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Is Sound Transit 3 light-rail investment worth it?

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Seattle Times illustration
By [Compiled by Times staff](#)

A million more residents are expected in the Puget Sound region by 2040. Is light rail the right option to transport residents? Two guest columns argue both sides of the issue:

Pro: [Opposition is using tired, misleading arguments against regional light rail](#)

Con: [Small ridership numbers on light rail don't justify the price tag](#)

Yes. Opposition is using tired, misleading arguments against regional light rail

*By Marilyn Strickland, Paul Roberts and Claudia Balducci
Special to The Times*

The Puget Sound region is among the fastest growing areas in the nation. With this growth comes chronic traffic congestion. A regional mass-transit system has been a core element of our region's transportation plans for decades.

We must finish the job to make our transportation system work. The livability and economic vitality of our communities depend on adding high-capacity transportation infrastructure.

Fortunately, this year there is momentum to take action. Before adjourning, it is critical for the Legislature to grant the \$15 billion in new authority needed for local voters to consider a Sound Transit 3 (ST3) ballot measure next year.

Without ST3, there are insurmountable physical, financial and environmental constraints on significantly expanding the region's transportation capacity. Light rail, along with expanded regional bus service, is not only critical to riders — who will benefit from congestion-free service — but also to drivers and freight movers. Every transit rider is someone who won't compete for scarce space on the region's roads. Every rider helps reduce carbon emissions from transportation, and smog and road runoff that pollutes Puget Sound.

Since 2010, Sound Transit's ridership increased 67 percent and light-rail ridership grew 113 percent. A million more residents are expected to live in our region by 2040, driving transit demand even higher. Think about your commute as the region grows — adding the current combined populations of Seattle, Tacoma and Everett.

Expanded light rail would provide the incentive and opportunity people need to ride transit while enabling us to get buses out of the worst congestion, and will reduce per-rider operating costs. Long term, light rail offers capacity to efficiently move 12,000 people per hour in each direction, compared with 700 cars per hour in a congested freeway lane.

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Opponents argue we shouldn't expand light rail because it would "only move 1 percent of trips." This misleading claim ignores the transportation crisis playing out every day during peak commute hours. The 1-percent calculation spans trips across every road in the region during a 24-hour period, including areas and times with no congestion whatsoever. It counts not only commutes, but every single trip by every person, including kids to school and activities, and trips to the grocery store.

Another favorite argument is that expanded light rail wouldn't solve congestion. With the growth we face, there is no single solution to traffic congestion. However, high-capacity, environmentally responsible light rail is the most effective way to address clogged roadways. What we know is that inaction and delay will result in worse congestion, worse air quality and a reduced quality of life.

A recent survey of 1,500 regional voters showed 70 percent support major light-rail expansions. People go to other parts of the country, ride mass transit, and ask, "Why can't we have this here?"

We can. The Sound Transit board is focused on completing the vision of light rail connecting Everett, Tacoma and downtown Redmond, serving West Seattle and Ballard, and building other high-capacity transit investments around the region, including bus rapid transit on Interstate 405.

We cannot afford to let tired and misleading arguments distract us from finishing a regional light-rail system. The costs of these investments would be significant, but nowhere near the costs of not making them. A regional light-rail system would help funnel growth to dense and vibrant communities surrounding transit hubs where people would rely less on cars.

Sound Transit has kicked off a public process to zero in on a draft Sound Transit 3 package by this time next year. Community members can learn more and take part through July 8 at soundtransit3.org. The Legislature's action this year is critical to give regional voters the right to decide in November 2016.

Tacoma Mayor Marilyn Strickland and Everett City Council member Paul Roberts are vice chairs of the Sound Transit board. Bellevue Mayor Claudia Balducci is also a member of the board.

No. Small ridership numbers on light rail don't justify the price tag

*By Maggie Fimia, John Niles and Victor H. Bishop
Special to The Times*

We took a close look at data in the Puget Sound Regional Council's (PSRC) adopted Transportation 2040 plan. They show that in 25 years, fewer than 1 percent of all trips will be made on light rail while traffic congestion will only increase.

We examined key performance measures we think the public really cares about: transit ridership, congestion, accessibility to jobs via transit, average speed and vehicle miles traveled — and put them [into a user-friendly report](#).

For example, by 2040, PSRC estimates \$87 billion would be spent for transit — assuming 79 miles of light rail are built and bus service is doubled. That amount is nearly half total regional transportation spending. And the percentage of trips by all transit would rise to an estimated 4.3 percent from 3.1 percent — almost 90 percent of those transit riders would be on buses, not trains.

These numbers are unacceptable, despite the justification that transit ridership improves during rush hour for downtown Seattle and a few other urban corridors — “because that’s what really matters,” we are told.

Our response: This is a regional plan paid for by everyone.

Even more disturbing, why are we led to believe that we are getting different outcomes? We’re told congestion would be solved at the same time we are warned the only predictable travel would be on rail. That was the argument 20 years ago when we voted to create Sound Transit. Today, light rail carries 0.23 percent of all trips in our region and congestion has increased 52 percent since 2010. Meanwhile, rush-hour buses are packed or not available at all.

Light rail only carries 0.23 percent of all trips in our region and congestion has increased 52 percent since 2010.”

It’s time to ditch the pretty photos and happy talk in the executive summaries and for elected officials to set realistic, measurable goals for our region.

This is not about roads versus transit. This is about honesty, accountability and the future. Investments in both should make sense.

The challenge is that land use and transportation go together. University of Washington Professor Emeritus Jerry Schneider once explained our growth patterns this way:

Picture a map of the region. Now drop a handful of pick-up sticks on the map. Voilà, you can see our actual travel and land-use patterns. No surprise that laying down half a pick-up stick every 10 years along a single corridor is not an effective way to deliver needed service. The modeling has shown for decades that fixed light-rail lines do not dictate where the great majority of people decide to live.

There are better ways to spend transit dollars and get higher performance. One is more bus rapid transit now going to more places in our region. More and better bus service do not take decades to implement and would be much more flexible. We’ve invested billions of dollars in 310 miles of HOV lanes. Let’s expand incentives for commuters to use them.

We call for the Legislature to require the state Department of Transportation, PSRC, Sound Transit and local transit agencies to address the following points before the measure, Sound Transit 3, is put on the ballot:

- Clearly and consistently state the region's goals and key performance measures, and explain how they will be achieved.
- Identify how the state will deliver on its commitment to keep HOV lanes at 45 mph, 90 percent of the time.
- Explain how and when tolls will be in place and what the plan is to prevent soaring congestion on arterials.

Proper public transportation planning requires balancing performance numbers and cost numbers. Long-standing performance measures that helped our region move into the top 10 for transit ridership are now buried in documents or not measured at all. We believe they should be front and center, and we ignore them at our peril.

Maggie Fimia is a former Metropolitan King County Council member, 1994-2001. John Niles, president of Global Telematics, is a Seattle-based independent researcher. Victor H. Bishop is a transportation planner and traffic engineer with 50 years' experience.

Compiled by Times staff