

ORANGE COUNTY
SHORT RANGE TRANSIT PLAN

**Short Range
Transit Plan**

2025 to 2030

DRAFT August 2024



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1 OVERVIEW

Orange County Transportation Services

Orange County Transportation Services (OCTS) provides fixed-route bus, demand response, and microtransit services throughout Orange County, NC and to surrounding communities within 10 miles. OCTS is one of three main public transit providers in Orange County, primarily serving the municipalities of Hillsborough and Mebane and the unincorporated areas of the County. Chapel Hill Transit provides service in Chapel Hill and Carrboro, and GoTriangle connects the major regional destinations.

Orange County Transit Plan

In 2012, voters in Orange County approved a half-cent sales tax to fund transit service and transit infrastructure improvements in the county. Revenues from the Transit Tax support transit services provided by OCTS, Chapel Hill Transit, and GoTriangle, and are allocated based on the needs, values, and priorities laid out in the Orange County Transit Plan and subsequent updates. The 2022 Orange County Transit Plan Update guides the allocation of revenue from the transit tax over the next 20 years. The Orange Transit Governing Boards include the Governance ILA parties, which consists of the Orange Board of County Commissioners, the

Durham-Chapel Hill-Carrboro (DCHC MPO) Executive Board, and the GoTriangle Board of Trustees.

Short Range Transit Plan

The projects and priorities identified in the Orange County Transit Plan and its updates inform the short-term planning efforts of transit agencies that operate in Orange County, including OCTS. The Orange County Short Range Transit Plan (SRTP) guides the improvement of OCTS transit through 2030. The SRTP analyzes existing service performance and markets, evaluates strategies for improving transit, and recommends a year-by-year transit investment program through 2030. Development of the SRTP was overseen by the Core Technical Team, a group of key stakeholders meeting regularly to review and provide feedback throughout the SRTP process. Members of the Core Technical Team include representatives from municipalities in the service area, regional agencies, and the other transit providers in the county. Funding for identified projects is provided through multiple sources, in addition to the funding allocated through the Orange County Transit Plan.

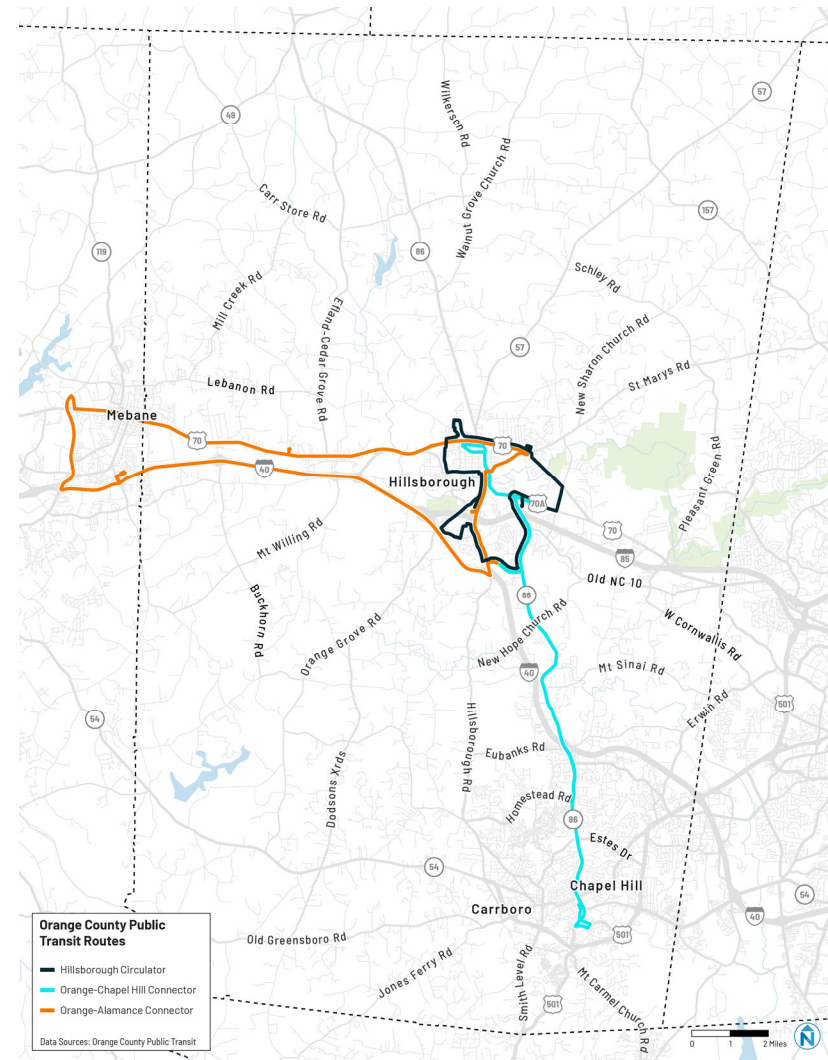
2 EXISTING CONDITIONS

Current Service

OCTS provides both regional and local service with its fixed route buses, shown in Figure 1. The Hillsborough Circulator is a local route serving key destinations in Hillsborough. Two regional connector routes, the Orange-Alamance Connector and the Orange-Chapel Hill Connector, connect Hillsborough with other regional destinations and fill a midday gap for peak-only GoTriangle bus routes, with additional local service stops. Each OCTS route and service has different hours of operation, though all fixed route buses are scheduled to operate hourly throughout their service period.

Along with the paratransit provided within 3/4 mile of fixed route service as required by the Americans with Disabilities Act, OCTS provides two types of non-fixed route service: program-based rural demand response service and a publicly available microtransit service called Orange County Mobility on Demand (MOD). Both service types operate throughout all of Orange County and serve key destinations in Mebane and Durham.

Figure 1: Current OCTS Fixed Route Service



Demand for Transit

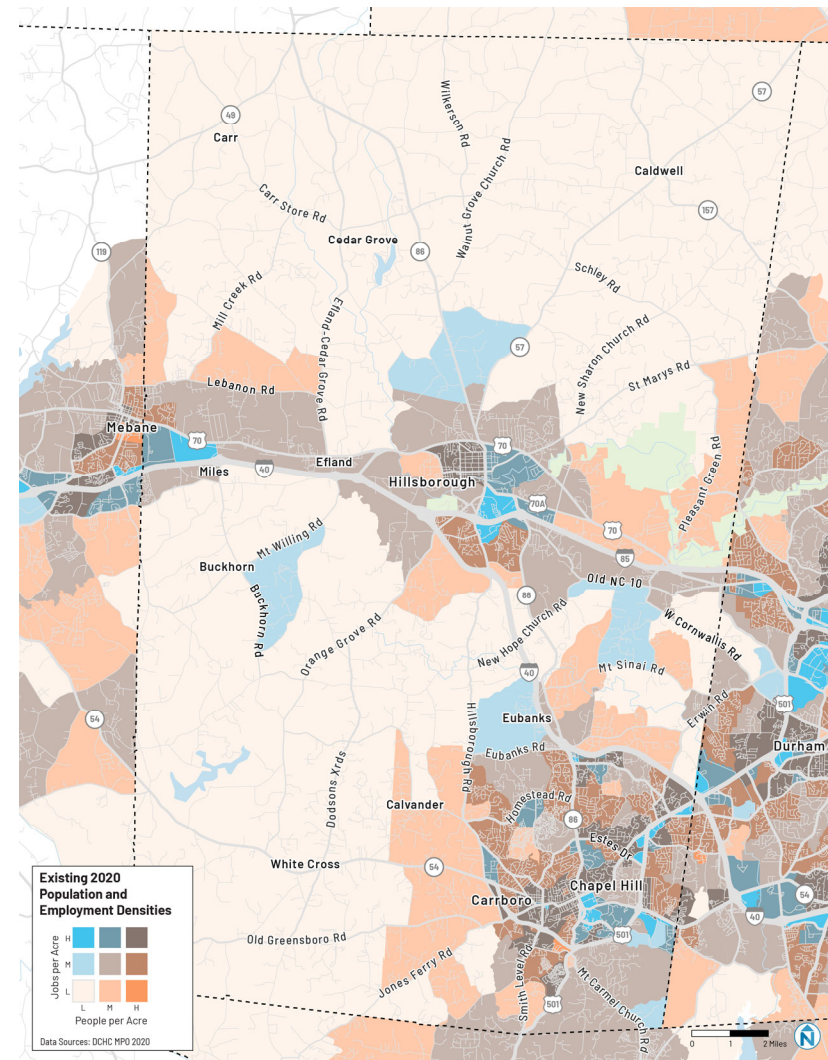
A major factor in determining the demand for transit is density: where people live and work, and how those areas are concentrated. Population and employment density may be used to indicate an appropriate level of transit service. Areas that are higher density may be able to support more frequent fixed route transit, while areas with lower density may be better suited for demand response or microtransit services.

Population density and transit demand is greatest in the Carrboro, Chapel Hill, Hillsborough, and Mebane areas. The rest of the county is rural, where demand-response services may be more suitable than fixed-route transit. Most of the employment density is located within towns and cities and along major corridors. Service jobs make up the largest share of jobs in the county.

Together, population and employment density give a more complete picture of potential demand for transit. Figure 2 shows the combined population and employment densities by Traffic Analysis Zone. Blue areas on the map signify areas with high employment density but lower population density, while orange represents areas with higher population density and lower job density. Darker brown areas have high densities of both employment and population.

Based on an analysis of travel patterns amongst all modes of transportation, most trips take place within municipalities. There is also relatively strong travel demand along the Mebane-Hillsborough corridor.

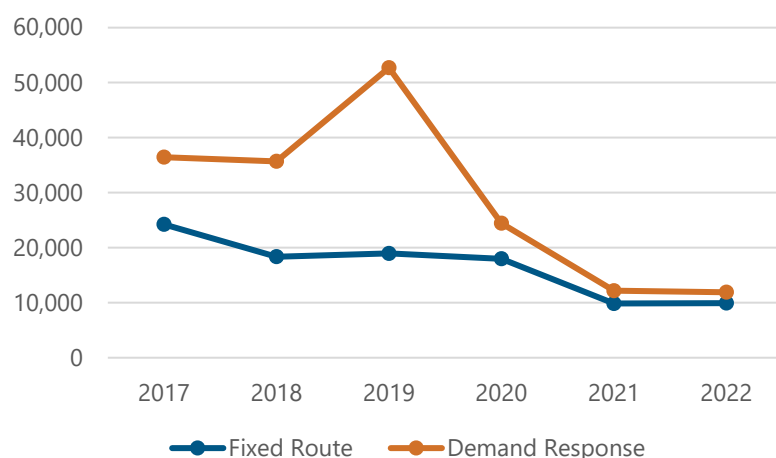
Figure 2: Population and Employment Densities



Service Performance

Ridership on OCTS’s demand response services declined significantly in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and continued to decline in 2021. Fixed route ridership did not see the same steep decline in 2020 but decreased in 2018 and again in 2021 (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Annual Unlinked Passenger Trips by Service Type



Source: FTA NTD

The pandemic and resulting changes to commute patterns, paired with vehicle and driver shortage challenges at the agency, have led to significant on-the-ground changes to the services being offered in recent years, including route suspensions and service hour changes. These challenges and changes make exact comparisons over time difficult on the level of an individual route or service. The Hillsborough Circulator is OCTS’s highest performing fixed-route service in both total ridership and

boardings per revenue hour, and it has recovered to approximately 78% of its pre-pandemic ridership. The Orange-Alamance Connector, on the other end of the spectrum, is currently partially suspended and covered by demand response service, and it had the lowest ridership of the three fixed routes before its suspension.

Public Engagement Key Findings

The first phase of engagement for the plan took place from March 4 to March 31, 2024. Target audiences included transit riders, Orange County residents, traditionally underserved communities (both riders and non-riders), and other community stakeholders. The project team held a series of pop-ups at bus shelters, community centers, and community events across Orange County (Figure 4). Standalone polling boards featuring project details and simple questions were placed in transit shelters at key bus stops in Orange County. A short survey was distributed both online and in print form in English and Spanish to Orange County stakeholders and 13 community centers, libraries, and apartments. A total of 191 participants completed the survey.

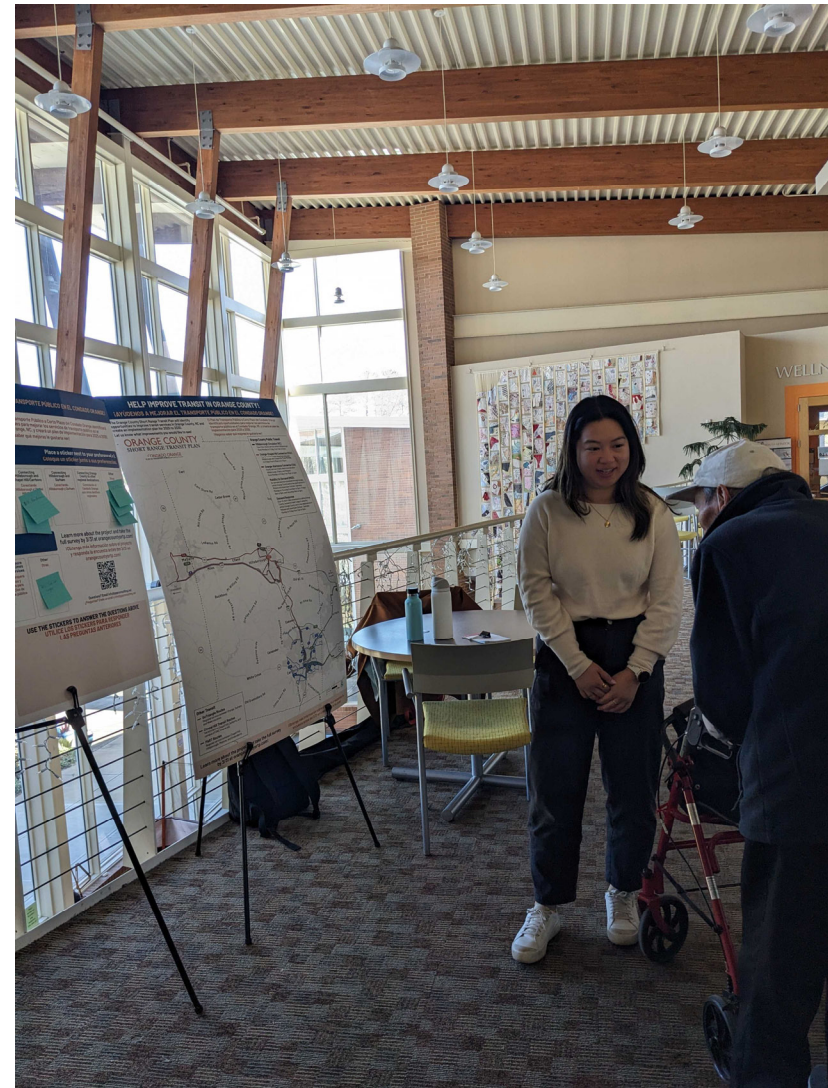
Locations where participants were most interested in seeing better transit services included between Hillsborough and Chapel Hill, from unincorporated Orange County into the municipalities, and between Hillsborough and Mebane. Survey and pop-up respondents favored midday weekday service the most, followed by Saturday service, while polling board respondents were most

interested in peak commute service and expanded morning and evening hours.

Participants desired improvements to transit services, including reliability, frequency, extended coverage, on-demand options, and accessible information such as real-time tracking apps. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of improving access to public transit through facilities like park and ride facilities, bike lanes, and pedestrian infrastructure.

A second round of public engagement in August and September 2024 will gather feedback on this draft plan through similar strategies of pop-ups and a distributed survey.

Figure 4: Pop-Up Event at Seymour Senior Center



3 PROJECT GOALS, OBJECTIVES, AND METRICS

An evaluation framework allows Orange County to prioritize recommendations and evaluate projects, policies, and programs for their ability to achieve the goals and values of the Orange County Transit Plan and Orange County Strategic Plan. The Core Community Values from the Orange County Transit Plan Update provided the foundation for evaluating the proposed strategies, and objectives for each value were taken directly from either the Transit Plan Update or the multimodal transportation section of the Strategic Plan. The Core Values and related Objectives include:

- **Equity**
 - Prioritize the transit needs of underserved or transit-dependent residents; includes historically disinvested communities of color, lower-income neighborhoods, seniors, and rural communities.
- **Economic Prosperity**
 - Prioritize increasing access to jobs and opportunities
- **Environmental Sustainability**
 - Prioritize accessible and convenient transit service in areas with existing or planned higher density development.

- Increase community awareness of all modes of transportation including transit, bike and pedestrian, vehicle, and all other modes
- **Transportation & Access for All**
 - Prioritize transit service that increases transit access for the most people to the most places
- **Affordable & Attainable Quality of Life**
 - Prioritize transit service connections to affordable housing, recreation, and arts and cultural opportunities.
 - Identify priorities and resources necessary to implement the Orange County Transit Plan.

For evaluation purposes, metrics were created to measure how well a project supported each objective, with a total of nine final metrics in the evaluation framework. Each strategy was scored from one to three points per metric. Methods of measurement varied depending on the type of strategy, and both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used. Final scores based on the evaluation framework helped to prioritize different strategies and spend Orange County’s funds in accordance with their core values. Full methodology details and strategy scores are available in Appendix B: Strategies Evaluation.

4 RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Strategy Types

A broad range of strategies for improving public transportation in Orange County were developed based on findings from the Existing Conditions report, the first round of public engagement, and other adopted transportation plans. Strategies were categorized into three types:

1. **Transit service strategies** – both new services and operational changes to existing services, including fixed-route, on-demand, and rural demand response services
2. **Policies and programs** – strategies that target agency policies or administrative activities
3. **Capital improvements** – physical infrastructure projects beyond basic bus stop signs.

All strategies were presented to the Core Technical Team and adjusted based on feedback before moving to evaluation. Strategies were slotted into the available budget and the 2025 to 2030 timeline before being reviewed by stakeholders and the public. The timeframe of the SRTP was broken into two key periods: short-term strategies that should be implemented starting in 2025 through 2027 and medium-term strategies that should be implemented from 2028 through the end of 2030. Long-term strategies are those that would be implemented in 2031 or later. Final strategies found in the Short Range Transit

Plan may differ slightly from those in Appendix B based on engagement feedback and technical considerations.

Transit Service Strategies

Short Term projects should be implemented early in the SRTP timeframe, and resources are available within the current known budget. Short term transit service strategies include:

- Mobility on Demand Service Improvements
- Discontinue Orange-Alamance Connector
- Hillsborough Circulator Improvements Phase 1
- Mebane Circulator
- Hill to Hill Consolidation Phase 1

Medium Term projects should be implemented later in the SRTP timeframe, and may require additional funding sources and grant applications. Medium term transit service strategies include:

- Demand Response Weekend Service

Long Term projects should be pursued after the SRTP timeframe ends, as funding is currently unavailable. Long term transit service strategies include:

- Hillsborough Circulator Improvements Phase 2
- Hill to Hill Consolidation Phase 2
- MOD Service Span Expansion

MOBILITY ON DEMAND SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS

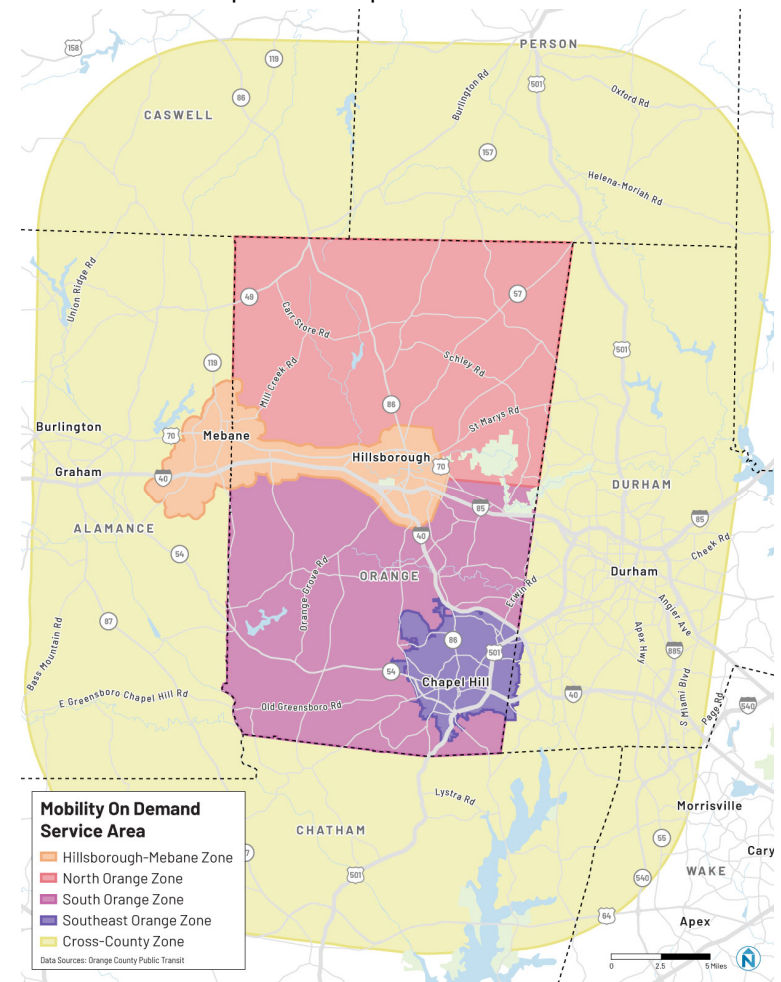
Short Term

Background: Orange County MOD is underused, given the potential demand within the service area. Microtransit service is well suited for the density of much of Orange County and can provide the public with high-quality and low-cost transportation options for those who cannot or choose not to drive.

Strategy Overview: Create zones for faster, cheaper trips within municipalities and consistent wait times for rural trips. The ability to book trips by making a phone call will also be added. No changes to hours of service are proposed within the S RTP timeframe.

- Hillsborough-Mebane Zone: Shorter wait times within this zone
- North and South Orange Zones: Dedicated vehicles for each zone to make consistent wait times
- Southeast Zone: Trips cannot both start and end in this zone
- Cross-County: This zone will extend 10 miles out from the Orange County border, covering rural and urban key destinations in neighboring counties. Trips cannot both begin and end within this zone.

	Existing	Proposed
Span of Service		
Monday to Thursday	8 AM – 5 PM	8 AM – 5 PM
Friday	8 AM – 9 PM	8 AM – 9 PM
Saturday	9 AM – 5 PM	9 AM – 5 PM



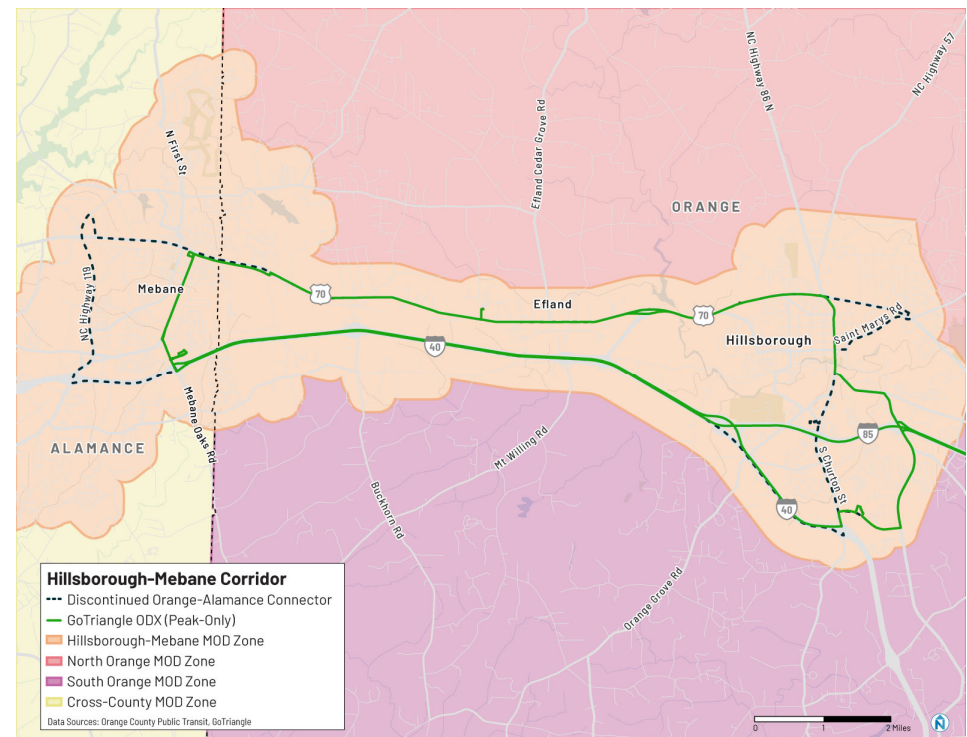
DISCONTINUE ORANGE-ALAMANCE CONNECTOR

Short Term

Background: The Orange-Alamance Connector is a low ridership route that offers redundant service with the GoTriangle Orange-Durham Express (ODX). The rider base of this route is likely better served by on-demand service zones, since they will have more direct access to destinations.

Strategy Overview: Formalize the elimination of the Orange-Alamance Connector and reinvest the resources into other transit service projects. With the improved MOD service zones, residents along the Mebane-Hillsborough corridor will still have access to transportation service, as well as continued service from the GoTriangle ODX during peak hours, the new Mebane Circulator, and improved Hillsborough Circulator.

	Existing	Proposed
<i>Span of Service</i>		
Monday to Friday	10 AM – 3 PM	-
<i>Frequency</i>		
Monday to Friday	60 minutes	-



HILLSBOROUGH CIRCULATOR IMPROVEMENTS PHASE 1

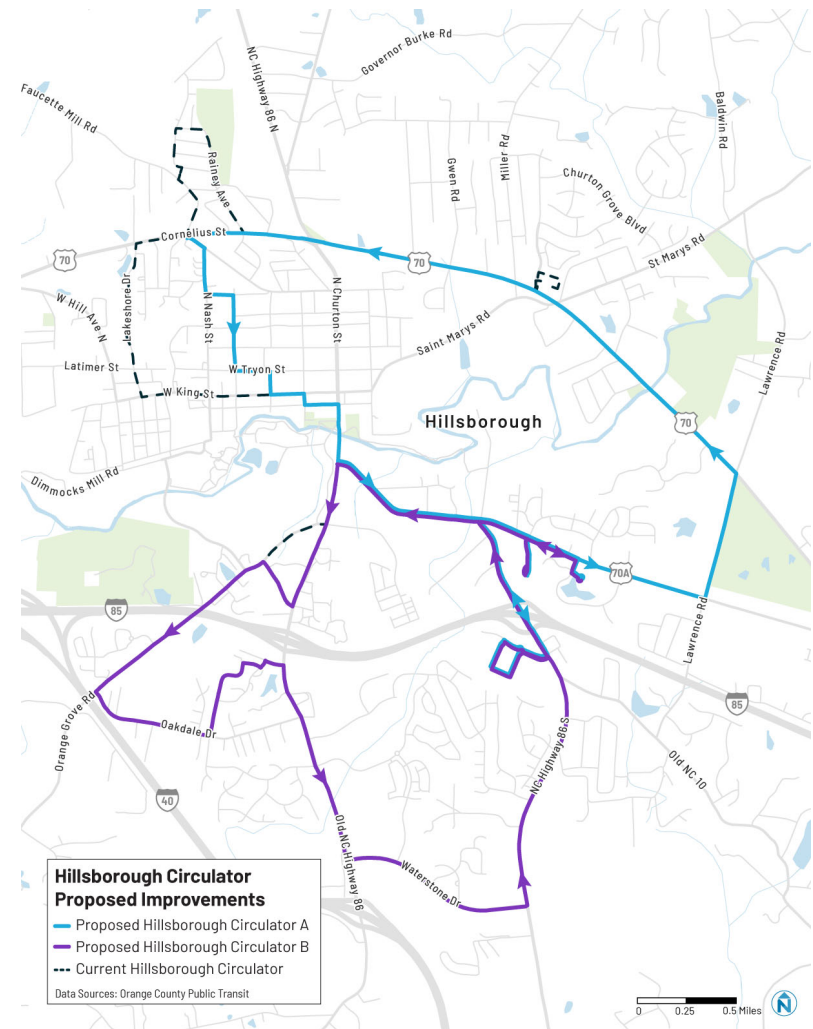
Short Term

Background: The Hillsborough Circulator is the highest ridership OCTS route and is the primary option for Hillsborough residents to travel between key destinations in the city without a car. The route often runs behind schedule, as it takes approximately 60 minutes to complete one trip and it runs every hour. The Hillsborough Circulator also only runs in one direction, making residents ride the full loop, even if they only need to get to the stop before they board.

Strategy Overview: Create an improved Hillsborough Circulator service that is more efficient, on-time, and frequent. The improved service will be split into two separate routes, Hillsborough Circulator A and Hillsborough Circulator B.

- Reduce route deviations at Rainey Ave (Fairview Park), Orange Grove Road, and Scotswood Road (Food Lion) to improve schedule reliability by decreasing the running time.
- Split route into two patterns, which can both be run in under 45 minutes.
- Expand the service hours and increase frequency of both routes.

	Existing	Proposed
Span of Service		
Monday to Friday	7 AM – 5 PM	6:30 AM – 6:30 PM
Frequency		
Monday to Friday	60 minutes	45 minutes



MEBANE CIRCULATOR

Short Term

Background: The City of Mebane has planned to establish a local bus route, which will take place in the form of a circulator that serves key destinations throughout Mebane. The Orange-Alamance Connector, proposed to be discontinued, currently serves smaller area of Mebane.

Strategy Overview: Implement the Mebane Circulator as adopted in the Mebane Comprehensive Transportation Plan and the BGMPO Metropolitan Transportation Plan. The Mebane Circulator will run every 60 minutes from 7 AM – 6 PM on Monday through Friday and will not initially offer weekend service.

	Existing	Proposed
Span of Service		
Monday to Friday	-	7 AM – 6 PM
Frequency		
Monday to Friday	-	60 minutes



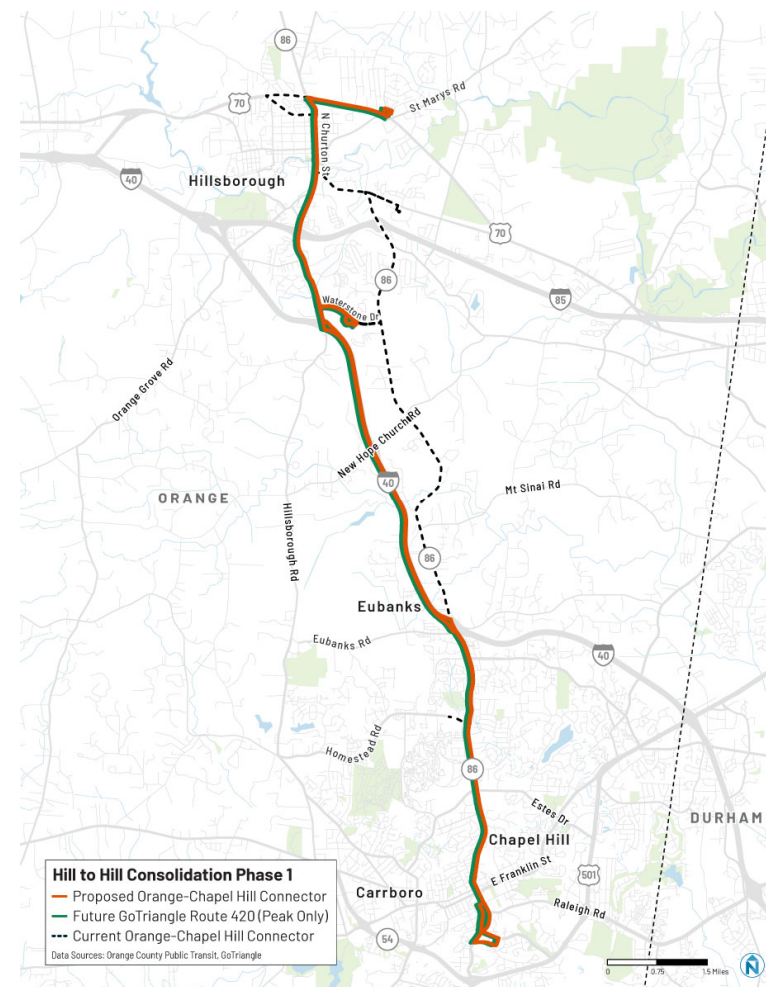
HILL TO HILL CONSOLIDATION PHASE 1

Short Term

Background: The Orange-Chapel Hill Connector provides midday and local coverage between Chapel Hill and Hillsborough, while GoTriangle Route 420 operates during the peak commute hours only and with fewer local stops. The similar but still differing route patterns can confuse riders, and there is some service redundancy in the current schedule.

Strategy Overview: When GoTriangle shifts Route 420 to run on Highway 40 after the current highway reconstruction project is complete, the Orange-Chapel Hill Connector will also shift to match the alignment of Route 420 exactly, with the same stops. Local connections in Hillsborough can be made to both Hillsborough Circulator loops. This Phase does not fully consolidate the two routes, and rather focuses on running them along the same route pattern and to be less redundant, allowing for full consolidation in the future.

	Existing 420	Existing OCH	Proposed OCH
Span of Service			
Monday to Friday	6 – 9:30 AM, 3:30 – 7 PM	8:30 AM – 4:30 PM	8:30 AM – 3:30 PM
Frequency			
Monday to Friday	30 minutes	60 minutes	60 minutes



DEMAND RESPONSE WEEKEND SERVICE

Medium Term

Background: Program-based demand response riders are not peak-oriented, and many riders use it to get to non-work destinations. Currently, hours on Saturday are limited and not clearly defined, and no service is offered on Sunday. This limits the types of medical trips that OCTS can provide, cutting off a potential funding source.

Strategy Overview: Operate program-based demand response services from 9 AM to 5 PM on both Saturdays and Sundays.

	Existing	Proposed
<i>Span of Service</i>		
Monday to Friday	8 AM – 5 PM	8 AM – 5 PM
Saturday	“Limited”	9 AM – 5 PM
Sunday	-	9 AM – 5 PM

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES

HILLSBOROUGH CIRCULATOR IMPROVEMENTS PHASE 2

Background: After the Hillsborough Circulator has been split into two routes, increasing and improving the service is necessary. Transit demand during peak hours is not necessarily much higher than it is during the off-peak hours, and there are a lot of riders that utilize the service for running errands.

Strategy Overview: Implement Saturday service, which will have 9 AM – 5 PM spans with buses every 30 minutes. In addition to this, service spans and frequencies will be improved for Monday through Friday, with spans from 6:30 AM – 6:30 PM and buses every 30 minutes.

HILL TO HILL CONSOLIDATION PHASE 2

Background: After operating the Orange-Chapel Hill Connector and GoTriangle Route 420 with more coordination and reduced redundancy, service levels can be improved through full consolidation of the two routes.

Strategy Overview: Fully consolidate the Orange-Chapel Hill Connector with GoTriangle Route 420 along the Highway 40 alignment. Peak operation of the route will require three 40' buses to accommodate ridership demand and maintain frequency. The service will run from Monday – Friday 6 AM – 7 PM with peak frequencies of 30 minutes and midday frequencies of 60 minutes.

MOD SERVICE SPAN EXPANSION

Background: In conjunction with the expended MOD service zones that are part of the short-term strategies, MOD service hours should be expanded to adequately serve the riders of Orange County, as there is local transit demand for services outside traditional commuting windows. Service hours are not expected to be expanded during the implementation of the short-term service improvement measures.

Strategy Overview: Service hours will be expanded on all days of the week, and Sunday service will be implemented. In the current service, Friday has expanded evening hours, and Monday through Friday have service beginning at 8 AM instead of 9 AM on Saturday. New service spans will be 9 AM – 10 PM on Monday – Friday, with Sunday service from 9 AM – 8 PM.

Policy and Program Strategies

Short Term recommended policies or programs that OCTS could implement in the early years of the SRTP with currently available administrative funding include:

- Alternative Fare Payment
- Transit Information Campaign
- Improve Demand Response Booking

Medium Term policies or programs that require OCTS to apply for additional funds include:

- Hire Mobility Manager
- Conduct Fare Study

ALTERNATIVE FARE PAYMENT

Short Term

Background: MOD and Orange-Chapel Hill Connector vehicles are not able to take cash as fare payment, which can create barriers for people without easy access to mobile banking.

Strategy Overview: Provide cash loading options for fare payment cards to better serve people with limited banking or smartphone access, and work to integrate with other transit agencies in the region that utilize UMO Pass.

TRANSIT INFORMATION CAMPAIGN

Short Term

Background: Many Orange County residents do not fully understand how to ride transit and what their transit options are. The transit information campaign would cover fixed routes, mobility on-demand, and ADA services.

Strategy Overview: The promotional campaign would provide information on services, their destinations, how to use each service, and other information that is relevant to the service. On-demand service would be a key focus, specifically around the expanded service zones and where they cover, and how to book trips would be the main emphasis.

Improving the availability of transit information is an additional component of the transit information campaign, including the publishing of real-time travel information using live GTFS data.

IMPROVE DEMAND RESPONSE BOOKING

Short Term

Background: Riders expressed confusion about how to book demand response trips during public feedback opportunities. Most of the confusion came around how and where to book trips—online, over phone, by app—and the application process.

Additionally, the Medicaid reimbursement process will be improved, making it easier for OCTS to submit for reimbursement.

Strategy Overview: Ensuring the demand response application process is streamlined so that prospective riders are able to book services more quickly is one of the first steps. This streamlined application process will be simpler and quicker for applicants. This process is already underway at OCTS. This streamlined process will include implementing additional, to be determined, measures that will help OCTS submit for Medicaid reimbursement.

HIRE A MOBILITY MANAGER

Medium Term

Background: Orange County currently has a Mobility Manager role that is run through the Department of Aging and focuses solely on outreach to older adults and assisting with their transportation. However, Orange County could use a Mobility Manager that covers on-demand services, in addition to the role within the Department of Aging.

Strategy Overview: Create a new Mobility Manager position that has a wider focus, one covering the management of all information and travel training needs for on-demand services. This person would oversee the application process for on-demand services and would be the primary contact for anything on-demand related in Orange County. This role could continue to be funded through 5310 grant funds, but the funds from this grant may not sufficiently cover the cost of an increased role.

Other grants could provide the necessary funding to implement this new position.

CONDUCT FARE STUDY

Medium Term

Background: Fare costs vary across agencies and modes in Orange County and can sometimes act as a barrier to transit access. There is interest from the public and key stakeholders to explore the viability of free or reduced fares for the different types of transit services in Orange County.

Strategy Overview: The fare study would cover each individual mode, including fixed route and on-demand. The potentiality for reduced MOD fares will be studied to determine if OCPT could provide the same level of service and continue to make improvements with decreased fare revenue. The viability of fare-free fixed route service will also be studied on a route-basis. With reduced fares, it is important that OCPT will have enough funds to continue future planning efforts.

Capital Improvement Strategies

Each capital improvement strategy represents a type of capital project with multiple locations recommended for each type. These strategies do not include capital projects that are required for basic operation of the transit service strategies, such as new bus stops for new services. Site locations were prioritized into medium and long term based on the evaluation matrix, inclusion of the projects in other adopted plans, and existing infrastructure at each site. The three types of capital improvement strategies include:

- Bus Stop Improvements
- Rural Mobility Hubs
- Walking Access to Transit



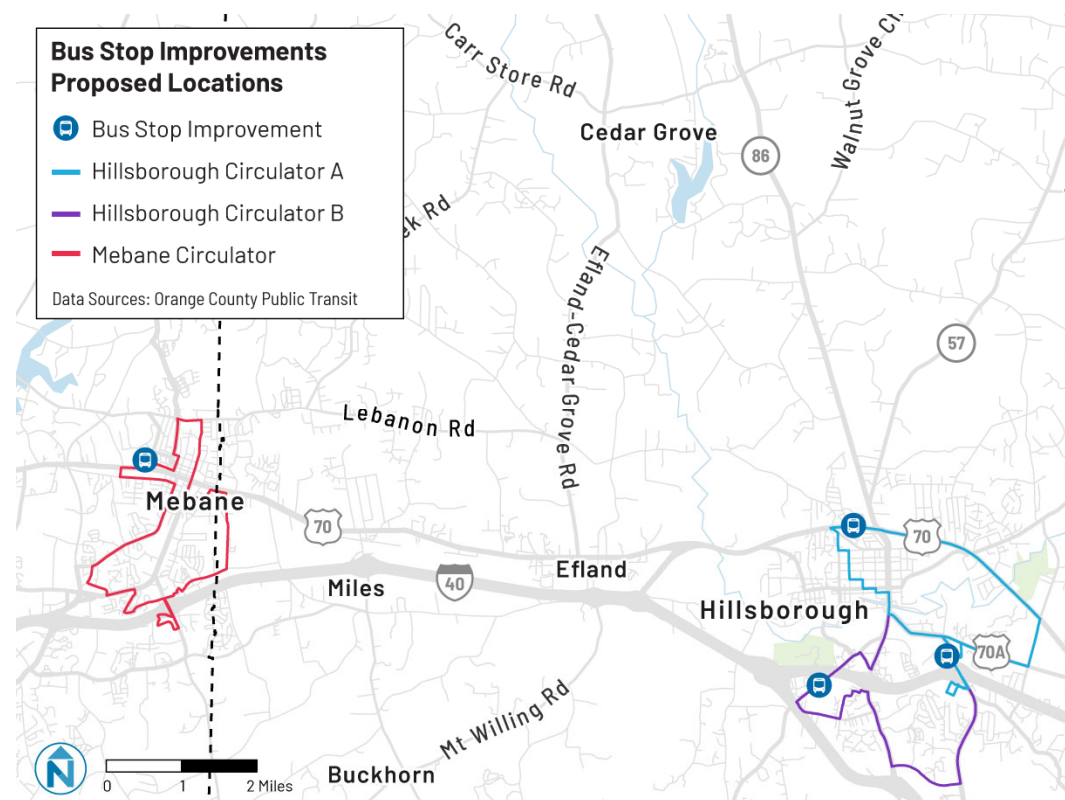
BUS STOP IMPROVEMENTS

Background: Bus stop improvements are an effective way to improve transit experience for riders. Bus stop improvements include various amenities, such as shelters or benches, and can be paired with capital improvement strategies on walking access to transit. Bus stops that have high ridership are often the targets of bus stop improvements since more riders will benefit from the improvements.

Strategy Overview: Upgrades to existing bus stops, including amenities like a shelter, bench, passenger information, ADA upgrades, or establishing a new physical stop where passengers are currently boarding and alighting without any infrastructure.

Medium Term

- Mebane Community Park
- Cornelius St/Rainey Ave
- Orange Grove Road
- NC 86 Cornerstone Court



RURAL TRANSIT HUBS

Background: Rural transit hubs are an effective way to improve the transit experience for residents of rural areas who may not have a large stop or transit hub nearby. These transit hubs are intended for low-density areas that are within MOD zones. Residents in rural areas may not be as familiar with transit options, so having a place where additional information can be provided is useful for rider understanding of the system and service options.

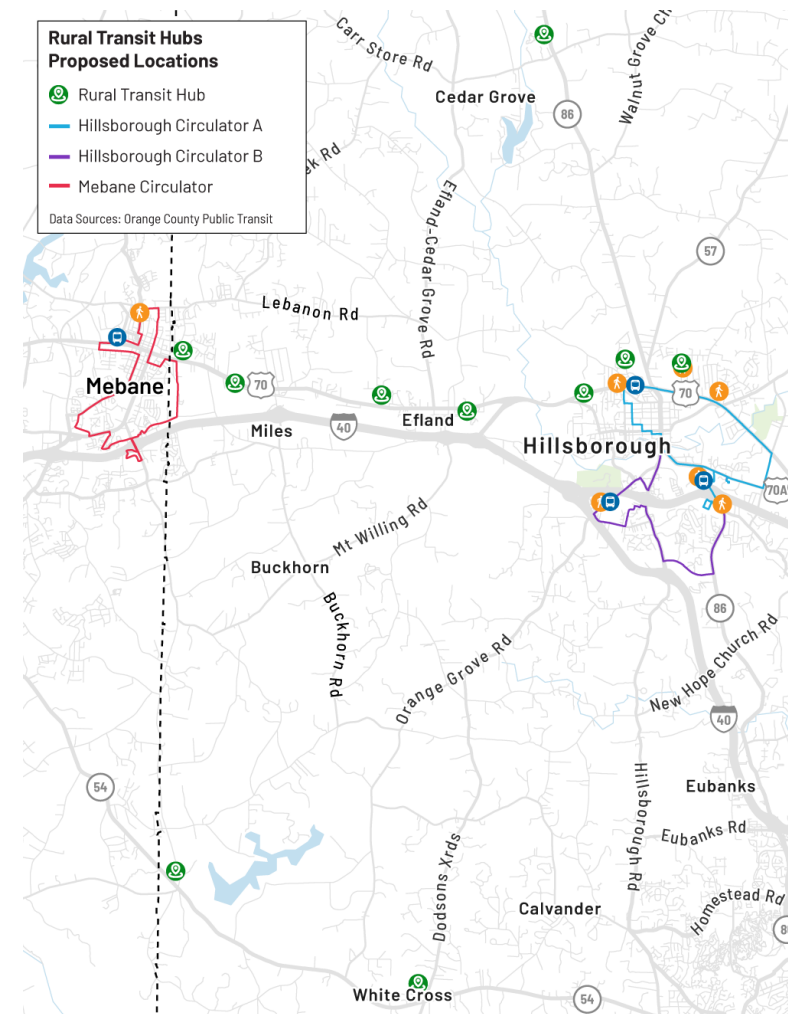
Strategy Overview: Locations in lower-density areas of Orange County with information on booking MOD rides and space to wait. Amenities include bench, shelter, and informational signage.

Medium Term

- Efland-Cheeks Community Center
- NC Driver's License Office
- Efland Hub
- Supper Club Blvd
- Cedar Grove Community Center

Long Term

- Fairview Park/Dorothy Johnson Community Center
- Mebane Memorial Garden
- Orange High School
- NC 54/Mebane Oaks Road
- White Cross Hub



WALKING ACCESS TO TRANSIT

Background: For local services, transit riders typically walk between the bus stop and their home or final destination. Unsafe walking conditions can discourage transit use and limit the number of people or jobs accessible within the typical “walking distance” of a transit stop. Improving these walking conditions can help increase transit ridership and improve the safety of those traveling

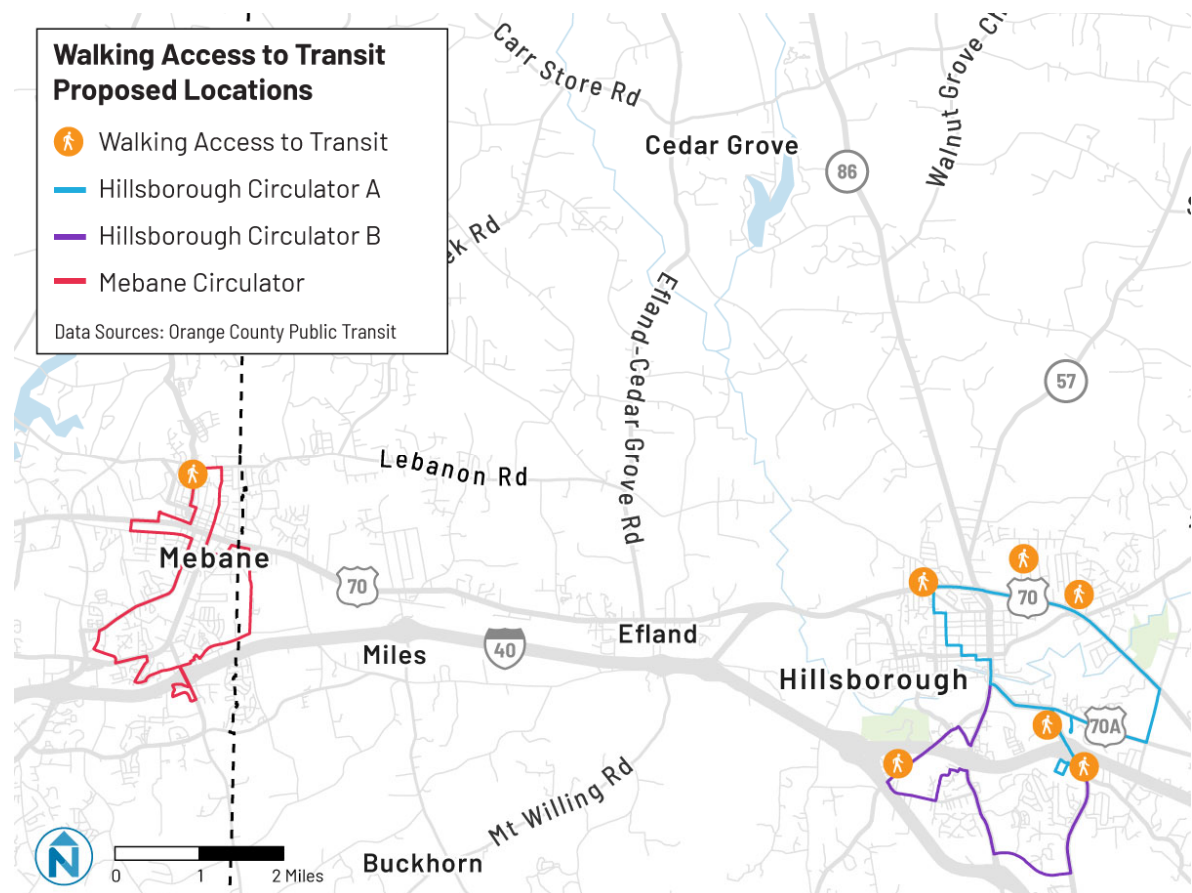
Strategy Overview: Improve access to bus stops with pedestrian improvements such as sidewalks, safe crossings, and ADA upgrades.

Medium Term

- Faucette Mill Road/Cornelius Street
- NC 86 Aldi
- Mebane Food Lion
- NC 86 Cornerstone Court

Long Term

- N Scotswood Blvd (access to US 70/Food Lion stop)
- Orange Grove Rd
- Orange High School



5 NEXT STEPS

Phase 2 of public engagement will run from August 19 to September 11, 2024, to gather feedback on the strategies proposed in this document. Similar to Phase 1, a series of in-person pop-up events, virtual and in-person presentations, and a widely distributed survey will serve to inform the public about the project as well as offer an opportunity to comment on specific proposals and the timeline.

After the conclusion of the engagement period, public feedback will be incorporated into the Short Range Transit Plan, with a full final version of the report, including all appendices, to be presented to the Orange County Board of Commissioners in October 2024 for approval. Project implementation will begin in 2025.