



Transportation

Sound Transit planning heats up for light-rail expansion and public vote



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Sound Transit has begun promoting a \$15 billion light-rail-expansion plan, but still needs to work out crucial route details before presenting anything to voters.

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Let the campaign begin.

State lawmakers last week gave Sound Transit permission to send to the 2016 ballot a mixture of sales-tax, car-tab tax, and property-tax increases. Beyond that, the GOP-controlled Senate, hardly friends of urban transit, agreed to allow a \$15 billion Sound Transit 3 program, scrapping its insistence on an \$11 billion cap.



In return, the agency says it can deliver light rail as far as Everett, Redmond, Tacoma, Ballard and West Seattle, plus bus rapid transit on Interstate 405. There’s even an emerging scenario for cross-Eastside rail from Totem Lake to Bellevue College and Issaquah.

Residents are invited [to go online until Wednesday](#), to rank [the potential projects](#).

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But when the euphoria wears off, Sound Transit leaders, and perhaps the public, will face the fact they’re a long way from having a clear plan.

What they can guarantee is that it is miserable getting around right now.

[Commuters on Interstate 5 must allow 80 minutes to drive from Everett to downtown Seattle](#), to arrive on time consistently. Bus travel is almost as slow, because of crowded high-occupancy lanes.

“This is unacceptable. It’s terrible for people’s individual lives,” Sound Transit Chairman Dow Constantine, who is King County executive, said last week. He mentioned Seattle’s top-five national ranking for traffic delay.

“We know we can’t build our way out of congestion. What we can do is create light rail to take you where you want to go, when you want to go, on time, every time, for work, for play, for school.”

Planners have one year to sweat details such as these before writing a measure in June 2016, for projects many years away:



How do people travel until 2031?

“Where Will Sound Transit Take You Tomorrow?” brochures ask.

In reality, light rail could take 15 years to finish, based on past performance. Thousands of voting commuters who suffer today will retire, move or change jobs long before trains arrive.

The Legislature’s new \$16 billion transportation plan doesn’t offer a strategy to improve express bus speeds on I-5 through Lynnwood, Shoreline and Northgate.

In 2011, then-Transportation Secretary Paula Hammond mentioned [tolling the I-5 express lanes](#), a trial balloon that went nowhere politically.



West Seattle's highway buses might even get slower. The nifty northbound bus lane through Sodo is supposed to revert to general use when the Highway 99 tunnel opens in 2017 or later. At the stadiums, transit would exit to surface bus lanes, subject to traffic lights.

Asked if we'll face 15 years of slow buses, Constantine said regional leaders are discussing bus rapid transit concepts.

Sound Transit taxes

State lawmakers last week gave Sound Transit authority to impose these new taxes, if voters approve them next year. They would bring in \$15 billion in the first 15 years, minus \$518 million in payments to the state.

- Car-tab increase: up to \$80 per \$10,000 of vehicle value, in addition to an existing \$30 that expires in 2028.
- Sales-tax increase: up to 40 cents per \$100 purchase, in addition to the existing, permanent 90 cents.
- Property tax: new tax of up to \$25 per \$100,000 home value.

Washington State Senate, Sound Transit

He specifically mentioned Highway 522, the Woodinville-Bothell-Kenmore corridor, though that doesn't appear on a \$111 million list of transit grants that Olympia issued last week.

State highway staffers and Community Transit are discussing measures to help freeway buses, such as letting them run on the shoulder.

Sound Transit district at a glance

Population: About 2.8 million people in urban Snohomish, King and Pierce counties.

Territory: Sound Transit lines overlap or connect with Everett Transit, Community Transit, King County Metro, Kitsap Transit, Seattle streetcar, Washington State Ferries, Pierce Transit, and private lines.

Budget: Total revenue of \$934 million this year; total 2015 budget is \$1.3 billion including federal grants and bond proceeds. Two-thirds of spending goes to construction.

Transit service: Sixteen miles of light rail from SeaTac to Westlake Center, with service in 2016 to Angle Lake and Husky Stadium, and to Northgate in 2021. Service to Lynnwood, Overlake and Highline College by 2023, for a total 50 miles.

- Sounder commuter rail from Lakewood to Seattle, and Everett to Seattle.
- Tacoma Link light rail downtown.
- ST Express buses, 26 routes reaching as far as Gig Harbor, Puyallup, Issaquah and Everett.

Ridership:

In first quarter 2015, Link light rail carried 31,000 passengers per weekday, Sounder commuter rail 13,845, Tacoma Link

3,655 and buses 62,285.

Source: Sound Transit

What's the plan in Everett?

Snohomish County officials want any Lynnwood-Everett extension to serve Boeing facilities at Paine Field, with tracks veering west of I-5 beyond 128th Avenue Southwest — rather than a direct freeway alignment to downtown Everett.

“If we didn’t do that, we’d be bypassing the largest manufacturing job center in the state, with the largest growth capacity,” said Everett City Councilmember Paul Roberts, a Sound Transit board member. He estimates 55,000 people work there now and there’s room to reach 90,000.



“[The preliminary studies](#) suggest it will cost somewhat more, but the ridership is significantly higher,” he said.

The big bend to Paine Field would need an extra \$840 million to \$1.1 billion — but would also increase ridership by 5,000 to 8,000 passengers daily, an early Sound Transit comparison suggests. A direct I-5 line is thought to need \$1.7 billion to \$2.3 billion, from Lynnwood to Everett Station.

Boeing workers are scattered throughout the region, so it’s debatable how many will funnel into a fixed train route. On the other hand, the Paine Field route offers five stations that reach a huge territory through Lynnwood and Mukilteo.

Another challenge is travel time, about 50 minutes from downtown Seattle to downtown Everett on a train along I-5, or 61 minutes via Paine Field. Will voters support that?

“It’s definitely not what I would call fast,” says transit commuter Tim Ellis, downtown Everett resident and author of Seattle Bubble blog, which looks at real-estate data. “Fast would be something that gets you there in 40 minutes.”

Politicians might argue that as traffic worsens an hour ride will look pretty good. And it would be much shorter for booming communities south of Everett, such as along 164th Street Southwest.

West Seattle and Ballard?

Road to the ballot

Sound Transit’s timeline for a November 2016 citizen vote:

- Currently: Public meetings were held in June, and online surveys last until Wednesday. Info at soundtransit3.org.
- July 23: Board of directors hears a summary of public surveys and comments.
- August: A list of priority projects is issued, to be studied.
- Early 2016: Board members write a draft ballot package after results of fall studies. Public comment period resumes.
- June 2016: A final measure is written, to send to the fall ballot.

Two of Seattle’s fastest-growing neighborhoods both clamor for better transit.

A study found five options for a Ballard-downtown route, including via Interbay, under Queen Anne Hill, or through Fremont to South Lake Union. A midrange, mostly elevated line over 15th Avenue West might be \$2.5 billion.

Rail to West Seattle, where Constantine lives, must surmount the Duwamish River, a steep hill climb, and the fact that the Alaska Junction, High Point and Delridge-Westwood neighborhoods don't line up cleanly for a straight route. Could bus rapid transit do better?

It could take \$4 billion to lay tracks to The Junction and continue to White Center.

Constantine strongly favors rail.

Is there room on the ballot for both Ballard and West Seattle? Transit staff members say yes but haven't issued their game plan. To deepen the intrigue, planners are also considering crosstown Ballard-University rail service.



The answers might hinge on whether trains would run in tunnels, on overhead tracks or in cheaper street medians like Rainier Valley.

What's the full cost?

The \$15 billion figure refers to the sum of new taxes that would be collected in the first 15 years, at the maximum rates allowed (see information box with this story).

The long-term total is higher, and could be stretched over 20 years to build it all. The value of new projects could surpass \$20 billion, said agency spokesman Geoff Patrick.

Sound Transit would finance projects by selling 30-year bonds, winning federal grants, and by prolonging existing taxes.

If costs soar, or a recession hits, the state Supreme Court has said the Sound Transit board may reduce its lines, or collect taxes indefinitely.

Much like state highway funds, the rail-transit finances are leveraged — not enough to poison the high credit rating, but enough that it's impossible to add big projects without raising taxes.



Taxpayers are already on the hook until 2058 to pay off a low-interest \$1.33 billion federal loan, for the \$3.8 billion East Link line from International District/Chinatown to Overlake. Repayments start in 2028, to last 30 years.

Politicians on the transit board must guess what voters will support after the state's 11.9-cent gas-tax hike and this fall's proposed Move Seattle property-tax measure in Seattle.

Already, taxpayers and fares cover about \$800 million of \$934 million this year to Sound Transit, though some is borne by businesses and visiting shoppers.

Can Sound Transit deliver?

The good news, featured in publicity handouts, is that the popular \$1.8 billion tunnel linking Westlake Station, Capitol Hill and the University of Washington will be completed in early 2016, for \$150 million less and up to nine months sooner than estimated when construction began.

In fact, Sound Transit's cost estimates have generally been accurate since 2001 after a forecasting debacle in the 1990s that almost sank the agency.

Nonetheless, there's no guarantee it can build everything on a campaign map. The University District station shown on the 1996 ballot for 2006 won't open until 2021, while Federal Way rail service approved in 2008 was deferred by the Great Recession.

A few months back, Constantine argued that a \$15 billion package has better odds of winning than the \$11 billion version, by offering more service to more voters.

If that sounds counterintuitive, just look at how state lawmakers promised each other highway megaprojects from Walla Walla to Blaine, to whip up support for the recently approved \$16 billion plan.

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