

CHARLOTTE

Charlotte's Regional Transportation Coalition

The Crescent and the Wedge

The [Charlotte Regional Transportation Coalition \(CRTC\)](#) mission statement outlines a possible future vision. In it, sustainable transportation options, like biking, are equally available to all residents of North Carolina's most populous region. The infrastructure has corrected the social and racial injustices haunting its past and has paved access pathways to jobs, health care, and more.

The mission statement is only two sentences long, but it distills a consensus drawn from months of meetings with community groups. That may sound like a lot of work for only 52 words, but for stakeholders to see CRTC as it's designed to be—the effective vessel to a future of equitable transit infrastructure—the guiding statement needed to be perfect. “It was clear from the outset that there was a set of shared values, of shared goals,” says Zak Accuardi, an NRDC transportation specialist who advises CRTC on behalf of the American Cities Climate Challenge. But consensus, he adds, “really does take time.”

In Charlotte, community advocacy has a long legacy. A number of neighborhood-level organizations cover the city, reflecting the varying interests and economic conditions of residents. A [clear dividing line](#) separates wealthy neighborhoods in the center and southern portions of the city from the working-class tracts that arc along its western, northern, and eastern flanks. Locals call it “the crescent and the wedge.”

In October 2019, the American Cities Climate Challenge presented an opportunity to bridge the divide in the form of technical and financial support. Sustain Charlotte, a nonprofit organization that advocates for an environmentally sustainable future, reached out to three core neighborhood groups that work in the crescent—the [West Boulevard Neighborhood Coalition](#), the [North End Community Coalition](#), and

MISSION STATEMENT

Through partnership and collaborative efforts, we support and engage communities and people with the resources to advocate for walking, biking, and public transit options that are equitable, efficient, sustainable, and safe.

We support transportation choices that connect people to jobs, education, housing, healthcare, healthy food options, art, cultural resources, and each other.

[CharlotteEAST](#)—to apply for the funding and establish a partnership. The idea was that the core group would push for broader transit options, with equity as its North Star. With the support of the Climate Challenge, after a year of recruitment, relationship building, and strategic planning, the CRTC was formally launched in January 2021. Today, in addition to the core group, CRTC includes more than three dozen partner organizations.

The Core Four

CRTC was established to advocate for transportation initiatives that prioritized equity by considering a wide array of community perspectives, then distilling them into policy stances. At the same time, it had to be functional. If every stakeholder were brought on board at once, en masse, the organization might lose momentum onboarding new members before even officially launching, and determining how to use the Climate Challenge grant funding would be impossible. Instead, input on direction was pooled from across the community, but decisions were made by the original four-member core group serving as the steering committee. “Having a smaller, highly engaged group in the very early days felt very valuable because it enabled CRTC to make hard decisions relatively quickly to build momentum,” Accuardi said. “With too many cooks, there might never have been a foundation to build and iterate on, because coordination costs become so large when the group is larger than the trust that’s already been established.”

The coalition’s initial, limited membership also offered a way to build trust with future potential participants. When envoys from the steering committee returned to their neighborhood coalitions, they conveyed any new developments. “We would report out on what the CRTC was doing at our larger CharlotteEAST group meetings,” remembers Chris Danis, the neighborhood coalition’s transportation committee co-chair and liaison at initial CRTC gatherings. “That would spark interest in our neighborhood coalition.” When it came time to expand CRTC, residents and other community organizations were already in the loop. Moreover, those stakeholders knew that CRTC decisions were being made in the presence of a representative from their own neighborhood.

In Action

Having begun to gather and develop CRTC’s strategy, the members of the steering committee needed to get on the same page. Ultimately they’d need to make shared decisions based on a mutual vision of the city. “How do we find common ground between North, West, and East Charlotte?” Danis remembers asking. “The first thing we did was commission a transit asset map.” In the summer and fall of 2019, an undergraduate student from Davidson College, Raul Galvan, began to gather and plot data on city residents’ access to food, sidewalks, health services, bank locations, and more. Once completed, the map served as an empirical guide for CRTC’s policy planning and gave members a unified sense of the city as well as a medium for discussing the coalition’s strategy. An all-encompassing view of Charlotte was essential as CRTC’s aim was to focus on citywide policy rather than individual projects or neighborhoods.

In February 2020, coalition leaders used Climate Challenge grant funding to hire Tarik Kiley, a longtime Charlotte community advocate, to anchor the organization as its full-time coalition manager. Other coalition participants, like Danis, were volunteers whose availability was limited. To minimize barriers to participation, the grant enabled CRTC to offer stipends to steering committee members.

Accuardi has remained on board to advise the coalition, and his role as an outsider has proved valuable. “It’s nice sometimes, when you’re all trying to get to know each other, to have someone from the outside say something, so it isn’t, like, ‘The East Side is talking,’ says Danis. “Once we all found that we were on the same page, I think it helped build the trust and shared understanding needed among the neighborhoods to move forward.”

With the foundation in place, CRTC members pooled their constituents’ respective policy desires and found that, more often than not, they were the same. “The east, west, and north neighborhoods all had the same complaints: They didn’t have access to parks, bike lanes, greenways, and sidewalks,” says Danis.

The official launch was still months away, but the CRTC didn’t have a moment to lose. The year 2020

was a busy one for Charlotte city officials, who began reviews and updates of half a dozen major planning documents. CRTC wasn't about to miss the chance to leave its mark. The organization mobilized to provide input to the Charlotte MOVES Task Force, a city-organized effort to address regional transit problems. The task force had 25 members—including CRTC by way of a Sustain Charlotte representative—and it ultimately recommended a mobility investment program for equitably scaling up public transit. Though the task force was CRTC's central focus, it also reached out to neighborhood residents for input on the Charlotte Future 2040 Comprehensive Plan, a guide to planning city expansion for the next two decades, and the Meck Playbook, a master plan for the parks and greenways in Mecklenburg County, where Charlotte is located. Meanwhile, it began to meet with Taiwo Jaiyeoba, Charlotte's assistant city manager and planning director, to ensure coordination with ongoing Comprehensive Plan and Charlotte MOVES policy efforts.

With partners soliciting ideas and perspectives from residents and then delivering that input directly to the city under the unified CRTC banner, stakeholders have already been able to wield influence in conversations around proposed policy. Comprehensive Plan dialogue is ongoing, and CRTC is a voice in the conversation, applying pressure and providing support for climate equity, preventing it from falling by the wayside. As for the Meck Playbook, it now contains bike and walking trail measures and prioritizes equity as a funding criterion. In September 2020, CRTC worked with other transit advocates to push the city to commission a six-month bus lane pilot program, the [Central Ave Bus Lane Pilot](#), which reclassified two lanes of a six-lane major thoroughfare for buses only.

Reflection and the Future

Since its inception in the fall of 2019, CRTC has drawn dozens of community organizations into its ranks. But as it continues to scale up, there are concerns over how it will maintain momentum while accounting for every voice in its ranks. Even the “smaller, highly engaged group” that made up CRTC at its beginning—and which would later become its steering committee—took much of 2020 to build relationships, develop a shared understanding of

goals, and ultimately draft CRTC's two-sentence mission statement and accompanying vision statement as well as a set of shared principles. Timely, democratic, decision making will only become a greater challenge as the coalition continues to grow. “We've never struggled with putting the equity question at the forefront of the mission and vision,” says Danis. “But what does it look like?”

CRTC prioritizes stakeholders' perspectives in its policy proposals, but there are concerns that its core structure could stymie equity. Sustain Charlotte has greater visibility, time, and funding than other core members, and some organizations like CharlotteEAST have been able to directly engage with the city, especially through CRTC meetings. As the coalition continues to grow, it must be mindful of equally holding up all members' voices, even those of community-based organizations without full-time staff. To ensure that CRTC honors its commitment to member voices and community leadership, it has expanded its steering committee and developed a more distributed planning structure focused on member-led subcommittees with delegated authority to lead efforts in policy, community engagement, and more.

At the residential level, CRTC is grappling with the task of distilling disparate views into a coherent message. A wide variety of perspectives and possible solutions are put forward by its members—including transit riders, community organizers, and local transportation consultants, who have led recent discussions on subjects ranging from free transit to regional transportation network planning to comprehensive land-use reform to opportunities to support local bus operators. Charlotte's ability to deliver on a future in which equity and transportation fuse depends on whether CRTC—and city residents—can see beyond individual needs to a unified vision. “It's important to bring an appropriate level of humility about the limits of your own perspective,” says Accuardi.