

Chapel Hill approves new apartments, townhomes; vote split over I-40 connection

By Tammy Grubb

A third project will bring more housing to Chapel Hill's eastern border with Durham, but without the land needed for a long-sought bike and pedestrian connection across Interstate 40.

The Chapel Hill Town Council voted 5-2 last week to rezone the site at 11 White Oak Drive for a higher-density, multifamily project. Developer ZOM Living could build up to 400 apartments and townhomes on 13 acres north of Old Chapel Hill Road.

Council members Camille Berry and Elizabeth Sharp voted against the project. Council members Adam Searing and Karen Stegman were absent from Wednesday's meeting.



ZOM Living could build up to 400 apartments at White Oak Drive and Old Chapel Hill Road. At least 10% would be affordable to households earning up to 80% of the area median income — currently \$64,750 a year for an individual, and \$92,500 for a family of four. ZOM Living Contributed

At least 10% of the apartments will be affordable to households earning up to 80% of the area median income — \$64,750 a year for an individual, for instance, and \$92,500 for a family of four.

The revised project reduces the visual mass of the building on Old Chapel Hill Road by adding a partially flat roof to the front side, limiting the height to three stories, and relying on different architectural features. The buildings set back from the road could be four and five stories tall.

Council member Paris Miller-Foushee asked why there weren't more affordable apartments, and at a lower leasing rate.

"The headwinds that we face are rising tariffs, the labor supply of people who do construction being under duress, and the investors who finance projects like this being concerned about the macro-economy," said Ben Stevens, director of development standards for ZOM Living. "We're trying to be sensitive to not commit to things that we think the project can't deliver."

Questions about Danziger extension

The project also lacks land for a future Danziger Drive extension to Mt. Moriah Road across I-40. The town has discussed the extension for a few years with developers working in the area now known as the "Parkline East Village" district between U.S. 15-501 and Old Chapel Hill and Pope roads.

Parkline East Village is a test case for the town's Complete Community strategy, aimed at creating more mixed-use neighborhoods and pedestrian- and bike-friendly connections. Two projects — Meridian Lakeview and Chapel Hill Crossing — were approved in 2023 with space for the Danziger extension.



A site plan for 11 White Oak shows several four- and five-story buildings on 13 acres north of Old Chapel Hill Road in Chapel Hill. The project is expected to add up to 400 apartments and townhomes. ZOM Living Contributed

A fourth project, East Lakeview, could add 86 for-sale townhomes with garages immediately west of 11 White Oak but is not part of the Danziger extension talks. It could come to the council for a vote later this year.

ZOM Living replaced Danziger Drive extension with a parking garage after talking with the council about the difficulty of getting N.C. Department of Transportation approval and funding.

But giving up now means the road extension will never happen, Berry said.

"You don't think that you have to be held to the same standards, to the same vision, that was shared with the others, and I cannot support that," Berry told the developer. "If we have a vision, let's stand by it. If we don't, let's be clear about it, because the tone that we're setting is, we want that, but maybe not, and that doesn't sit well with me."

Sharp said she also wouldn't vote for the project without the easement.

It "was important enough with the prior projects to insist upon it," and should be in this project, Sharp said.

"I think that our future plans are to reconstrue the shape of Chapel Hill that was developed a long time ago along car-centric, single-family dwelling models, and if we continue to forego the things that make that reconstruction possible, we'll never get there," she said.

Praise for other project details

Historic building: ZOM Living plans to move a historic gas station building at the White Oak and Old Chapel Hill Road intersection to the project's recreation area, where it will be preserved. Trees surrounding a stream buffer that crosses the site also will be preserved.

Other amenities: Two pools, a dog park, small parks and courtyards, clubhouses and greenways. ▪

Getting around: The site will get a new Chapel Hill Transit bus stop, walkways to surrounding properties, and a pedestrian crossing on Old Chapel Hill Road.

Additional turn lanes are planned. Infrastructure for at least 60 EV parking spaces is required, and at least 15% of bike parking spaces will serve e-bikes.

There is a lot to like about the project, council member Theo Nollert said, including that it's "next to a transit corridor, it adds desirable density, [and] it is actually walkable and bikeable to a grocery store."

It's the town's duty to add more housing, so scarcity doesn't keep driving up the cost of rent, Nollert said, adding rents are "lower this year than they were two years ago." Taller buildings would provide even more housing, while preserving stream buffers, he said.

"When I talk to people my age who are interested in housing, what they say to me is that they're upset that the buildings aren't taller. They say, how can you let people build such short buildings that close to a highway when so many people want to live here and they want access to resources," Nollert said.



A portion of the apartment building along Old Chapel Hill Road in the 11 White Oak development will have a flat roof to reduce the visual height of the building from surrounding properties. ZOM Living *Contributed*