

New interstate and campus spur prospecting in NW Guilford

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Two weeks after being sworn in as a new member of the Greensboro City Council, developer Robbie Perkins recused himself from a vote to amend the city's comprehensive plan for GTCC's proposed aviation campus near Oak Ridge. Perkins explained that the decision involved extending water and sewer services to the new campus and that his company, NAI Piedmont Triad, had financial and brokerage relationships, not to mention partnerships in the area that could benefit from the new utilities infrastructure.

"Based on the whole theory that water and sewer makes property more valuable," Perkins said, "I think I should abstain."

The amendment passed unanimously without Perkins' vote. Two council members reassured property owners concerned about the campus scarring their view and displacing wildlife that the community college had proven to be a model of neighborliness with its campuses in Jamestown and east Greensboro. And college President Don Cameron said during a public hearing that the campus would spur economic growth in Guilford County by training residents for jobs in aviation and logistics.

Voters in Guilford County have also signaled widespread support for the new campus, approving a \$79.2 million bond referendum by a 9.4-percent margin in May. The new campus represents the kind of business-progressive politics that in North Carolina tends to draw together a motley coalition of players who otherwise share little in common.

With traditional industries ailing, the area's rare economic growth has lately come from the aviation and logistics fields - enterprises that naturally cluster around Piedmont Triad International Airport. And with the HondaJet scheduled to begin rolling planes out in 2010, community leaders have been eager to train local residents so they could qualify for the new jobs. New students would mean more jobs for faculty and support staff, and all would add to consumer spending. GTCC has been a generous media buyer, and YES! Weekly was among several entities that endorsed the bond issue earlier this year. Honda Aircraft Co., Cessna Aircraft Co., Old Dominion Freightline and New Breed Logistics each chipped in \$5,000 to help a GTCC political action committee rally support for the bond issue.

In short, GTCC's expansion has represented economic development in Greensboro and the surrounding countryside.

Everybody wins, it would seem, with the exception of group rural homeowners in a rare remaining sliver of unincorporated land between Greensboro and Oak Ridge. They are

residents who like their one-story ranch houses nestled in the woods, prefer cattle pastures to fields of pavement, and would rather live out their days than take a payout from developers.

"Dr. Cameron was talking about this being an aerotropolis," said Barbara Sumner, who has lived with her husband on nearby Castleford Drive since the mid-1980s. "I looked it up, and oh my God, it describes rings of apartments for the worker bees. That's really, really scary. Greensboro, North Carolina, do we really want to be Charlotte?"

Sumner works from home as business analyst for a major nationwide company. Her husband is a glazier who has helped erect several of the county's major corporate parks.

"Me and Tom camp and we hike," she said. "What do you hear?" She paused for a moment to give audience to a gentle symphony of birds. "It's nice out here. Yeah, you hear some trucks [too]."

Notwithstanding reluctant neighbors such as the Sumners, Cameron and GTCC might turn out to be rainmakers not only for aviation companies and future workers, but also for developers hungrily eyeing vacant real estate along the NC Highway 68 corridor.

When a newly formed limited liability company brought a request for a separate comprehensive plan amendment before the council last month to allow for a retail and residential development adjacent to the future campus, not one but two members had to recuse themselves from the vote.

At-large Councilman Robbie Perkins, who also abstained from voting on the amendment requested by GTCC, told YES! Weekly that he and an unnamed group of partners hold a contract to purchase the property. The limited liability company was set up by Brooks Pierce law firm, and Derek Allen, the lawyer arguing the case before council, said he was hired by Stanhope Johnson, a partner in Perkins' firm, NAI Piedmont Triad.

Zack Matheny, who represents District 3 and is employed as financial consultant at Wachovia Securities, also recused himself. He said he was part of a separate group of investors that might possibly obtain a contract on the property.

Matheny said at the time he voted for the amendment requested by GTCC he had not joined the partnership and was not aware of any plans to invest in real estate next door to the new campus.

"That vote was what, in December?" he said. "I think I joined in February. I didn't write a check until three weeks ago.

"It's a private LLC," Matheny added. "It's just a business venture to do something good, and I hope it works out."

Allen, the lawyer with Brooks Pierce, noted that GTCC's aviation campus is spurring real-estate development by creating a demand for housing and retail services. A third force behind both initiatives is the vaunted 220-68 Connector, a four-lane thoroughfare that will be part of the future Interstate 73-74 proposed to run from Myrtle Beach, SC to Detroit. Both the college and its coterie of real estate hangers-on are banking on a favorable decision from the NC Department of Transportation to locate an interchange nearby to funnel traffic off the interstate to Leabourne Road, which bisects the future campus and proposed apartment complexes and shopping centers.

"That's where the 220 Connector comes down," Allen said. "That's the only way off the 220 Connector for a long way. The proposed 220 Connector, which is part of Interstate 73, this is how the FedEx guys are going to get out and go north.... That major artery will take a lot of traffic off 68. The way on and off the interstate will be right there on Leabourne Road. That's one of the reasons GTCC is going to be there. GTCC wants supportive services, places for people to live and shop."

In fact, the interchange at the southwest end of the connector has yet to be determined, said Mike Mills, chief engineer for the NC Department of Transportation's Division 7. The department has narrowed alternatives for the future interstate down from four to two. Alternative 1, the alignment favored by the department and most amenable to GTCC and the prospective developers next door would route the interstate along NC Highway 68 with an interchange a quarter mile south of Leabourne Road before cutting across to Greensboro's western loop and then south towards Asheboro.

The second alignment, identified as Alternative 4, would break away from the connector east of the campus and cut across residential areas in a more direct path towards the western loop. Mills estimated that the interchange assigned under Alternative 4 would add an extra half-mile to the trip between the connector and the campus.

"Alternative 4 would be a closer route," Mills said, evaluating the relative merits of the two options, "but then you have more human impacts. You've got more relocation of people."

Mills said he expects the department to make a decision on the interchange in six to eight weeks. Transportation planners say right-of-way acquisition for the connector is expected to begin in 2010, and construction would commence in 2013. Mills said the department has been inundated with phone calls from developers and others anxious to find out where the interchange will be located.

The developers eyeing the land across the street from the future campus are not the only ones rolling the dice on real estate along the NC Highway 68 corridor. Property owner Johnny O. Pitts requested a delay on a rezoning request from the Guilford County Planning Board until its July 9 meeting. The request calls for 66 acres located a little ways south of the GTCC campus to be rezoned from agricultural to mixed-used office, commercial and residential. A county planning document identifies the developer at Huntington Run Development Co.

Allen indicated that he does not view the proposed development as a threat to the Leabourne Road project's market share because of presumed conditions placed on the Pitts property to limit the amount of acreage that can be used for retail and residential building. The proposal calls for 42 percent of the property to be reserved for corporate park and 22 acres to remain open space.

One significant advantage the Leabourne Road development holds over its rival to the south is that the Pitts property lies in the pathway of the planned connector. An official roadway corridor map filed by the NC Department of Transportation in 1997 shows the future four-lane connector cutting directly across the property, which lies west of NC Highway 68 at Edgefield Road. If the department approves Alternative 1, as expected, an interchange would also be installed in the general vicinity of the property.

Local and state planners gave contradictory accounts as to whether the planned alignment of the connector might impede Pitts' rezoning request. Craig McKinney, a transportation planner for the city of Greensboro, said he advised Bill Bruce, a planner with Guilford County, that the rezoning request would need to be reviewed by the NC Department of Transportation.

Guilford County Deputy Planning Director Les Eger said Pitts requested a delay not because the county instructed him to submit his rezoning request for review by the state but because of low turnout at a meeting arranged to present the plan to neighboring property owners. Pitts did not return phone messages for this story and none of the partners in Huntington Run Development Co. could be reached for comment.

"The guy has the right to come in and request something with his property," Eger said. "The DOT could take years to make a decision. The DOT could say, "Forget it, we're not even gonna go there."

Kirk Perkins, a real-estate appraiser who chairs the Guilford County Commission, said rezoning the property for higher and more profitable uses could potentially increase the value of the land when the state begins to acquire right-of-way in 2010.

"If it's at a higher zoning then it could make a difference as to what the market value is," he said.

Doug Allison, branch manager for right-of-way, said the NC Department of Transportation plays no role in regulating rezoning decisions and would not intervene to stop a property owner from obtaining a higher zoning that could potentially increase the amount of compensation awarded by the state, despite the fact that the roadway corridor map is a public document that has been on file with the county register of deeds for more than a decade.

"The Department of Transportation has nothing to do with zoning, and whoever the county authorities and planners are, these are the ones who determine the uses they

want," he said. "When we come to acquire right-of-way it would be appraised based on what the zoning is at that time."

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