

Alachua County Transportation Summit Report

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by

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(Corrections of Content and Analysis Very Welcom at -jtexconsult@gmail.com)

The Transportation Summit held by the County Commission invited dozens of stakeholders, including public institutions, advocacy groups, commercial groups (builders, developers, realtors), and public officials (mayors from various cities), and concerned citizens. My interpretation of the meeting is less specific and detail-oriented than general for the sake of clarity, and I recommend that you all read the transcript and watch the video once they are posted to develop your own interpretation. I will incorporate your analysis or corrections to the best of my ability with the full right for you to review or comment on that.

Disclosure: I tend to be a cheerleader for consensus when I see an opening from “anti-bike” folks. I saw a lot of that here, so I interpreted the meeting quite positively. The Gainesville Sun took two comments, one of them from a public citizen who represented only herself (respectfully). None of the other eleven stakeholders’ comments were considered, and the meeting was made to sound comical. That was not the tone of conversations between stakeholders during or after the meeting.

Also, I’ve heard a lot of people try to watch the video and say they got “yawny” or tired during the moderators opening remarks, which were long. Actually, what she did was explain honestly the rancour and bitterness that have accumulated over the years on transit issues from all sides. It made a lot of us squirm, because she was right. Her long message was necessary to assure that this did not devolve into some of the tit-for-tats that we have seen at county and city meetings over transit and repaving issues. I think in a time when a lot of us lament the attention span of a younger generation and the ill-effects of tweeting and facebook, we would do well to take our own criticism to heart (mine included) and accept the moderators patience-inducing but ultimately effective role in moving us forward as a community. She did a bang-up job.

So, here is a summary of my talk. (1) We need to work together away from the public hall and from under the thumb of the media and the eyes of the Commissioners as stakeholders. There is no reason we can’t have coffee or a bagel and figure out some things we agree on before we show up to Commission meetings to debate one another. The bone I threw to Florida Motorcycle Safety rep was that we also ride on the worst parts of the road (he invited me to a biker rally afterwards, pretty cool). (2) Without a doubt some kind of repaving and redesign of facilities will have to be done until the use of the automobile in our County and City rapidly declines. The question is what can we do to mitigate the need for it in the future, and

how will we as stakeholders educate our constituents on the need for projects that compete with our own, but that are on the same roads and paths and circuits?

In brief, I gave a “kumbaya” talk. Not knowing who was speaking after me, and speaking early, I thought this the best approach. Furthermore, I’m sick of wasting all of our time responding to emotional pleas vs. bikes and peds and busses (I also tried to avoid this at the City Commission meeting on 8th Ave, hope I did okay). Just let the facts speak and at the very least we will keep fence-sitting non-bike-ped-transit folks at home. I got lucky in that the following speakers did just that.

Representatives from local builders and realtors associations were my heroes for the day. They used data from their own national associations to show that the current emerging and next generations of buyers and families DO NOT favor the auto-dependent suburban dream of their parents. They want to live in walkable communities with more density, less yard to take care of, and more public commons with retail, services, and public institutions. The vast majority of folks under forty now list walkability, rideability, and transit options as fundamental to their selection of location for living and working.

Two other presentations stood out, not just for their clean presentation and excellent arguments and statistics (moreso John’s since he is talking about largely extant phenomena), but for their passion and their divvying up of the world of Alachua into its two sometimes conflicting components. The one is a largely rural Agriculture sector of a large southern and fertile county called Alachua which provides the third or fourth largest economic sector in the county (according to UF’s IFAS data), and also provides a good number of the working people who make long and arduous commutes daily to work in the first and second place sectors--education and health care, mostly in Gainesville. The other component is what I call “The Bubble,” that vast complex of education and health care complexes centered in or around UF and Shands, with sister planets like Santa Fe State College and the VA.

As a guy from a rural township in cattle country I often wince at the derision and stereotyping with which the Bubble people view “ACR” folks (Alachua County residents). I likewise wince at the country-fried conservatism and palpable anti-progressivism of many ACRs (both in and out of Gainesville). What John Martin (former mayorial candidate) did was make a reasonable and educated plea for the importance of nicely paved roadways for the ACR economy, whether it is agricultural or “coming to town to work” in a bus or a car. What City Commissioner Thomas Hawkins did was make a similar plea for the importance of the Bubble Economy--young salaried creatives and green startups around Innovation Square--to the importance of the Gainesville economy. They did so without condescension, an admirable feat. I consider both men assets to our debate.

What Martin and Hawkins do is expose the fundamental rift inside our transportation debate--the one between a largely car-dependent community outside the bubble and a largely transit-optional (if imperfectly so) and transit-visioned community inside the bubble.

In many ways the County Master Plan (thanks Kristen Young for tuning me into the details) realizes this, with multiple projects completing busways, park and rides, and bike trails in the Gainesville satellite towns that are in their own right, and by Martin’s accounting, really “planets” worthy of their own infrastructure. I hope the other stakeholders got this sense of this rift, one that meanders conveniently down I-75, but also has borders in East Gainesville and in

the Southwest of our County's capital city.

On the negative tip, mostly during public comments but also from a local realtor and our mayor-elect Ed Braddy, we heard fairly homogenous and concerted retorts about the "American Dream" of a big yard, far from the city center, with automobility as its driving transit option." Like transit activists, there is a common jargon and ideology at work here, but unlike transit and density proponents, the American Dreamers don't have science, polling, and data, even from the very accrediting agencies that give them title, to support their assertions.

I don't want to discount former City Commission candidate and realtor Donna Purfalo, or mayor elect Braddy. I actually believe Braddy's coalition campaign (including Dems for Braddy, multiple environmentalists, and some reluctant progressive voters) will come to roost, and that the fact of our likely still 4-2 majority on the City Commission on transit progress (Braddy and Commish Chase vs. the other four) will force some softening of his rhetoric. We can only hope.

I do think that to focus overly on the American Dreamer ideology is a distraction from a great majority of Gainesville folk who, even if they live in the low-density low-transit option suburbs, are at least considering the benefits in their burghs of, say, the Archer Braid trail, a central shopping area, and bike-ped-transit access to public schools. All the data the builders and realtors gave us says so. A vast majority of the below-retirement age crowd in Haile Plantation for example supported the Archer Braid and support transit--they would love to take a well-lit and well-served bus from Haile Village to downtown Bo Diddley and share an evening at the farmer's market with their neighbors inside Gville and the East Side. And those folks would also, we discovered during that last many public hearings, love to travel west to Haile and Archer and Alachua for fun and commerce.

People like to do things together. Such is the way of things.

So what does this mean politically? Well the not so silent elephant in the room was the possibility of a rerun on the proposed 1% "roads" sales tax that the County (mostly Gainesville, and I'd like to think a good bit of the Gainesville Cycling Club) roundly crushed during the last election cycle. It had no transit or bike ped funding, and sales taxes are regressive (less so in a touristy town like Gainesville, but much so in the county towns), and there is a huge anti-govt anti-tax sentiment right now. But what I think most everyone in the room was saying was we need some kind of county funding to fix our infrastructure, and we need to give in to our opponents a little to get it. The idea currently being floated is a rekindling of the roads tax with some dedicated funds for bike-ped--it will be very small (1% or so), and you all will have to decide if we support it.

I think the big question for my immediate colleagues (the cycling commuters, esp. in the GCC) and for the larger random or organized bike-ped-transit coalition, is whether we want to keep fighting a tax until we get a radical ideological overhaul leaning more toward earth friendly and working-class affordable transit, or do we want to accept a very small portion of a repaving tax to be dedicated to bike-ped and busses and wait until a darker future when gas is more expensive and non-car options more politically acceptable? That is the rub. The radical in me wants to hold out for more, the compromiser in me looks to get some stuff done to repair some wounds in our body politic. I hope you all will guide all of the stakeholder representatives and let them know (loudly if necessary) which way to lean, but more important to get involved. We need more warm bodies, and more voices in this debate.

Think about it, don't just let me or the GCC Advocacy Committee know what you think--you should also be talking to your realtor, your home builder, your boss, your bus driver, your friends, businesses you frequent (and not just the owners), and fellow students. Transit is not about cars, or bikes, or busses, or walking--it is the most radical communal activity we partake in daily without supervision. The way it unfolds is up to all of us.