



Triangle rentals
are easy to find with apartments.

newsobserver.com

Raleigh · Durham · Cary · Chapel Hill

 [Subscribe to print edition](#)

Search Keyword

Sunday

MemberCenter

[Register/Log In](#)
[Help](#)
[About Us](#)
[Contact Us](#)

B City & State

[Sunday](#) | [Monday](#) | [Tuesday](#) | [Wednesday](#) | [Thursday](#) | [Friday](#) | [Saturday](#)

[Home](#) / [Print](#) / [Sund](#)

Published: Jul 11, 2004
Modified: Jul 11, 2004 7:45 AM

Story Tools

[Printer friendly](#)
[Send to a friend](#)

Adverti

[Home](#)
[News](#)
[Politics](#)
[Business](#)
[Sports](#)
[Lifestyles](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Multimedia Gallery](#)
[Weather](#)
[Archives](#)
[Print Edition](#)

East commuter rail affordable

Proposed Eastrans would run a U-shaped route from Wilson and Goldsboro to Raleigh

By ELLEN SUNG, Staff Writer

The idea of commuters from Zebulon hopping a train to work in Raleigh may seem far-fetched. But a new study says the idea is not only feasible, but also affordable.

"We have lots of people tell us we're foolish and we're silly and we don't know what we're doing," said Mike Frangos, Knightdale planning director and a champion of a proposed rail system called Eastrans. "We see it as trying to get ahead of the development curve."

Backers say a recent study bolsters their proposal for a two-corridor, U-shaped route running east from Raleigh on existing tracks. A northern leg would reach Wilson, with stops in Knightdale, Wendell and Zebulon. A southern leg would reach Goldsboro, with stops in Clayton and Selma.

The study, commissioned by Knightdale officials, concludes that building the 100-mile Eastrans system would cost \$126 million -- less than the typical cost of eight miles of urban freeway and two-thirds the cost of the 11-mile U.S. 64 Bypass around Knightdale.

Frangos and officials in other towns along the route see Eastrans as a way to promote economic development, encourage compact growth, and make their communities more attractive to commuters. In Raleigh, it would link to two stations serving the Triangle Transit Authority's planned rail line.

Knightdale, 11 miles east of Raleigh, is centered around clogged U.S. 64. New roads will provide some relief; later this year, drivers will zip around Knightdale on the new U.S. 64 Bypass, and by 2006, the Outer Loop will speed them to work at Research Triangle Park and beyond. But the quick commutes won't last forever. The new, hassle-free highways will be congested within 25 years.

Frangos envisions a downtown where people could live, shop and walk to the train stop -- all without fighting traffic on U.S. 64.

Others are intrigued by the rail idea too: Knightdale officials got the state Department of Transportation and the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, a transportation group, to help pay for the \$155,000 study by consultants Wilbur Smith Associates of Columbia, S.C.



[Movies](#)
[Dining & Clubs](#)
[Weddings](#)
[Travel](#)
[Directory](#)
[Education Guide](#)

Towns on the fringe of the Triangle see commuter rail as a possible engine for growth.

Selma Town Manager Jeff White said Eastrans has the potential to boost downtown redevelopment and encourage people to buy homes in the Johnston County town. It currently takes about 45 minutes to drive 30 miles from Selma to Raleigh, thanks to clogged traffic on U.S. 70. The study estimates commuters could make the same trip by train in 37 minutes.

Don't expect to jump a train from Selma to downtown Raleigh anytime soon. At best, it would be a decade before trains run.

The study cited major hurdles, particularly along the northern spur to Wilson. That corridor, owned by the Norfolk Southern freight company and dotted by grade crossings, was designed in the 1900s with twists and turns that make it impossible for commuter trains to accelerate to top speed. Straightening out the kinks would cost tens of millions.

The southern spur to Goldsboro runs along straighter tracks owned by the N.C. Railroad Co. that would require fewer improvements. The state is considering the corridor for passenger rail service to Wilmington.

In three years, the N.C. Railroad Co. already has spent \$25 million to improve tracks between Raleigh and Morehead City, said president Scott Saylor. It plans an additional \$16 million in improvements between Raleigh and Goldsboro in the next year and a half.

The N.C. Railroad Co. projects could cut the final price tag for Eastrans. Even so, the Eastrans project would likely cost upwards of \$100 million for improving tracks, installing signals and buying locomotives and rail cars. Operating the system would cost \$4.7 million a year.

The Eastrans study does not address in detail how the project would be funded. Researchers said 1,350 people would have to ride the train each day to make it competitive for federal money.

"You can get 75 or 80 percent federal funding for a road project," said Patrick Simmons, director of the rail division for the state Department of Transportation. "You can get -- at best, after a struggle -- 50 percent funding for a commuter rail program."

The rest would come from state and local government, said White, the Selma town manager. Passenger fares would not cover all the costs.

"We don't expect highways to break even," White said. "We understand that bus systems in most cities don't break even, so why should we look at rail any differently? ... It really comes down to, 'Is it a good use of public money?'"

So far, the Eastrans movement has been led by officials in towns along the rail lines, and they say they will need help to get the trains running. Frangos, the Knightdale planning director, said their study will gather dust on a shelf unless regional or state transportation officials take on Eastrans as a cause.

"We're really about at the end of what we can do as far as our first and last gasp in terms of getting this going," Frangos said.

One possibility stirring interest is another, more detailed study of who would ride the train. N.C. Railroad Co. would chip in one-sixth of the \$250,000 cost, if towns such as Goldsboro and Wilson find the rest, Saylor said.

"We are interested in what the true market may be," Saylor said. "There is no data. All we see are strings of traffic on Highway 70 and Highway 64."