a turning point in North Carolina public transportation.

Since opening late last year, LYNX has become an instant icon in the Charlotte area with ridership going well beyond our most optimistic expectations. The success of LYNX has led one local reporter to ask in a recent article– “Is it 2025 yet?” We’re here to say it is. Utilizing Federal Transit Administration prescribed guidelines to estimate ridership, LYNX may actually reach year 2025 ridership levels before its first full year of service. First year ridership was estimated at 9,100 average daily riders, with that number rising to 18,100 by 2025. Well, we are already averaging 16,900 daily riders and we are only seven months into service. I would like to challenge you to find another city with a light rail start up system that has achieved a ridership level this quickly.

This success has suddenly made Charlotte a model city in the public transit world. In just six-months, we have hosted a number of cities from around the country and beyond who want to see the LYNX Light Rail. Visitors from places like Tampa, Atlanta, Mobile, Daytona, Oklahoma City, and Ontario, Canada are traveling to Charlotte to see the estimated \$1.8 billion in new and proposed developments that have emerged along the light rail line. They’ve also heard about the tens of millions of dollars in new property tax revenue LYNX is helping to generate. These dollars can be used to hire teachers, police officers and firefighters.

The tremendous use of the LYNX Blue Line is putting early stresses on the system. Sixty-five percent of our park and ride lots are full by 8 a.m. We are already researching opportunities to expand or purchase additional land to keep up with the demand of commuters at light rail park and ride lots. Frequency of service has also been increased to accommodate the rush of riders we have throughout the day. Using

more of the rail vehicles to reduce headways also means greater wear and tear on the vehicles in a shorter amount of time.

However, what I like to highlight to our visitors is the substantial impact LYNX has on everyday citizens. Of the city's 173 neighborhoods, the Charlotte neighborhood that has seen the greatest improvement is Wilmore, which is adjacent to the LYNX light rail line. Every two years, the City of Charlotte conducts a Quality of Life Study of its 173 neighborhoods. They assess a neighborhood's health by looking at a variety of measures including crime, property values, education, and teenage pregnancies. Just two years ago, Wilmore was given the City's lowest rating.

Today, by virtually every measure, Wilmore is now a better place to live. Crime is down, dropout rates are down, and residents property values skyrocketed. We are talking about people of modest means watching their homes with an average value of \$95,000 increase to \$192,000 in just two years.

The LYNX light rail opened during this same time period. Just imagine what that type of equity can mean for a family of modest income. Outside the City's core area, only three other neighborhoods showed improvement since 2006 - all of which are on the LYNX Light Rail Line.

Simply put, the investment in public transportation isn't just about moving people; it's about independence. Public transportation creates sustainable communities that strengthen neighborhoods and lives of everyday citizens.