

Close to Home

An Affordable Housing Analysis of the Triangle's Passenger Rail Corridor Executive Summary



The Triangle Region is considering a passenger rail investment that initially could connect West Durham, Central Durham, East Durham, the Research Triangle Park, Morrisville, Cary, NC State University, West Raleigh, Central Raleigh, Southeast Raleigh, Garner and Clayton in Johnston County. Later investments might extend service to Orange County on the west and farther into Johnston County on the east. Part of this effort is analyzing opportunities along the corridor: for affordable housing, for guiding land use, for serving travel markets and for influencing economic development.

This Executive Summary highlights findings from an analysis of rail corridor affordable housing. The full report:

- Defines affordable housing and its two main types: housing that is affordable due to legally binding commitments and housing that is currently affordable due to its characteristics and market conditions.
- Summarizes the connection between housing affordability and transit access.
- Provides a detailed analysis of:
 - Legally-binding affordability restricted housing, both existing and planned
 - Other multifamily (apartment) housing that is currently affordable due to its age, condition or location
 - How the corridor would rate for affordable housing under federal transit project funding evaluation
 - Publicly-owned sites where future affordable housing could be feasible
- Identifies locations on the corridor where additional stops might benefit residents of affordable housing.
- Indicates performance measures we can track and steps we can take to work together in the Triangle Region to preserve and create affordable housing.

Aligning commuter rail investments with affordable housing decisions can provide residents in both permanently protected and naturally occurring affordable housing fast, reliable access to jobs, education and important community services. But it will likely take a sustained, collaborative effort to do so.

This housing analysis focused on two types of places:

- The “rail corridor,” defined as one mile on either side of the railroad tracks, and
- “Station study areas,” circles with a half-mile radius around a point that represents a likely location for a stop

The Big Picture

Housing is usually a household’s largest expense. Transportation is typically second. So addressing housing and transit together is a pocketbook issue for households, a workforce access issue for employers, and an equity issue for communities. A good rule of thumb is that if a household can limit its combined housing, utility and transportation costs to 45% of its income, it has money left for life’s other necessities.

Legally-Binding Affordability-Restricted (LBAR) Housing

There are 6,200 units of LBAR housing in the corridor, 27% of all the LBAR units in Wake, Durham and Johnston Counties. Durham especially has a concentration of LBAR units in the corridor -- 37% of the county’s total. LBAR means the housing is for those who meet income thresholds, and is a critical component of housing for people with incomes well below the Area Median Income (AMI). About 1,700 LBAR units are within the initial 15 station study areas. In addition to the existing units, at least another 1,000 units of LBAR housing are planned in the station study areas alone.

Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH)

There are about 22,000 market-rate apartments within the rail corridor that are affordable to households making 80% or less of the Area Median Income (AMI), the rule-of-thumb used to define the upper end of the affordable housing range. NOAH units are more prevalent than LBAR units, especially in Johnston County, but they are also more at risk, as their rents are set based on market conditions. Working to preserve existing NOAH units, and to remove barriers to increasing its supply, can be cost-effective strategies.

The Affordable Housing Opportunity Analysis was conducted by Erika Brown of the Triangle J Council of Governments and is the first of three evaluations accompanying the commuter rail service analysis of the NC Railroad Corridor between West Durham and Clayton. The other two evaluations address travel markets and land use.

Opportunity Sites for Additional Affordable Housing

In a fast-growing region like the Triangle, we can’t just rely on the affordable housing we have today, but will need to preserve and create affordable housing to serve the place we will become. An initial examination of publicly owned land within the rail corridor indicates that around 1,500 acres of land controlled by the public sector might be suitable for additional affordable housing. In certain cases, a special federal process called “Joint Development,” might help offset some of the costs of building new affordable housing at rail stations.

How the Corridor’s Affordable Housing Stacks Up in the Competition for Federal Funds

The rail project will require federal funding and part of the criteria for federal support is the amount of legally binding affordable housing near rail stations. The project would score well based on existing LBAR housing, earning a Medium-High rating. With future LBAR projects, this rating could increase, especially if communities use some of their opportunity sites to add housing.

Opportunity Segments Along the Corridor

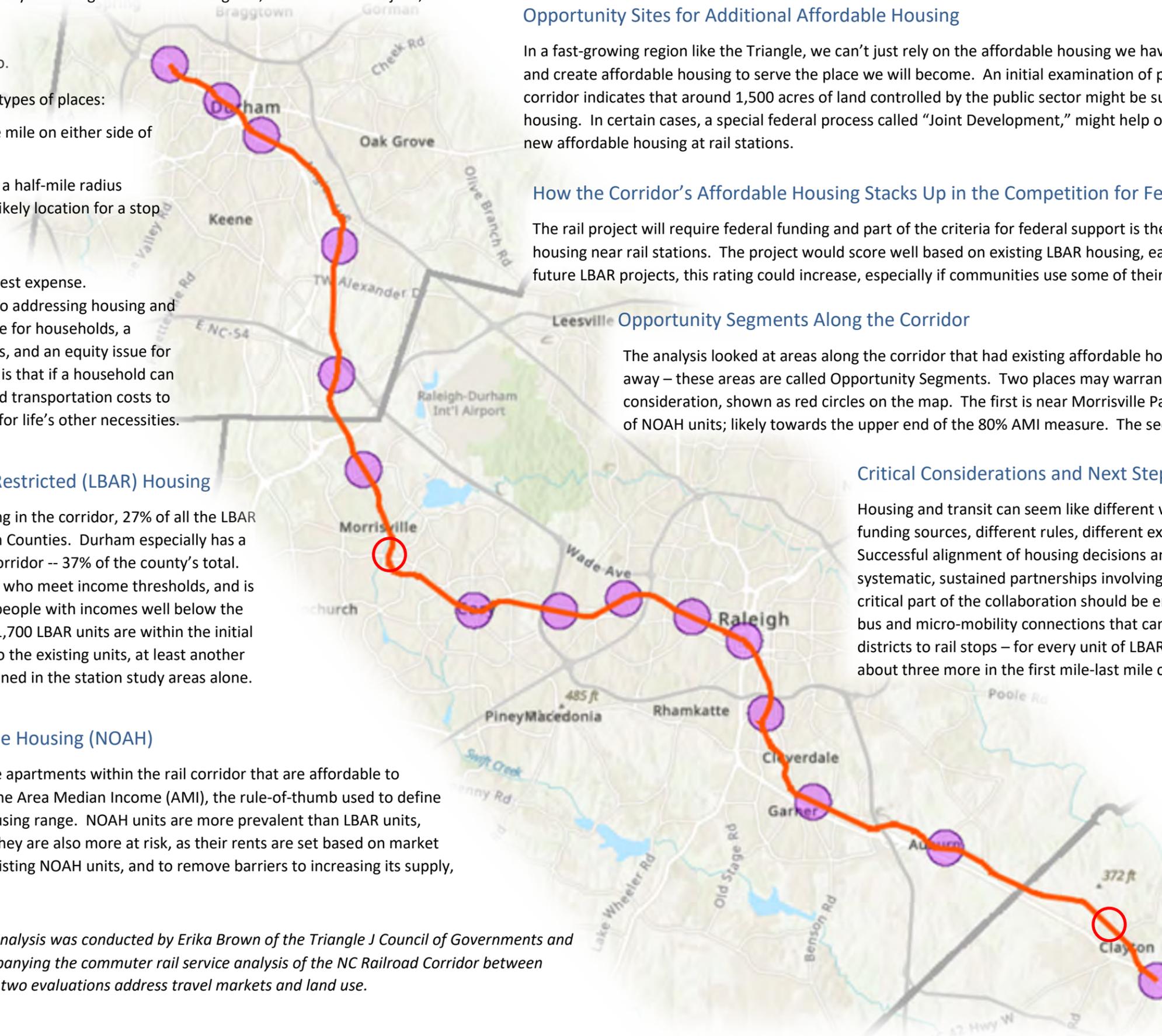
The analysis looked at areas along the corridor that had existing affordable housing, but where stations were far away – these areas are called Opportunity Segments. Two places may warrant more attention for station consideration, shown as red circles on the map. The first is near Morrisville Parkway, where there are large numbers of NOAH units; likely towards the upper end of the 80% AMI measure. The second is around downtown Clayton.

Critical Considerations and Next Steps

Housing and transit can seem like different worlds: different agencies, different funding sources, different rules, different expertise, different perspectives. Successful alignment of housing decisions and transit investments may require systematic, sustained partnerships involving creative people of good will. And a critical part of the collaboration should be ensuring seamless “first mile-last mile” bus and micro-mobility connections that can link neighborhoods and business districts to rail stops – for every unit of LBAR housing in a station area, there are about three more in the first mile-last mile corridor.

The Symbols on This Map

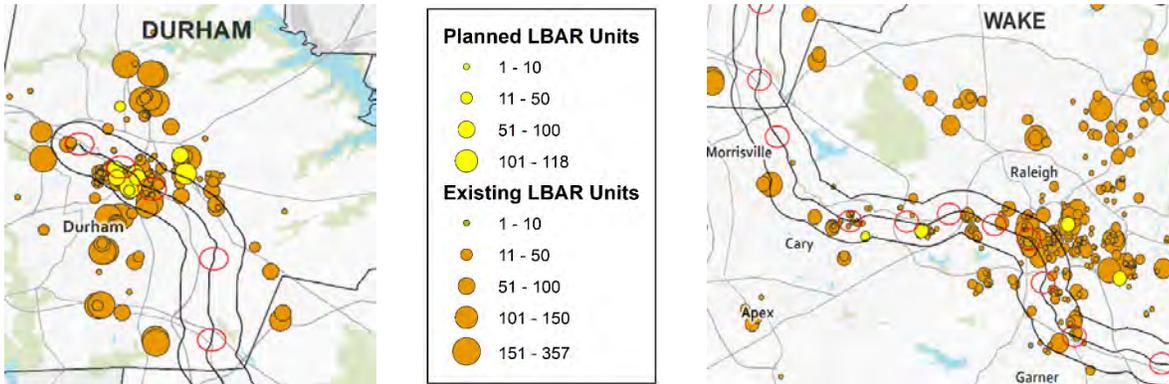
- The existing railroad where initial service is being studied
- Initial Station Study Areas: ½ mile radius circles around stops that are being analyzed
- Opportunity Segments: places where adding and/or shifting stations might serve current affordable housing



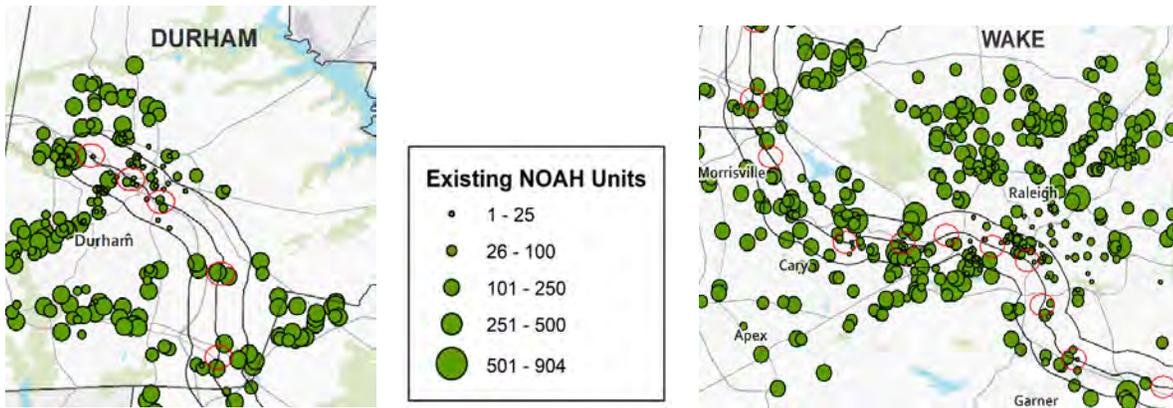
How to Learn More and Engage in the Project

This Executive Summary includes highlights from a more detailed analysis of affordable housing along the proposed commuter rail service between West Durham and Clayton in Johnston County. Each of the topics addressed in the highlights on the previous page is described in more detail in the full report. The report, along with resources like those shown below in thumbnail images, and opportunities to give your thoughts about the project, are available at <https://goforwardnc.org/project/commuter-rail/>

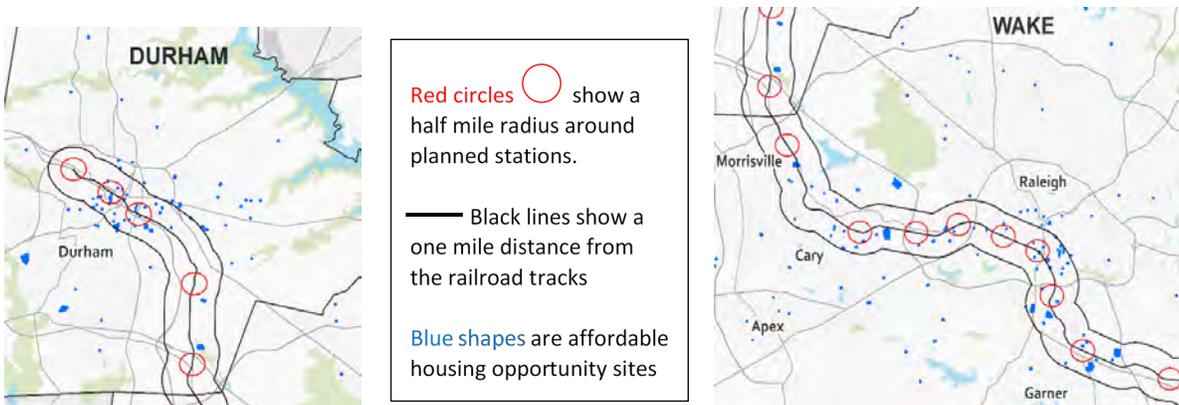
Existing and Planned Legally Binding Affordability Restricted (LBAR) Housing



Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) -- apartments



Affordable Housing Opportunity Sites (publicly owned land where affordable housing is feasible)



This report was prepared by the Triangle J Council of Governments as part of its work to align transportation investments with land use and housing affordability decisions. Contact John Hodges-Copple at johnhc@tjco.org with comments and questions.