

October 13, 2023

Mayor and Town Council

301 W Main St

Carrboro, NC 27510

Town of Carrboro, NC

Dear Mayor and Council members,

I am writing on behalf of the Orange-Chatham Group of the North Carolina Sierra Club. We support construction of the Bolin Creek Greenway in Carrboro, and specifically recommend the Creekside Alignment.[[1]](#footnote-1) This support and recommendation are in accordance with the national Sierra Club infill and smart growth policy adopted in 2019 -- the latest tool in our longstanding fight against sprawl and climate change (https://www.sierraclub.org/smart-growth-urban-infill). In addition, the national Sierra Club launched a guidance for the policy, meant to assist Sierra Club activists who are interested in making a difference in their community. For these purposes, as well as for a more vibrant, resilient, and equitable Carrboro, we support the construction of the Bolin Creek Greenway.

Use of the term “greenway” here is intended to encompass any pathway surface that will accommodate active transportation, as discussed below – i.e. a surface that accommodates *walking, bicycling, and/or rolling*, including *wheelchairs, walkers, baby strollers, skateboards, scooters, etc*.

Before discussing the infill policy, it is important to recognize that, of course, any greenway design must respect the buffer and water quality rules that protect our creeks and streams. In that context, we will discuss our support for the Creekside Alignment below. Of course, we also expect that these issues will be front and center during the design and permitting phase of greenway development.

The Sierra Club’s infill policy states:

Sierra Club’s mission in combination with growing threats to our environment require a renewed emphasis on cities and towns where people can live, work, and thrive while protecting and restoring our natural environment and fighting the causes and impacts of climate change. Our resilience to the threat of climate change begins with our social, cultural and economic resilience, which depends upon inclusive and fair communities.

Therefore, the Sierra Club supports transformative strategies that build communities that feature:

●Affordable housing accessible to all;

●**Transit, bike, and pedestrian first approaches to transportation;** [*emphasis ours*]

●Expanded opportunities for all residents to participate in the local economy and civic decisions;

●Living wage jobs;

●A balance between employment opportunities and housing;

●Access to education, services, amenities, and recreation that improve overall quality of life; and

●Measures and policies that increase climate resilience

Accompanying the policy document, Sierra Club has issued its [Smart Growth and Urban Infill Guidance](about:blank). The guidance contains a chapter called **Active Transportation and Transit**. The very first sentence says,

One of the Sierra Club transformative strategies for building communities included in the National Sierra Club Urban Infill Policy is: “Transit, bike, and pedestrian first approaches to transportation.”

It further says that:

To fix the rising rates of emissions from transportation we have to change both the physical layout of our communities and transportation infrastructure.

As it explains, changing our transportation infrastructure includes stressing what it calls *Active Transportation*, using as examples *walking, bicycling, and/or rolling*, including *wheelchairs, walkers, baby strollers, skateboards, scooters, etc*.

The guidance notes that:

[Active transportation] *can be designed for urban, suburban, and rural areas without extraordinary expense if properly planned*.

Finally, the chapter goes on to recommend a set of active transportation (and transit) policies, practices and strategies for which members should advocate, along with links to further resources on these recommendations. Here are some of them (emphasis ours):

* **Safe routes to schools plan and implementation strategy**
* Non-motorized transport strategy or policy
* **Policies that equalize access to micro-mobility**
* Policies that require infrastructure for active transportation modes to support the “first and last mile” and that are complementary with a community-wide mass transit strategy
* **Constructing connected network of multiuse trails**
* Providing safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian connections to public parks and recreation areas.

As Sierra Club members, we want to make sure all members of our community have access to active transportation routes, such as a greenway that connects different parts of town to downtown, and which provide children with safe routes to school. In addition to the considerable quality of life and [equity benefits](about:blank) this would provide to Carrboro’s citizens, it is also an extremely important strategy to help us reach our carbon reduction goals.

As you may have seen, according to the Town of Carrboro’s most recent (2019) [greenhouse gas emissions inventory](about:blank), motor vehicles contribute 38% of the carbon emitted in town. The greenway is intended, in part, to help get folks out of cars, and getting people out of cars is one big thing we need to do the lower our carbon emissions.

For example, given the long drop-off and pick-up lines every school day of the year, giving kids a safe walking and biking route to Seawall Elementary, Smith Middle, and Chapel Hill High schools will likely prevent a significant amount of family driving and idling, which costs time and money in addition to both carbon emissions and toxic pollution at the height where children breathe it in. This is a necessary step to significantly reducing our community’s carbon footprint.

Further, the additional benefits of access to active transportation, for all citizens, are myriad. They include greater access to nature, to jobs, and to downtown amenities for young people, other folks without access to cars, folks in wheelchairs, and older people who may not drive. People who use active transportation are also healthier, both physically and mentally.

While there is no one solution to climate change and community health and sustainability, it is clear that getting our citizens out of cars, as much as possible, is critical. Even the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has stressed the importance of lowering “vehicle miles traveled”.

Why the Creekside Alignment is Environmentally Preferable

The Orange-Chatham Sierra Club is in agreement with the Town of Carrboro’s conclusion, in its 2009 Master Plan, that the Creekside Alignment should be chosen. We have seen no new information that should change this conclusion. We agree with this conclusion based on the following:

* The Upland Forest route would require cutting down far more trees than the Creekside Alignment. This is largely because the Creekside Alignment would rest on an already cleared and compacted 30 foot wide OWASA sewer easement, down which OWASA vehicles travel. Because of truck, foot and bike traffic, this pathway is functionally impervious and already causing damaging sedimentation to Bolin Creek, as well as damage to tree roots.
* The Upland Forest route would connect far fewer Carrboro residents to the greenway. It would not connect to neighborhoods near Greensboro Street nor Hillsborough Street, for example. This will take far fewer cars going into downtown Carrboro off the road. Importantly, it will provide far fewer children with a walkable/bikeable path to school, so it will not address the considerable daily problem of parents idling their cars for 15 minutes at a time in school pickup lines, contributing to both ozone and particulate pollution, and to climate change.
* In 2009, Town staff recognized how the OWASA path is already impervious and unstable. This is why state Department of Water Officials in 2009 stated their belief that the Creekside Alignment would be allowed under Jordan Lake rules, and stated that they preferred this alignment because the path is already disturbed.
* Town staff also concluded in 2009 that the Creekside Alignment could actually improve environmental conditions; this reasoning still holds. Specifically, staff wrote:
  + *Inclusion of protective surfacing will protect soil particles from being dislodged by the impact of both wheels and feet, and therefore can be expected to reduce erosion relative to the existing condition.*
  + *A protective surface tread, potentially with usable shoulders, will concentrate use into a narrow corridor (10-15’ wide rather than the existing 25-50’ wide) and allow for stabilization and restoration of adjacent areas.*
  + *The trail can be designed and installed in a manner that will both drain adequately and be protected from erosion.*
* We strongly encourage the Town to take the above measures to protect the stream buffers, as well as any other appropriate measures recommended during the permitting process.

For all these reasons, we hope that you will finally take this important step and approve the Bolin Creek Greenway Creekside Alignment.

With thanks,

Melissa McCullough, Chair, Executive Committee

Orange-Chatham Group of the North Carolina Chapter of the Sierra Club

1. One member of our Executive Committee, Barbara Foushee, is a current member of the Carrboro Town Council, to whom this letter is addressed. Therefore she has recused herself completely during all discussion and voting on the Bolin Creek Greenway; she neither attended the meeting discussions nor participated in the voting. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)