



A chat with Board Vice Chair Sig Hutchinson

When Sig Hutchinson first drove into Raleigh in 1984 from his home state of Texas, he fell in love.

He recalls sitting in a parking lot and saying, “This is the coolest place I’ve ever been. I want to move here with my family, and I want to make a difference here.”

That instant attraction proved lasting, inspiring a lifelong commitment to caring for the land that would become his home and for the people living there. More than three decades later, Hutchinson, now a Wake County commissioner and GoTriangle’s Board of Trustees vice chair, has many accomplishments to his name.

He helped lead multiple bond initiatives in Wake County and the City of Raleigh totaling more than \$400 million for open space preservation, parks, greenways, transportation and affordable housing. Among his biggest achievements, he counts the successful \$2.3 billion transit referendum in 2016 that set aside a half-cent local sales tax to help fund an expansion of public bus and train services.

“I was the go-to guy for the city and the county to lead these bond referendums,” Hutchinson recalls. “I convinced the county commissioners that if they would put a \$15 million open space bond on the ballot, then I would raise the money and run the campaign and get it passed.”

The bond referendum subsequently passed in 2000 with 76 percent voter approval.

“That was our first effort in open space and that led to more parks bonds and more transportation bonds, affordable housing bonds and open space bonds and then ultimately, the transit referendum,” he says.

Ironically, Hutchinson helped move Wake County toward more transportation options but grew up in a town with no public transit.

“It was an auto-centric, flat west Texas town,” he says.

After graduating with a bachelor’s degree from Texas Technical College and earning a master’s degree in education from the University of South Carolina, he married Nancy. An avid cyclist, Hutchinson shared his passion for exploring on two wheels with their son, and biking soon became a family activity.

After moving to Raleigh and discovering Wake’s greenway trails, he says, he wanted to expand them and began attending city and county Parks and Recreation meetings. One day, he realized that the trails could become a transportation network, making them eligible for transit funding, a source that had yet to be tapped. So he began sitting in Wake transportation meetings to embed that idea and, from there, became increasingly involved in issues that affect the quality of life.

“I started working around building trails and greenways, and then that ultimately led to on-road cycling, which got me involved in transportation and then that got me interested in transit and creating transportation options as an extension of bicycle-pedestrian infrastructure,” he says. “But then I started getting very interested in how transportation and land use work together to create healthy communities.”

By 2006, the Raleigh City Council had appointed Hutchinson to the GoTriangle board, where he served through 2013, stepping away for four years – during which he was elected Wake County commissioner – before returning in 2017. He views transit as one way to create healthier communities.

“What I like best about being on the board is it gives me a chance to help shape transportation and land use for the region,” he says. “So I’ve been about creating healthy communities where people can be healthier, happier, safer and can thrive, so transit is a key component of all of those things.”

Transit has many other benefits in Hutchinson’s mind.

“It puts more money in their pocket, creates healthier lifestyles and a greater sense of community,” he says. “It’s better for the planet. It reduces climate change. It’s better for the plants and animals in that it reduces sprawl and protects green space. It’s better for cleaner water and cleaner air. So you get richer, happier, healthier populations, and I like to do that.”

A former Dale Carnegie instructor in Texas, Hutchinson credits his Carnegie training for his success in North Carolina. Carnegie, who wrote the book, “How to Win Friends and Influence People,” remains an inspiration to him.

“It sounds cliché, but success is all about relationships,” Hutchinson says. “You have to build positive relationships with people and then you have to have a vision for what people want. There’s this misconception that vision follows money. That is never the case. ... One of my gifts is just the ability to communicate. Mr. Carnegie would say that if you paint a picture of what people want, they will move heaven and earth to get it.”

Hutchinson continues to imagine better ways of living and promote them, although he admits that change never comes as quickly as he would like. A case in point, he says, is the difficulty of weaning the country off traveling by car.

“They’re expensive, and they are polluting, and they chew up a lot of infrastructure,” he says. “They reduce people’s health, and they isolate people, and they create a lot of unintended consequences that we need to change. So my work on the board is to try to bend the curve, and move back to healthier populations that can live in more desirable places.”

His latest effort is to create the Triangle Trails Initiative, a regional greenway system that would run through 14 counties surrounding Wake County. He’s working to raise \$2 million to set up an organization that can carry out the plan.

For GoTriangle employees, too, Hutchinson has a plan to make life better.

“I am so appreciative of our employees,” he says. “I find them committed – they believe in our mission. I want for them – as a board member – to create a healthier workplace. One of my own personal goals for the organization is a healthier workplace, where they can be healthier and happier.”

Above, Sig Hutchinson lives near a greenway in Raleigh with his wife, Nancy, of more than 35 years and they have a son who is married and three grandchildren.