

Waiting for the Interurban: The Politics of Light-Rail Planning in Seattle

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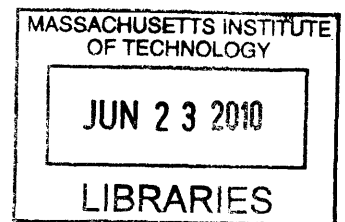
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Abstract

Transportation systems pose some of the most intractable challenges to sustainable, climate-friendly cities. As the fastest growing source of greenhouse-gas emissions, transportation is critical to sustainability. Yet transportation planning is complex, involving dynamic, multi-modal systems, and requiring the collaboration of multiple jurisdictions. Efforts to implement a more sustainable transportation system, therefore typically confront multiple barriers. This thesis examines a 20-year process to establish a light-rail system in Seattle, Washington to explore the opportunities for and obstacles to devising sustainable metropolitan transportation systems.

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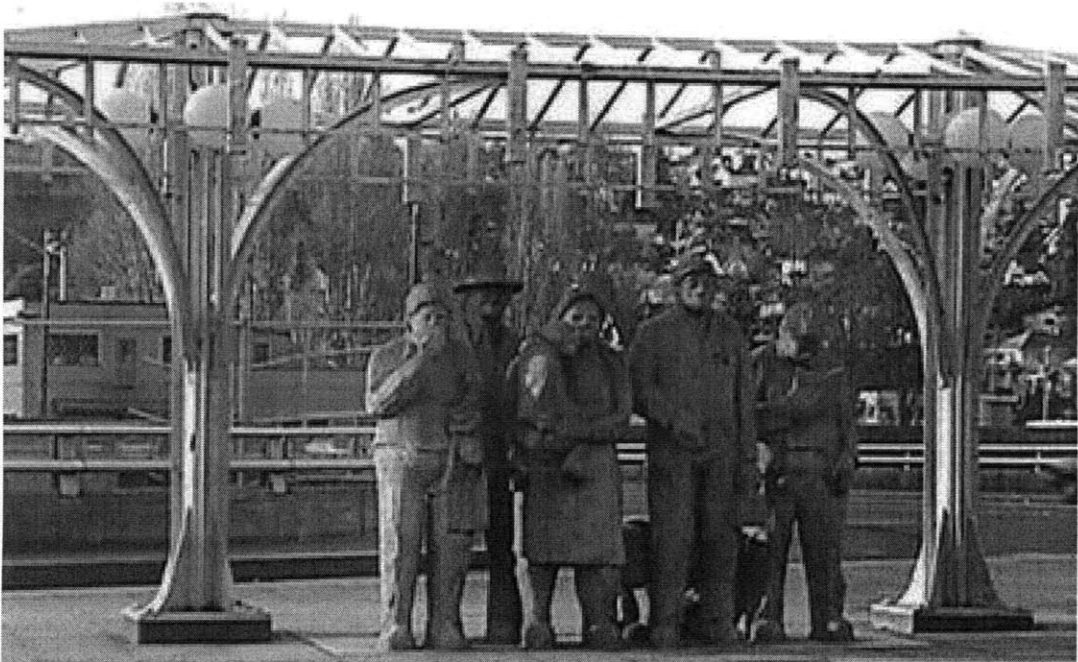
Finally, I would like to thank the people I interviewed from Seattle, who were generous with their time and thoughtful with their insights.

This thesis is dedicated to Diego, my favorite companion on train rides long and short. Te quiero mucho más que mucho.

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Waiting for the Interurban: The Politics of Light-Rail Planning in Seattle



A popular sculpture in Seattle commemorating the Interurban rail line, which connected downtown Seattle with its outer suburbs. After the transit service was terminated in 1939, Seattle residents would wait 70 years before boarding another interurban light rail train in the region.

We have reached a unique juncture in human ecological history, one requiring a radical reconfiguration of planning values and goals. The “ecological footprint” of the global economy is already larger than the planet, yet a quarter of humanity still lives in poverty, the human family is expanding by 90 million a year, and material demands everywhere are rising. An unlikely tenfold reduction in the energy and intensity of economic activity would be required to accommodate anticipated economic growth safely, posing an enormous challenge to planners in facilitating the transition to sustainability. Failure enhances the considerable possibility of global disaster.

William Rees, 1995

Introduction

With growing scientific consensus on the projected severity and impact of climate change, the global ecological disaster referenced ominously by Rees fifteen years ago seems more than a “considerable possibility.” For sustainability advocates, recent indications that climate change has progressed faster than anticipated have only heightened the sense of urgency to reverse the devastating trend in greenhouse gas emissions (Parks 2009; Sommerkorn and Hassol 2009). And increasingly, city planners and policymakers are enacting plans with explicit reference to climate protection.

The salience of climate change as a political issue has prompted the adoption of climate plans by cities around the globe. In the U.S., over 1000 municipalities have signed the Conference of Mayors’ Climate Protection Agreement (CPA), pledging a 7 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels by 2012—the target for the U.S. established in the Kyoto Protocol. Launched in 2005 by Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels, the CPA was intended to prompt both local commitments to climate protection and pressure for federal policy change. The unexpected enthusiasm for Nickel’s CPA campaign indicates that at the local level, the debate is no longer focused on whether climate change is happening but rather what is the appropriate response.

Nearly a decade before the launch of the CPA, planning theorist Scott Campbell suggested that “In the battle of big public ideas, sustainability has won: the task of the coming years is simply to work out the details, and to narrow the gap between its theory and practice” (1996, 403). Though there are some reasons for hope (e.g. Roseland 2005; Portney 2003), the overwhelming evidence from U.S. cities suggests that a balance between economy, society, and environment—the three pillars of sustainability—remains elusive. Working out the details, it seems, is far from simple. The real task for sustainability planners is to understand how a city can translate a broad commitment like CPA into specific policy interventions to achieve meaningful, sustainable outcomes. Where there are gaping holes between sustainability theory and practice, significant barriers or constraints must exist.

Transportation systems pose some of the most intractable challenges to sustainable, climate-friendly cities (Todd Goldman and Gorham 2005; Sperling 2009). Described as the “life-blood of cities,” transportation consists of a complex network of multiple modes, often crossing jurisdictions, that aims to meet constantly fluctuating demand. Transportation is closely linked to land use, the historical legacy of decades-old policies and city design. Urban transportation systems involve many, often competing, institutions in their finance, construction, operation, maintenance, and regulation. And finally, the performance of a transportation system is affected by the behavior of thousands of users. In short, transportation systems are influenced directly and indirectly by closely intertwined social, spatial, economic, technical, and institutional factors that interact in often unpredictable ways (Black 2002). It is hardly surprising,

then, that efforts to implement a clear vision for a more sustainable transportation system typically confront multiple barriers (Banister 2005).

Nevertheless, addressing sustainability in urban transportation systems is a clear priority. In the U.S., the transportation sector is the fastest-growing source of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs), and is second only to electricity generation in its share of GHG production (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2009). The growth in transportation emissions is driven primarily by a persistent increase in personal automobile use, which contributed over 61 percent of transportation GHGs in 2007 (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 2009). Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT)—the number of miles driven by residential vehicles—grew three times faster than population in the U.S. between 1980 and 2005 (Reid Ewing et al. 2008), and is projected to increase another 48 percent by 2030 (U.S. Department of Energy 2008). Reducing automobile use, therefore, is essential to meeting cities' GHG-reduction targets.

But the problem with automobile dependence is not limited to GHGs. Just a few of the environmental impacts linked to motor vehicles and the infrastructure to support them include local air pollution (Easas and Samdahl 1998; Watson, Bates, and Kennedy 1988; Frumkin 2002; Pinderhughes 2004), groundwater contamination and excess runoff (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency 1996; Litman 1999), solid waste (Freund and Martin 1996), sprawling land use (Shoup 1997; R. Ewing 1997; R. Ewing, Pendall, and Chen 2002), and habitat destruction (Spellerberg 1998). Furthermore, vehicle accidents hospitalize more than 5 million people in the U.S. every year, and are the leading cause of death for people under 35 (U.S. Center for Disease Control 2010). Finally, cars can facilitate spatial segregation and social inequality (Henderson 2006;

Ohnmacht 2009). Clearly, achieving sustainable transportation stems will require a transition away from the automobile dependence that characterizes urban environments today.

Transportation patterns—which are essential to sustainability but difficult to change—thus provide a useful focus for investigating the gap between sustainability theory and practice. Many sustainability scholars have proffered visions for urban transportation systems that “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland and Khalid 1987; Newman and Kenworthy 1999; Vuchic 1999; Litman 2006; Tolley 2003). Although the design of such systems varies depending on the particular context, in general sustainable transportation systems do the following: provide a balance between multiple transport modes; support compact urban form; create vibrant, human-scale public spaces (“livable streets”); manage transportation demand; limit automobile parking; and price roads and car use to more closely reflect their real social costs. A sustainable transportation system emphasizes increasing access—the ability to reach a range of destinations—rather than maximizing mobility—the distance a person can travel in a given period of time. Most important, a sustainable transportation system reduces dependence on cars (Newman and Kenworthy 1999) and challenges the system of *automobility*, defined as “the centering of society and everyday life around automobiles and their spaces” (Henderson 2006, 293).

Planning processes generally address automobility by considering changes to the physical infrastructure of transportation systems. And indeed, automobility is deeply engrained in physical form—vast networks of streets and highways, acres of pavement

devoted to roads and parking, patterns of sprawling development. But the tremendous dependence of society on the automobile also has structured the ways people understand problems of transportation and mobility. Geographer Kevin Ramsey points out that, “The car is constructed as a democratizing technology that is able to facilitate the ultimate freedom of mobility and choice, while all other forms of mobility are evaluated based on this standard” (Ramsey 2009). When transportation systems are inadequate to meet demand—illustrated most plainly by chronic traffic congestion—this conception of the car is challenged. Finding a solution depends on how the problem is defined. As planning theorists argue, “[P]roblem constructing must always precede problem solving” (Fischer and Forester 1993, 12). So a sustainable solution requires rethinking the transportation problem from one of not enough mobility to one of too many cars.

Automobility is also perpetuated, however, through the institutional framework of transportation planning. U.S. surface transportation policy focused primarily on highway building for nearly a century (Taylor and Schweitzer 2005). Beginning in 1991, a portion of federal gas tax revenues were systematically earmarked for transit and other non-roads projects for the first time. But federal funding still reflects the decades of preferred treatment for highway building. Between 2005 and 2009, the U.S. Department of Transportation provided an average of \$10 billion in funding to transit projects, compared to nearly \$40 billion for federal highway aid programs (Baxandall, Dutzik, and Hoen 2008). Though this is a significant improvement over transit’s historical share of federal transportation funding (see figure 1), it is still far disproportionate to the need.¹

¹ The U.S. Department of Transportation, for example, estimates that \$15.8 billion annually will be needed for transit improvements over the next 20 years (Mallett 2007).

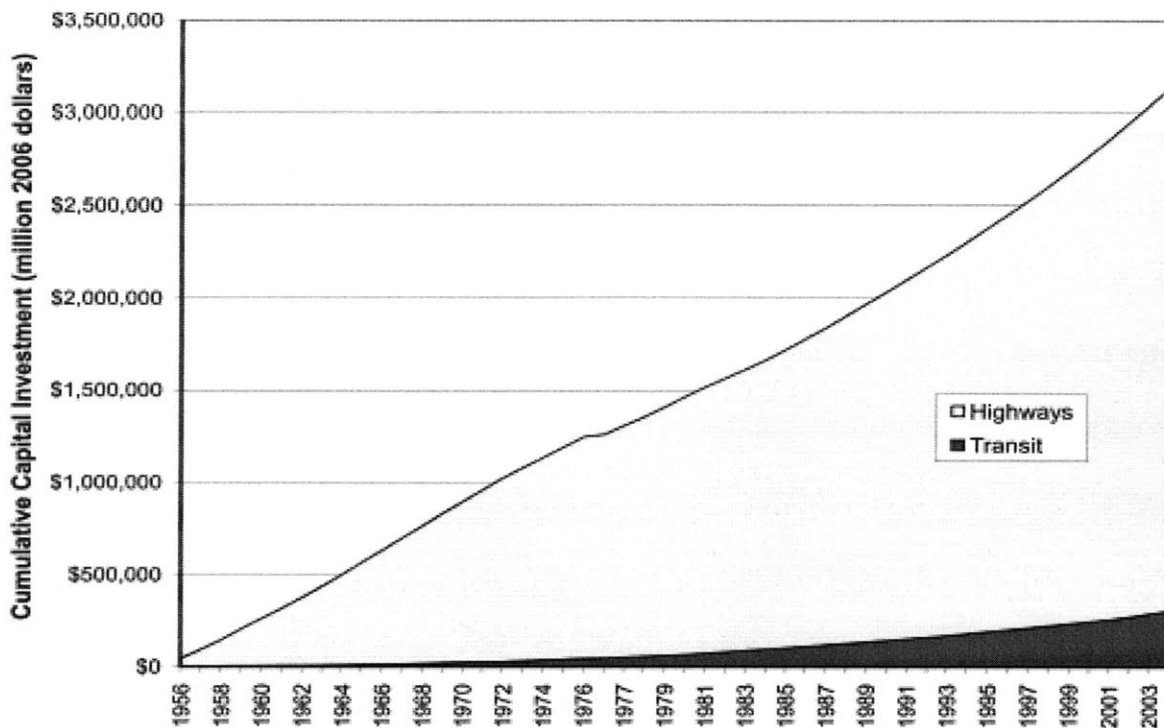


Figure 1: Cumulative Government Capital Investment in Transit and Highways since 1956
 Source: Baxandall, Dutzik and Hoen 2008.

While money for highways is allocated by formula, allowing each state to determine its own priorities, funding for transit projects is awarded through a competitive grant program, pitting projects from different regions against each other (Baxandall, Dutzik, and Hoen 2008). Furthermore, guidelines for federal transit funding reward mobility and cost efficiency gains over land-use and environmental benefits, and they do not take into account the land-use changes that a project may induce—e.g. compact development around a train station that improves the efficiency of transit operations.²

Federal transportation policy took a big leap forward in 1991, with the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, which mandated that transportation investments

² Land use and environmental benefits were only added as a factor in January 2009, when the Obama Administration followed-up on a campaign promise to consider “livability” in its funding priorities. Though transit advocates welcomed the changes, they also pointed out that the new factors have yet to be linked to quantifiable measures.

in urbanized areas be linked to comprehensive regional plans, requiring collaboration between local jurisdictions through metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs). In most cases, however, MPOs lack the authority to affect real reform, and most transportation decisions revert to either cities or states (Katz, Puentes, and Bernstein 2005; Weir, Rongerude, and Ansell 2009). Regional cooperation is further challenged by rapid global economic restructuring, which pressures cities to compete for highly mobile capital (Brenner 2002; Hackworth 2009). Finally, the gas tax, the primary source of both state and federal transportation revenues, is levied on a per-gallon, not per-dollar basis; it thus has failed to keep pace with inflation and has eroded with increasing fuel efficiency. This has led state and local governments to turn increasingly to local ballot measures for alternative finance mechanisms (Goldman and Wachs 2003; Surface Transportation Policy Project 2002). Voter initiatives can reduce complex policy issues to dichotomous choices and empower powerful interest groups at the expense of broader public interest (Donnovan 2007; Fontaine 1988; Linde 1998). Thus, the institutional context for transportation planning presents multiple barriers that must be addressed in achieving a sustainable transportation system.

This thesis asks: *what are the opportunities for and obstacles to devising sustainable metropolitan transportation systems?* To address this question, I investigate the process of planning a regional transit system in Seattle, Washington, through a review of the debate's treatment in the media, a survey of public opinion surrounding the controversy, and personal interviews with key participants in the dispute. The case spans the period before and after Mayor Nickels' launch of the Climate Protection Agreement Campaign in 2005, thereby providing a window into the ways that the

emerging consensus on the climate crisis affected how struggles over automobility were conceived, contested, and resolved.

My analysis focuses on two pairs of election campaigns for a regional transit system; between 1995 and 2008, voters in Seattle faced sixteen separate transportation initiatives. I focus on the four elections in which voters considered plans for a regional transit system. This emphasis on ballot measures is not to suggest that other elements of rapid-transit planning were less important—indeed, I explore a few core challenges in a briefer analysis of the system’s implementation. But initiative campaigns are illuminating because they force advocates to crystallize their arguments to be comprehensible to voters, rather than just to transportation experts. They also illustrate the challenges and opportunities in direct democracy.³ Furthermore, looking at a series of initiative campaigns enables me to chart how arguments for and against transit evolved over time. In addition to analyzing the debate rhetoric, I explore the political disputes within the regional transit agency and among the jurisdictions that have a role in transportation decision making.

By focusing the study on a city that has led the movement to address climate change and demonstrated a commitment to sustainability, I hope to uncover both the possibilities for and the limitations on moving from vision to action. Seattle has political leadership that, more than that of many peer cities, is committed to achieving a sustainable city, and a population that, relative to the U.S. public, is supportive of environmental policies. Therefore, the challenges Seattle encounters in implementing a vision for a sustainable transportation system should reveal many of the fundamental

³ Though ballot measures are used increasingly in states across the country, direct democracy is especially popular in the western U.S. California and Oregon use ballot initiatives most frequently, followed by Colorado, North Dakota, Arizona and Washington (D. A. Smith and Tolbert 2007).

barriers to reversing automobility. Likewise, any successes can help demonstrate how the climate-change challenge can be used to mobilize political support to achieve more sustainable outcomes.

I argue that the creation of a light-rail system in the Seattle region was a limited success, achieved through remarkable persistence and leadership, but constrained by a flawed institutional structure. Funded primarily by local tax revenues, the development of a regional-transit system in greater Seattle was plagued by intercity rivalry, forcing political compromise at the expense of regional collaboration. Moreover, the reliance on voter initiatives caused a balanced analysis of modal alternatives to give way to polarized disputes. Transit opponents capitalized on the weaknesses in the transportation-planning process, threatening the limited source of revenues for rapid transit, and pushing for expanded highway capacity. But environmental advocates also engaged successfully in the initiative process, using the growing salience of climate change to reframe transportation debates. For public officials, maneuvering within the institutional constraints required strategic and tactical decisions, and underscored the importance of building public trust in government agencies.

The Emerald City: An Overview

Seattle was dubbed the “Emerald City” in the early 1980s, a reference to the region’s lush evergreen forests. For many residents, the city’s stunning landscape inspires a concern for the natural environment. But Seattle’s topography also gives rise to some of the area’s transportation challenges; the city’s major corridors are constrained by the Puget Sound to the west, Lake Washington to the east and many steep hills in between (figure 2). The City of Seattle’s population has hovered between

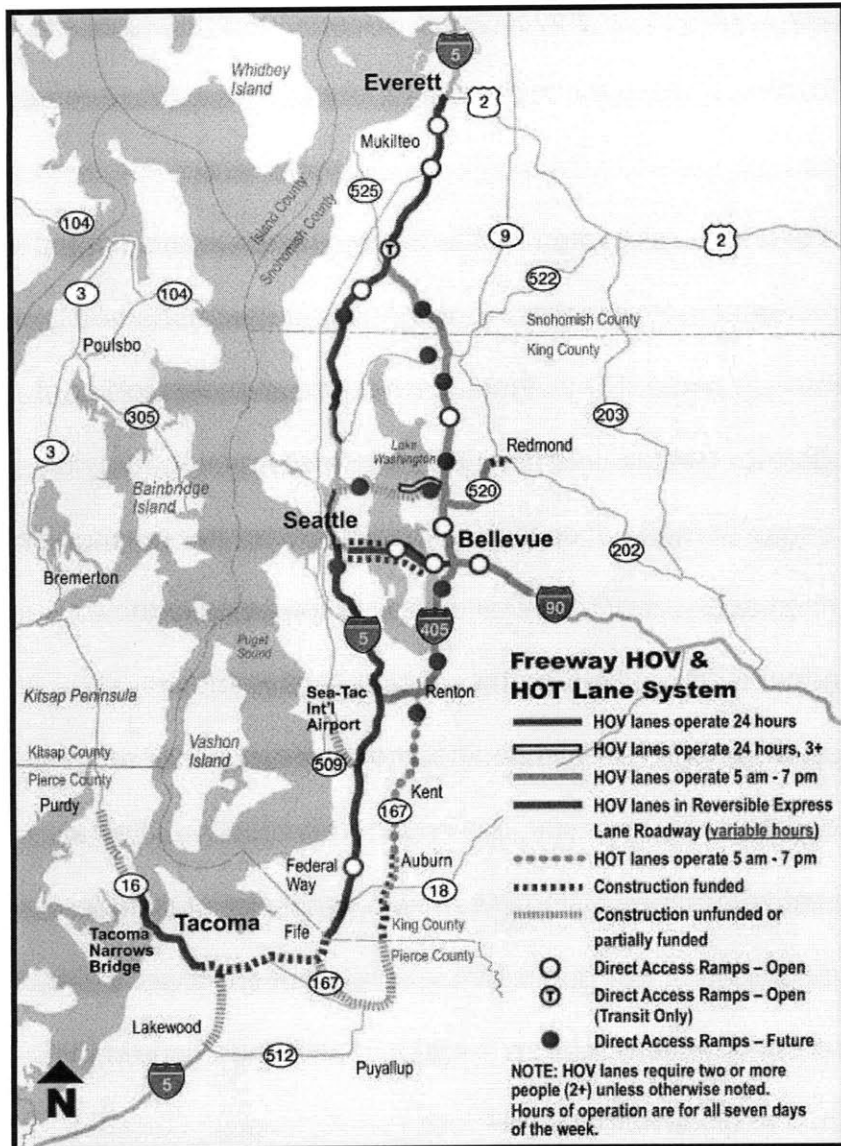


Figure 2: Seattle Metropolitan Area

500,000 and 600,000 people, rising less than 10 percent in the last 10 years. But the surrounding suburbs have grown more dramatically; the population of Bellevue, for example, a city on the eastside of Lake Washington, rose 26 percent between 1990 and 2000, while Everett, on the northern edge of the metropolitan area grew nearly 31 percent (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

Seattle is frequently heralded for its commitment to sustainability (Portney 2003; Krueger and Agyeman 2005). Many trace the city's path to environmental leadership to an innovative indicators project launched in 1990 by Sustainable Seattle, a volunteer-led non-profit. The project helped form the basis for the city's comprehensive plan, what political scientist Kent Portney describes as "[p]erhaps the single most important element in assessing the seriousness of a city's efforts toward achieving sustainability"

(2003, 36). *Toward a Sustainable Seattle*, adopted by the City Council in 1994, outlines a twenty-year vision for the city, with concrete goals in areas such as land use, economic development, and transportation (City of Seattle 1994).

Evidence suggests that Seattle does more than plan for sustainability; it achieves results. According to the city's website, Seattle was the first U.S. city to adopt LEED green building standards for all municipal projects, a policy approved by the City Council in 2000 (City of Seattle 2010a). In 2006, just a year after the launch of Mayor Nickels' Climate Protection Agreement, Seattle City Light became the first major public utility to achieve net zero emissions.⁴ And in December 2009, the city announced that it achieved its CPA target, with overall emissions seven percent below 1990 levels, three years ahead of the 2012 goal (City of Seattle 2009).

But GHG emissions are still growing from transportation, Seattle's only sector that has not achieved reductions (City of Seattle 2009). Of the eighteen goals detailed in the city's 2006 Climate Action Plan, eight address transportation, aiming for a combined reduction of 370,000 tons of GHGs by 2012 (City of Seattle 2006). This deliberate focus reflects both the scope and the severity of the transportation challenge in Seattle. As the plan emphasizes, each year personal vehicles travel two-billion miles in Seattle, and are the city's largest single source of GHGs (City of Seattle 2006). In 2000 there were 1.34 cars for every household in Seattle, a growth of 56 percent in ten years (City of Seattle 2005). The city's highways are widely considered to be among the country's most congested (Downs 2004; Firestone 2001), and a senior transportation planner for the city describes the area's bus system as "bursting at the seams" (Layzer 2010).

⁴ Though a dramatic claim, this was a relatively easy achievement for the city, which has relied on hydropower as a major energy supply since the 1920s. Today, nearly 90 percent of Seattle's electricity is hydro-generated (City of Seattle 2010b).

Thus for Seattle, with its roads and transit systems overburdened, its residents concerned about environmental protection and its political leadership committed to sustainability, a rail-transit system would seem a natural development. The story of light rail's development, however, illustrates quite the opposite.

Case Overview

Seattle first tried to establish a rapid-transit system in the 1950s and 1960s, but the effort faded after two failed ballot measures. The region only returned to rapid-transit planning in 1990, as intense population growth and suburban development were aggravating urban sprawl and traffic congestion. By 1995, a regional partnership that spanned the three counties in the Seattle metropolitan area assembled a plan for a metro-wide transit system, featuring light rail, commuter rail and express buses, and advanced a ballot initiative to voters. When the measure was defeated, the regional partnership quickly reconvened and returned to voters in 1996 with a scaled-back plan. This time the measure succeeded, and the transit agency turned its sights to implementation. A series of challenges nearly toppled the fledgling transit project, but by 2005, the agency was solidly established and it began to plan for an expansion of the transit system. The state intervened, however, forcing the transit agency to work with a regional road-building effort. A joint roads-and-transit ballot measure was cobbled together and presented to voters in 2007. But with fierce opposition from environmentalists and transit opponents alike, the initiative failed badly. Again the transit agency worked quickly to refine its own plan for system expansion, and returned to voters with a ballot measure in 2008. Despite a deep economic recession, the initiative

was successful, winning majority support in all three counties. Light-rail service opened the following year amidst much public acclaim.

Rapid Transit Gets Its Start

The story of Seattle's rapid-transit system begins in the 1950s, as the state was developing plans for the region's first interstate freeway. The Seattle Transit Commission appealed to the state to design a 50-foot median for the Central Freeway (now Interstate 5), providing a right-of-way for a future rail line.⁵ Though the state denied the request, the concept of a regional mass-transit system remained and gradually gained support.

Concerned with the inadequacy of fragmented local governments to address the region's growing infrastructure needs, a young Seattle attorney, James Ellis, partnered with the Seattle Municipal League to develop plans for regional government and investment. According to Earl Clark, who described Ellis' campaign debut at the city's Rotary Club, "Ellis warned that the area's booming growth would spawn major problems of congestion, dislocation, and pollution, unless Seattle and its suburbs united in a great 'forward thrust' to plan for future capital improvements" (1968). In 1968, Ellis assembled a package of twelve local bond measures including a \$1.1 billion plan for a regional rail and express-bus system, and took the proposals to King County voters (King County 1993). Early polling indicated the transit measure was likely to pass (Skidmore 1976). But the opposition mounted a campaign claiming rapid transit would alter the region's

⁵ The Transit Commission ran an electric trackless trolley in the city, and operated several urban bus lines. The Commission had previously operated an elaborate network of streetcars that ceased operations in 1941.

“way of life” (Gogerty, cited in Skidmore 1976).⁶ The measure won a slim majority, but failed to garner the 60 percent it needed to pass. Undeterred, Ellis and his Forward Thrust supporters revised the plans, and returned to voters in 1970 with a second transit measure. In the intervening two years, however, an economic decline left voters weary of new tax increases. This time, the measure received only 46 percent of the vote, and the Forward Thrust organization disbanded (Skidmore 1976).⁷

The failure of the Forward Thrust’s regional-transit campaign was a particularly significant setback because Seattle lost \$900 million in federal funding. Future transit plans for the region would never again garner so much federal support. On the eve of Seattle’s 2007 transit ballot, Ellis lamented the 1968 defeat: “If the people had voted for it — eventually it would have been 80 percent paid by the federal government — the system would have been finished in 1985, at three times the size of the one before voters this November. And the last payment for it would have been in 2008” (Veseley 2007). Without a rail-transit system to help rein-in sprawl, the region’s dramatic growth over the next three decades pushed the boundaries of the metropolitan area across three counties. So when the region again considered rapid transit, the context for regional cooperation was complicated by more jurisdictions and fewer federal dollars, a recipe for intense competition.

⁶ Ellis noted in particular some “very clever ads” and public relations events by transit opponents including General Motors weeks before the election (Veseley 2007).

⁷ The economic decline is referred to locally as the “Boeing Depression” because the City’s largest employer slashed 66,000 Seattle jobs between 1969 and 1971 (Abbott 1992).

Growth Management and the Regional Transit Authority (1990-1993)

By the early 1990s, transportation concerns in metro Seattle had reached a crisis point in the eyes of many area residents. In one decade, population in the region had grown 20 percent, while personal vehicle miles had jumped 80 percent (Haas et al. 2000). Vehicle ownership also had risen a dramatic 108 percent since 1970 (Joint Regional Policy Committee 1993). To add to the region's growing pains, on Thanksgiving weekend 1990, the I-90 floating bridge, which carried traffic to the burgeoning east side of Lake Washington, collapsed and sank. The images, replayed in spectacular detail for weeks on local TV, symbolized for many the failures of Seattle's transportation system.

Seattle-area residents increasingly expressed fears that the Northwest was "transforming...into something akin to Southern California, with its urban sprawl, severe traffic problems, and environmental degradation" (Woolston 1996). In several electoral races in the Puget Sound region, growth-management advocates had beaten their opponents largely on a platform of land-use control. Reflecting the salience of the region's growing pains, the state legislature opened its 1990 session with mounting political pressure for policies to curb sprawl and traffic.

State House Speaker Joe King, whose home district in Clark County had experienced one of the most dramatic growth rates in the state, was particularly motivated to find a solution to the state's uncurbed growth. Together with a coalition of six House committee chairwomen, King helped to pass the Growth Management Act (GMA) in April 1990. This landmark bill required that the state's largest and fastest growing cities and counties complete comprehensive plans to accommodate growth in

compact urban areas. It also reflected the growing concern about the environmental impact of unrestrained growth. According to the Act:

The legislature finds that uncoordinated and unplanned growth, together with a lack of common goals expressing the public's interest in the conservation and the wise use of our lands, pose a threat to the environment, sustainable economic development, and the health, safety, and high quality of life enjoyed by residents of this state (1990a).

Most important for the future of mass-transit planning, the GMA mandated a link between land use and transportation, and required regional collaboration among jurisdictions.

After passing the Growth Management Act, the legislature turned more pointedly to transportation. With the High Capacity Transit Act (HCTA), the state established local-option taxing authority for high-capacity transit, called for regional cooperation in planning, and required the central Puget Sound region to complete a mass-transit system plan. Unlike the Growth Management Act, the HCTA had no explicit environmental purpose; instead, it purported to address the "increasing congestion on Washington's roadways" (State of Washington 1990b). From its start, therefore, transit was defined as a solution to a traffic problem, reflecting the centrality of the automobile in transportation planning.

With the state mandate for mass-transit planning, within four months the Joint Regional Policy Committee (JRPC) was formed to study transit alternatives for the Puget Sound region. As outlined in the HCTA, the committee was created through an interlocal agreement between King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties, and consisted of elected officials from each county and a representative from the Department of Transportation.

Debates over the details of the regional transit plan required by the HCTA quickly emerged within the committee. Tensions were most pronounced between the City of Seattle and the surrounding suburbs, with urban advocates pushing for fast but expensive subways for efficient inner-city travel, and representatives from outside the center city claiming that cheaper bus service would reach more dispersed areas. Suburban officials underlined the importance of regional equity in any transportation plan. Bellevue and Redmond, for example, both passed resolutions demanding the rapid-transit system return economic benefits proportional to the taxes the cities' residents would pay (Wilson 1992). As *Seattle Times* reporter Georgie Wilson summed up the debate, "Equity butts up against efficiency when it comes to transit. Mass transit, to be efficient, needs masses of people. It makes sense to put rapid transit where most people live and work. But people on the outskirts are going to pay just as much in taxes as those who live next to a train station" (Wilson 1992). Thus, without a successful history of regional collaboration, a critical challenge for transit planning from the outset was to create an institutional mechanism maintain the partnership among jurisdictions.

The JRPC responded to the regional conflicts by crafting a draft plan with a \$13.2-billion price tag that represented more of a "wish and prayer" than a hard-fought compromise for limited transportation funds (Williams and Schaefer 1993). The draft plan included: 105 miles of light rail with 70 stations running north and south from Everett to Lakewood, and east and west from Seattle to Bellevue; 76 miles of commuter rail from Everett to Seattle and south to Tacoma; expanded local and express bus and van service; and new HOV lanes and park-and-ride lots. Though few expected such a massive package could survive at the ballot box, the draft plan provided enough

enticement for all three counties to continue the collaboration, and in July 1993, each voted to approve the plan and form the Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (RTA).

In the lead-up to the draft plan's approval, participants in the debate began to coalesce around two very different definitions of the problem that the transportation system was designed to address. These problem statements were indicative of the conflict in values over the appropriate role for government in land use and transportation. On the one hand, the most vocal critics of the RTA plan, led by Eastside developer Kemper Freeman, asserted strong opposition to any rail system, calling it "yesterday's answer to yesterday's problem" (Whitely 1992).⁸ In place of rail, Freeman proposed an expansion of the region's bus service and two new highway lanes. From his earliest statements in the press on the transit-planning process, Freeman defined the transportation problem as one of traffic congestion, underscoring the importance of the automobile. In response to a proposal for an extensive tri-county light-rail system, Freeman argued, "[the Metro plan] doesn't solve the Eastside's congestion, it doesn't solve anybody's traffic problems...My worst nightmare is to wake up and see that we spent far more money than anybody ever thought we could scrape up and it did almost nothing" (quoted in Higgins 1992). Freeman and other transit opponents, who came together to form FACT—Families Against Congestion and Taxes—reiterated that the transit plan did nothing to solve the region's traffic problems throughout the debate.

⁸ Opposition to rapid transit is something of a family pastime for Freeman Jr. His grandfather, Miller Freeman was a state Legislator who challenged the railroad companies in his winning 1913 election campaign, and then worked to weaken their influence in Olympia. He also advocated successfully for major road projects, including the construction of the Interstate 90 Bridge connecting Seattle to the east side of Lake Washington. Freeman Jr.'s father, Kemper Sr., pushed for the second floating bridge across Lake Washington, and was a vocal opponent of the 1968 and 1970 Forward Thrust measures (Schaefer and Ervin 1995).

A very distinct argument incorporated the problem of urban sprawl. “We are addressing what the alternative of the auto will be and to a large extent where growth will occur,” explained Greg Nickels, who was then a King County councilman (quoted in Higgins 1992). As the planning process progressed, Nickels remained the most consistent champion of rail as the preferred mode. He describes that his support for rail was based on the advantages for managing growth. “In Seattle, the congested corridors and the constraints from the topography make light rail ideal. We have a strong ability to shape land use” (Nickels 2010). Nickels’ argument is notable for its explicit vision for a city independent of the automobile. With poor grassroots support, however, his problem definition gained little traction in the initial campaign.

The RTA draft plan did not win the immediate backing of environmental organizations. The Sierra Club and the Washington Environmental Council, both proponents of compact land use, targeted specific elements of the draft transit plan, in particular the proposed park-and-ride lots at commuter rail stations. In early 1993, the two organizations mounted a legal challenge to the plan’s draft environmental impact statement, charging the commuter parking lots would worsen the region’s air pollution. Planners downplayed the environmentalists’ opposition; Dan Williams, spokesperson for Metro (King County’s transit authority) explained to the *Seattle Times* that the specificity of the objections showed that “Metro has much more in common with the groups than differences of opinion” (Higgins 1993a). But environmentalists were adamant. “Regional Transit Plan Promotes Sprawl,” proclaimed a letter to the editor by the two groups’ leaders, who argued:

When you take nothing away from the preponderance of SOVs, when you train tens of thousands of transit riders to drive to parking lots in the middle of

wetlands, when you provide those lots with better transit services than in most town centers, when you proliferate peak-oriented bus services and starve regular off-peak services, then you are planning transit only for the car-dependent and sprawl-living commuter (Higgins 1993b).

This direct challenge to the transit plan by environmentalists—the natural allies of alternative transportation—weakened the position of the JPRC’s rail supporters just as the intense political struggle began. The committee still needed to transform the draft plan into a viable ballot measure, an undertaking that would test the resolve of the fledgling regional collaboration. But because of environmentalists’ early concerns with the draft plan and their focus on other pressing struggles at the time, a strong grassroots advocacy campaign in support of the transit plan never coalesced.⁹ Without an effective counterweight to FACT, and with discord among the RTA board growing, arguments for the plan’s growth-management benefits were drowned out and the impact on traffic congestion emerged in the public debate as the primary metric for evaluating the measure’s cost effectiveness.

The RTA Ballot Measure (March 1995)

The \$13.2-billion price tag of the draft transportation plan presented an easy target for transit opponents. Even as the RTA worked to pare down the package to a more palatable size, Kemper Freeman and his allies relentlessly highlighted the “multi-billion dollar” cost, while emphasizing that the transit package addressed just a “little teeny piece” of the traffic problem (Penhale 1994b). Over sixty percent of articles in the *Seattle Times* and *Post Intelligencer* about the plan refer to traffic or congestion as the

⁹ Environmental groups were deeply engaged at the time in a policy debate over old-growth forests and spotted owl protection. An organization, Citizens for Sound Transit, eventually formed to advocate for the regional transit plan, but it never received much popular support.

primary problem for the transit system to address, reflecting the primacy of the car in concepts of transportation and the popular appeal of Freeman's storyline.

Meanwhile, trimming the plan forced the RTA board to confront the political quagmire of designing a regional system that was perceived as equitable to the cities and counties in the transit district. Describing a particularly contentious RTA meeting, *Post-Intelligencer* reporter Ed Penhale explained the challenge for the board: "RTA members...often spoke in earnest about devising a rail-and-bus plan that is truly regional. But individually, they were bound by political self-interest in bringing home a share of the rapid transit plan that reflects the amount of tax money their constituents would contribute to it" (1994d). As RTA members scaled down the transit master plan into a proposal for a more manageable first phase ballot measure, the Board's leadership expressed cynicism that an agreement could even be achieved. "There is no history here of regional consensus and decision making," stated RTA Director Tom Matoff, while King County Executive Gary Locke added, "Whoever figures this out will be an outright genius" (Penhale 1994a).

As if on cue, the squabbling between jurisdictions intensified. In response to the first Phase I plan proposal—which would extend light rail service into Snohomish County but stop eleven miles from the City of Everett—Mayor Ed Hansen highlighted the disparity between projected revenues to be collected from his constituents and the transit improvements they would enjoy. "You may assume that folks in Everett all drive turnip trucks... but [the Chamber of Commerce and I] would like to see Everett as part of the regional transportation system, including light rail service to Everett" (Regional Transit Authority 1994b). In the same meeting, Edmonds City Councilman Dave Earling

commented that the emphasis on rail left Snohomish County and eastern King County residents waiting for “a whole lot of service for a whole long time” (Regional Transit Authority 1994b). Meanwhile Seattle representatives insisted that a \$1.3 billion subway from Northgate to downtown was critical to moving riders through the heaviest volume segment of the transit system (Penhale 1994a). “Everyone had a ‘me-too’ attitude,” described Paul Matsuoka, Puget Sound Regional Council east corridor manager (quoted in Rosegrant 2001).

Seattle officials framed the need for the proposed tunnel as an important investment in the overall health of the region. In the midst of a heated debate in an October 1994 RTA meeting, King County Councilwoman Cynthia Sullivan described, “I am afraid if we are not very careful and caring about central cities and fostering them, it isn't just bad for them. They are, in fact, the economic engine[s] of the entire state. When they go down, the whole state suffers. We should build on the notion that if my partner does well, I do well. We are all partners” (Regional Transit Authority 1994a). But Seattle’s appeal for a regional perspective was not embraced by others. As Ed Hansen argued, “I am speaking as a representative from Everett and Snohomish County, and we have serious traffic problems....I know there are traffic problems in Seattle, King County and Tacoma. I will be focusing on how this system addresses the problems in Snohomish County” (Regional Transit Authority 1994a). Hansen later sued the RTA, threatening to withdraw his city from the transit district if the measure was approved.

Despite calls by some RTA Board members to continue to work for consensus on the transit plan, Chair Bruce Laing pushed for a final endorsement. On October 28, 1994, the RTA voted 15-2 to approve a \$6.7-billion rail and bus plan that would be

completed within 16 years. Although significantly scaled back, the plan included 81 miles of commuter-rail service from Everett to Lakewood, and an express bus system serving areas not reached by rail corridors. At its heart was a system of 69 miles of light rail in three segments radiating out from Seattle—north to Lynnwood, south to Tacoma, and east across the I-90 bridge to Bellevue (figure 3). To finance the plan, backers

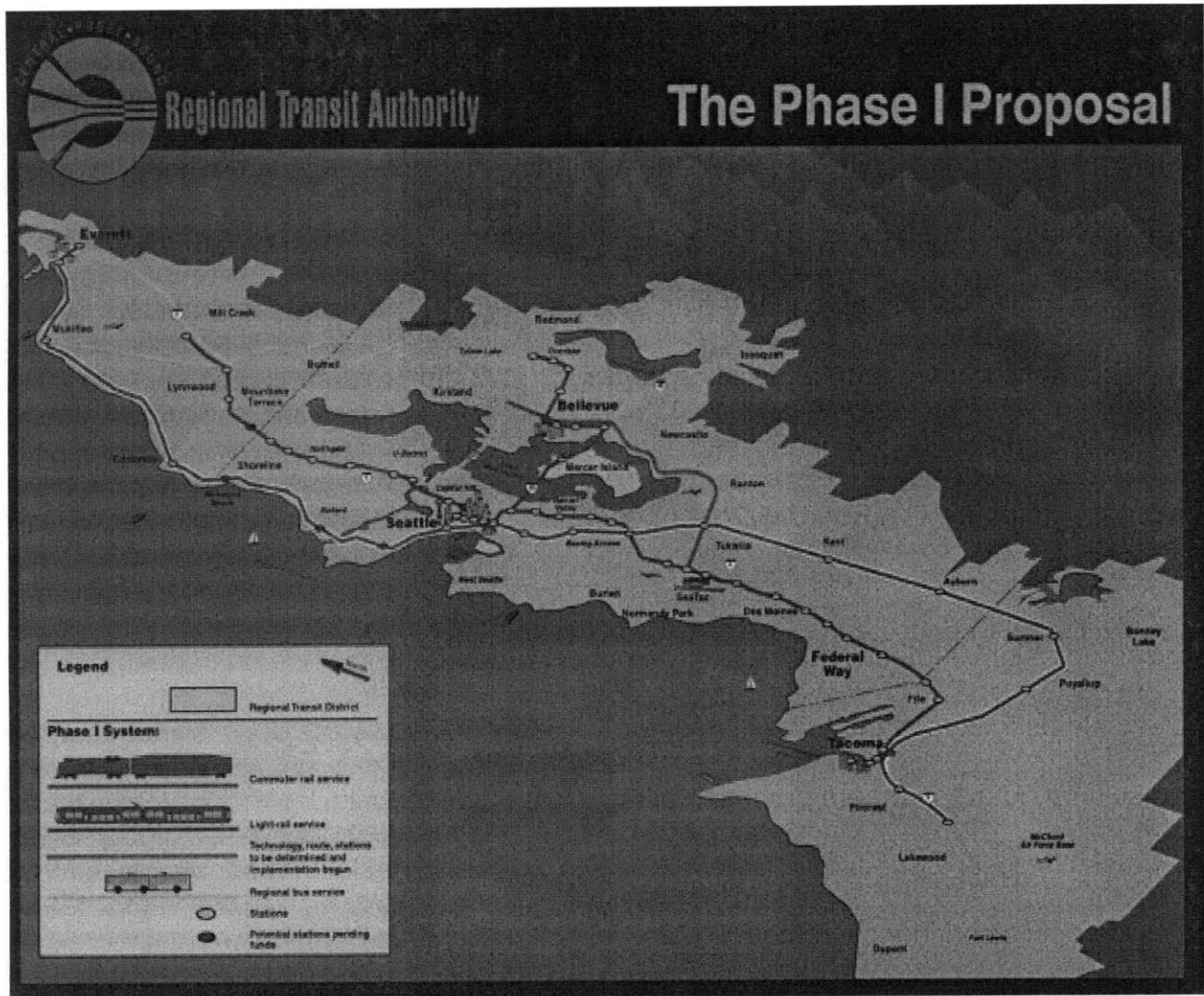


Figure 3: RTA 1995 Regional Transit System Plan. Source: soundtransit.org

asked voters in the transit district spanning all three counties to approve a sales tax increase of 0.4 percent and a vehicle-licensing fee of 0.3 percent, which taken together

would cost the average household \$8 per month. The taxes levied would cover an estimated half the cost of the plan.

In December 1994, just three months before the election, the three counties approved the Phase I plan, clearing the way for a March 1995 ballot. But with little time to campaign for the package's approval, and one board member attempting to withdraw his city completely from the RTA district, the initiative's supporters faced improbable odds. And in the final three months, the opposition's main messages—emphasizing the package's cost, questioning the RTA's competency, and underlining the plan's insignificant impact on the traffic problem—grew louder.

Political divisions among the plan's backers enabled transit opponents to advance of the notion that traffic congestion was the main problem, while using the plan's considerable uncertainties to challenge the RTA's credibility. The fierce parochial disputes within the RTA Board were reported in the media with painstaking detail. The *Post-Intelligencer* elaborated on multiple disagreements during one RTA board meeting, for example, as Matoff and King County Councilwoman Martha Choe presented conflicting estimates of the travel-time improvements gained by the downtown tunnel, and several board members proposed different formulas for calculating a county's share of the plan's costs and benefits (Penhale 1994c). This only bolstered opponents' efforts to erode public confidence in the RTA. Letters to the Editor in Seattle's two daily newspapers questioned the RTA's credibility. "Metro and its successor, the Regional Transit Authority (RTA), have a habit of understating the cost of rail transit to the taxpayer" claimed one resident, while another outlined the perceived failures of the four-year-old bus transit tunnel—a project of King County Metro that was fraught with

construction delays and cost overruns—as evidence of the RTA’s incompetence (Burke 1994; Cain 1994). Similarly, opponents were able to tap into public outrage over an unrelated issue—ballooning costs for overdue repairs to the Kingdome sports stadium—which had contributed to a widespread distrust of local government. The RTA’s finance plan assumed contributions from both the state and federal government. But detractors were quick to point out that the funding was far from secured.

To defend its credibility, the RTA assigned an independent “expert review panel” to evaluate the plan’s ridership forecasts, finance projections and cost estimates. Weeks before the election, the panel released its results, describing the RTA’s plan as “fair and reasonable” (Schaefer 1995). Panel chair Aubrey Davis was quoted in the Seattle Times declaring, “There is no flimflam...No one has cooked the numbers” (Schaefer 1995). Yet following repeated attacks on the RTA’s competence, Davis’s statement only reaffirmed that the agency’s credibility was subject to debate.

On the eve of the election, reporter Ed Penhale summed up the choice the voters faced, “If the RTA plan goes forward, it will be buffeted by changes in political leadership, uncertainties about state and federal financing, and fights over what is going to happen - or not happen - with development and rail route alignments...A leap of faith will be asked of voters next week” (Penhale 1995).

Voters it seemed weren’t ready for that leap, given the negative portrayal of the RTA, the dogged emphasis on the package’s price tag, and the inability of transit backers come together and tell a compelling story about the plan’s benefits. On March 14, 1995, in a special election that attracted only one-third of eligible voters, the initiative lost badly, failing to achieve a majority in every legislative district outside of Seattle.

Though King County scraped by a 51 percent approval, Pierce County rejected the measure with a solid 60 percent of voters opposed, and Snohomish County with a resounding 64 percent. Much of the problem in the first election was summed up in a *Seattle Times* letter to the editor describing one voter's perspective:

Public officials have a credibility problem because of the way they have mismanaged our past investment in public assets. The proposed transit system, projected at \$6.7 billion, is 100 times greater than the Kingdome fiasco. I almost rejected the RTA proposal because I didn't have enough information to make a decision involving that much money. RTA proponents did not make a case that they had done their homework... I would like to have seen some evidence that everybody is working together on the plan. (Hartman 1995).

Without a base of popular support or any track record to demonstrate its competence, the RTA was vulnerable to questions about its legitimacy. The charge that the plan's financing depended on uncertain funding presented a particular dilemma; federal funding guidelines required the demonstration of local financial support. Until a tax increase was approved by voters, federal funding could never be guaranteed. So the only solution was to reduce the plan's scope, so local revenues raised could support a greater share of the costs.

The initiative's dismal results also reflected a key strategic error by the agency's leadership. Had Laing answered calls to postpone the ballot until the following year, the RTA may have had time to build stronger regional cohesion or at least neutralize the opposition of public officials like Hansen. And 1996—a presidential election year—would certainly attract stronger voter turnout. With these lessons in mind, the RTA board reconvened to consider a revised ballot measure.

The Sound Move Ballot Measure (November 1996)

The overwhelming defeat of the RTA's plan left transit proponents with very little time to reshape a package and build support; RTA's operating budget had money only through June. Moreover, the authority's enabling legislation required a successful ballot measure within two years. If the RTA failed on its second attempt to refine a proposal and win voter approval, the regional transit-planning effort would likely dissolve. Meanwhile, federal officials were expressing growing impatience with the region's transportation planning efforts. At the first RTA Board meeting following the election defeat, John Horsley, Deputy Assistant for the U.S. Department of Transportation urged Seattle to "get its act together," and reminded the Board that other regions would be competing for the limited New Starts funds (Regional Transit Authority 1995a).¹⁰

For RTA officials, these factors combined to create a tremendous sense of urgency, which in turn caused them to focus more seriously on building public support while strengthening regional cooperation. Unlike the previous process, the renewed campaign for transit started with an explicit approach of listening to voters' concerns. As RTA Vice-Chair, Tacoma City Councilor Paul Miller argued "It is incumbent to take a pause before the Board identifies the path it needs to take....We have an obligation to take a step back and listen to not only what the public says, but what the proponents and opponents have identified our role to be" (Regional Transit Authority 1995a). Two weeks following the election, the RTA held a workshop for representatives from FACT and Citizens for Sound Transit—the principal opponents and advocates of the 1995

¹⁰ New Starts is the Federal Transit Administration's major capital grant program for rail and bus rapid transit projects.

ballot measure—to present their arguments for addressing the region’s transportation problems.

FACT members seemed to sense in RTA’s “soul searching” an opportunity to broaden the scope of the authority. In the workshop, FACT representative Hill Hornung argued for “a drastic expansion of your charter for not only rail and buses and the full spectrum of transit improvements, but for highway improvements as well” (Regional Transit Authority 1995b). As FACT members envisioned it, this expanded role for RTA would include building carpool lanes, increasing rapid bus service, and investing in technology improvements for the region’s highways, or as James MacIsaac summed up, “capitalizing on the rubber tire system we’ve been building for two decades,” (Regional Transit Authority 1995b). In short, FACT members used the momentum from their election victory and the RTA’s subsequent self-evaluation to expand the debate to fully encompass the auto-centric transportation agenda.

This broader focus was also reflected in the problem definition FACT members advanced during the workshop. In marked contrast to their disciplined reiteration of the “traffic problem” during the previous campaign, FACT members at the workshop focused on the “suburban mobility crisis” as the “mass majority problem” of the transportation system (Regional Transit Authority 1995b). In a particularly candid moment, Hornung described the previous campaign’s use of congestion as the primary problem definition: “The swing issue was congestion. As people discovered your plan would not reduce congestion, they flipped. That is why our campaign was very consistent in focusing on congestion” (Regional Transit Authority 1995b). But emboldened by their success, FACT approached the renewed transit campaign

articulating the more explicit value choice of freedom of mobility facilitated by the automobile.

Though the tone of FACT's presentations in the March workshop was largely conciliatory, not far below the surface was a direct threat to rail proponents. Horning warned that if the Board were to push for "the maximum rail profile you can get past the ballot in the spring, the region will have gone into a state of suspended animation. You will gear up and we will gear up and the region will decide once again whether rail lives or dies. What we have proposed is that if that is the course the RTA is proceeding down, we oppose it" (Regional Transit Authority 1995b).

Unlike FACT's members, representatives of Citizens for Sound Transit gave little attention to either the specific elements or the broader purpose of the transit plan, but focused instead on the need for a good process to build regional consensus. Only Preston Schiller of the Sierra Club spoke to the substance of a new RTA plan, arguing emphatically, "Highway expansion increases congestion. That has been proven by research....HOV is a non-solution for various reasons, including the fact that it is a form of highway expansion. EPA analysis and models have analyzed the effects of HOV lanes and conclude it increases driving and does not improve air quality" (Regional Transit Authority 1995b). But overall, CST's message to RTA was to "get out to listen to what the public will support" (Regional Transit Authority 1995b). CST's comments reflected the sense of an untapped potential for grassroots RTA support. One transit supporter questioned the RTA board about its lack of a base-building campaign: "I was in some panic a week before the election to find that even though I am a grassroots person, no one had contacted me to work on this campaign. I made a few random calls

and found that no one else had been contacted either. The people running the RTA campaign did not utilize a grassroots component. I think that was a grievous error” (Regional Transit Authority 1995a).

The RTA seemed to take CST’s advice to heart. Over the next several months, the agency held over 400 public meetings and workshops with residents across the transit district. Meanwhile FACT worked quickly to build support for an RTA mission inclusive of highway expansion. In March and April 1995, members testified before the King County Council and the state’s house and senate transportation committees, arguing the need for increasing road capacity. Their efforts met with early success when the legislature earmarked \$750,000 for private groups to study alternatives to the RTA’s preferred transit alternatives. Though the provision was later vetoed by Governor Mike Lowry, FACT’s lobbying helped build support for the inclusion of some roads element into any new RTA measure.

In addition, the legislature approved the allocation of \$2.5 million to RTA—far less than the \$9 million the Board had requested, but enough to continue work toward a second ballot measure. With funding secured, the RTA Board turned its attention to building regional cooperation and public support. As Board Chair Bruce Laing described, “While some Board members may be feeling frustration because the Board is not actively engaged in developing a revised proposal at this time, the primary focus of the Board is on reaching a consensus” (Regional Transit Authority 1995c). To achieve this objective, the RTA hired a mediator and launched a process to establish shared regional priorities. In addition, the Board identified the need to integrate its revised plan more closely with the Metropolitan Transportation Plan created by the Puget Sound

Regional Council (PSRC), the area's federally mandated metropolitan planning organization, which led the region's growth-management efforts. RTA's new approach thus seemed to better incorporate the institutional prerequisites to sustainable transportation planning: regional cooperation, multi-modal coordination, and integration with compact land-use strategies.

But tensions were brewing beneath the surface. The board struck one controversial compromise with the adoption of "subarea equity," dividing the transit district into five areas. Each sub-area would maintain control of its share of tax revenues, though decisions would still be subject to Board approval. If a sub-area fell short of revenue, it could not use funds from another sub-area without the two-thirds support of the Board. The finance scheme was designed to win support from suburban members, who feared Seattle's expensive tunneling would consume more than its share of revenues. But critics charged the regional equity plan was "parochial politics at its worst." As Nickels described, "It is a very regressive policy...The East King County area has a very healthy tax base, people are buying BMWs all the time, so they have lots of motor vehicle tax money. But you can't use that financial strength for any other place but East King County" (quoted in Rosegrant 2001, 12).

The subarea equity agreement illustrates the constraints of the institutional framework for transportation planning. Few cities were willing to think beyond their own self-interest to preserve the integrity of the system as a whole. Tacoma, for example, planned its own 1.5-mile light-rail line connecting the city's downtown with the Tacoma Dome. Though the service has proven popular with Tacoma residents, the money used to build the short segment arguably could have been better utilized to improve the

transit plan for the region as a whole. Nonetheless, without the promise of additional federal support, the subarea equity agreement may have been a necessary compromise to prevent the in-fighting over limited tax revenues that weakened the 1995 measure.

As work toward a revised plan progressed, the roads-versus-rail debate foreshadowed at the March 31 workshop grew louder, and threatened to break apart the regional collaboration. In March 1996, the Board released its revised draft plan, titled "Sound Move," featuring a regional express bus system, peak-hour commuter rail from Everett to Lakewood, 100 miles of HOV lanes, and 21 miles of light rail, with an integrated fare system for "seamless transition" between modes. The most notable changes from the previous year's plan were the dramatic decrease in the light-rail system—which aside from the short segment in Tacoma, would be built entirely within King County—and the new inclusion of HOV lanes. The region's key environmental organizations, including the Sierra Club, the Washington Environmental Council, and 1,000 Friends of Washington, immediately blasted the plan, declaring it the result of "efforts to buy support of powerful special interest groups . . . rather than a strategic effort to resolve the region's transportation problems as efficiently as possible" (Foster 1996a). Particularly offensive to environmentalists was the major HOV expansion and a \$10 million provision to study the expansion of the Rt-520 floating bridge. Predictably, Kemper Freeman and other transit opponents also dismissed the Sound Move plan, calling it "politics at its worst," and charging once again that the rail projects would "make no discernible impact on the worsening congestion problem" (Foster 1996a; Foster 1996b).

With criticism from all sides, members of the Regional Outreach Committee, the RTA board's consensus-building group, urged the RTA to delay the election by a year. But others were adamant that the measure should move forward on schedule. "It's 1996 or nothing," declared Martha Choe, Seattle city councilor and RTA board member (Schaefer 1996). Greg Nickels recalls his strong support for a 1996 ballot: "A presidential election is where you want to be for a transit issue. Younger voters vote in presidential elections and younger voters are the most avid advocates of transit. They believe they will live to see the results of an investment like light rail and they want it and they're willing to pay for it" (Nickels 2010). So when the committee voted eight to five to advance the initiative—far from a consensus decision—the board chair decided to accept the vote as an endorsement and push for the approval of the RTA board. Members authorized the Sound Move plan for a November 5th election. Given that the 1995 measure was undermined by conflict within the RTA board, the decision to send the Sound Move plan to the ballot with only slim majority of support was a bold move. But it proved to be a pivotal decision.

Political officials scrambled to rebuild support for Sound Move. In May 1996, Governor Lowry hosted a meeting with ten environmental organizations as well as RTA Executive Director Bob White and Chair Bob Drewel. In a deft political move, White proposed that the state should assume responsibility for the HOV-lane expansion, while the RTA would handle only the access ramps once the new lanes were built. In this way the RTA could maintain the concept of high-occupancy travel lanes as part of the Sound Move package—an element critical to support from Eastside jurisdictions—but could reassure environmentalists that the tax measure would not directly support highway

expansion. To further placate environmentalists, White expressed the board's willingness to drop the controversial 520 bridge study from the ballot package.

The proposed changes were enough to win the endorsement of the environmentalists. As the election approached, they continued to emphasize the environmental problems associated with cars, arguing that the RTA plan was an alternative to sitting in traffic. Aaron Ostrom of Alt-trans, a new statewide transit advocacy organization, argued in a column in the *Post-Intelligencer*, "Cars are our largest source of air pollution. They are major contributors to urban sprawl, water pollution, oil spills and global warming. Auto accidents kill around 40,000 people in the United States every year and seriously injure 500,000 more." And he went on to highlight the advantages of rail transit. "Rail investments...offer the transportation infrastructure required to make growth management work—a system that can serve the concentrated urban centers called for in regional growth management plans" (Ostrom 1995)

Meanwhile, in an indication of the increasing polarization in the debate on the ballot initiative, transit opponents criticized the effectiveness of rail, and extolled the advantages of the automobile. As one article described, "People get a tremendous benefit from cars...Most people view cars as a superior good because of door-to-door flexibility" (Foster 1996d). Another accused the RTA plan of being a "social engineering" scheme "to woo families away from suburban, single-family homes and get them into trains and high-rise apartments" (Foster 1996c). Thus when voters went to the polls on November 5th, the debate had been distilled in the press as a choice between the car

and the train as the mode choice for the region's future. And multiple polls had indicated a consistent preference for rail among Seattle-area voters (Rosegrant 2001).

The Sound Move ballot measure won resoundingly with an overall 58-42 margin, achieving majority support in all three counties. Voters also approved a 0.4 percent increase in the local sales tax and a 0.3 percent increase in the motor-vehicle tax for a \$3.9 billion transit and HOV ramp package that would be completed in an estimated ten years (figure 4).

At the RTA meeting three days later, board members were triumphant. The RTA leadership "slam-dunked" the campaign, proclaimed King County Councilmember Cynthia Sullivan, while Vice Chair Paul Miller of Tacoma observed, "This is the first truly regional effort that will have concrete results" (Regional Transit Authority 1996). Pierce County Executive Doug Sutherland elaborated on the significance of the regional planning effort:

The term "we" is very inclusive. I remember trying to convince each other of what different aspects of the plan should look like. I remember listening to the public and trying to figure out what we were trying to accomplish... I have watched all of you work to convince the opponents, pundits and the public and convince yourselves that this was a doable activity. All of us, at some time, will be zipping along on some conveyance not currently available, saying, "I remember when...." We will recognize how important some of our activities truly were. (Regional Transit Authority 1996).

Considering the skepticism expressed by the RTA's leadership in 1994 that regional collaboration could even be achieved, the success of Sound Move was indeed an important accomplishment. The 1996 campaign was marked by far fewer disputes between jurisdictions within the transit district than that of the year before. Everett

Mayor Ed Hansen in particular was appeased by the subarea equity agreement, and campaigned enthusiastically in favor of Sound Move. And in turn, Snohomish county voters showed the most dramatic turnaround in their support for the measure, approving Sound Move by a by a margin of 55 percent (it was turned down by 64 percent the year before). The leadership of local public officials, therefore, seems an important factor influencing the voters' willingness to support a transit measure.

Implementation Challenges (1997-2005)

Although triumphant about the passage of Sound Move, the board and staff of the RTA were also mindful of the significant task that lay ahead. Executive Director Bob White described the need to break the \$3.9 billion project into manageable pieces: “The first step is to recognize this is not one project but it is literally hundreds of projects” (Regional Transit Authority 1996). Joni Earl, who would become executive director following White’s resignation, recalls the challenge facing RTA in 1996: “We were the first transit agency in the country that tried to go from zero to a hundred. We had no framework, we had no institutional structure....you’ve just promised the voters to deliver a \$4 billion dollar project in 10 years, of which every siting decision still had to be made....it was hugely complex” (Earl 2010). Over the next decade, a series of challenges—especially in building the organization, planning the detailed light-rail route, and responding to citizen ballot initiatives—tested the strength of the regional collaboration and demonstrated that the election was only an initial victory. As Miller reminded his colleagues on the board, “The work is just now beginning” (Regional Transit Authority 1996).

Organization Building

The first task for the RTA (dubbed “Sound Transit” shortly after the election) was to build an organization. The RTA had run the two elections largely with borrowed staff from the counties’ planning agencies (Rosegrant 2001). Joni Earl recalls that following the 1996 election, the entire institution of Sound Transit was composed of 23 employees, mostly planners. “Planners are wonderful, and we need them all. But to also figure out how to run a business was very challenging” (Earl 2010). Executive Director

White faced the job of creating basic systems like how to pay people, and how to write a contract, while sticking to the “very aggressive schedule” for rolling out the new transit service (Earl 2010).

With 21 miles of new light rail corridors, 20 regional bus routes, and 81 miles of heavy rail commuter service, the process for detailed route planning, siting decisions, finance planning, and property acquisitions was a tremendous undertaking. White described to the board the need for balance, with progress toward all modes in the system and in every sub-area in the region. He also emphasized the importance of showing early results, to build trust with the public and to remain competitive for federal funding (Regional Transit Authority 1996). By mid-1997, Sound Transit adopted a capital plan which stipulated a timeline for the agency’s investment projects, and in September, Sound Transit launched its first new bus service—an express route between Tacoma and Seattle—and broke ground on a park-and-ride lot in Lynnwood. So optimism was running high in 1998 when Sound Transit selected the 18 “most promising route alternatives” for light rail, kicking-off an intense period of detailed study and public engagement in neighborhoods across the transit district.

Unlike the commuter rail, which would utilize existing tracks, the light-rail system required establishing a new right-of-way, and therefore entailed the most complicated planning of the Sound Move package. The light rail would span 21 miles and consist of three segments: the 15.6 mile Central Link between SeaTac Airport and downtown Seattle; the 3.1 mile University Link, extending from downtown Seattle to the University of Washington; and the 1.6 mile Tacoma Link, connecting downtown Tacoma with the city’s commuter rail station.

Site and right-of-way planning is notoriously contentious, as multiple interests compete over the future form and function of the city (Weitz 2008). And parties that feel excluded from a siting decision process may be more likely to become opponents of a new facility (Smith and Marquez 2000). As Sound Transit developed its preferred alignment for its “starter” light rail system, debates were particularly intense in the cities of Tukwila, Federal Way and Seatac, and in several Seattle neighborhoods, including the University District and First Hill. But in Seattle’s Rainier Valley, the decision over the light-rail alignment was arguably the most contentious.

Residents of the Rainier Valley, a racially diverse, working-class neighborhood, reacted angrily to plans for a 4.6-mile segment down the center of one of the area’s busiest streets, charging Sound Transit with racial and economic discrimination.¹¹ Neighborhood activists contrasted the agency’s plans for expensive tunnels through the wealthier downtown districts with the street-grade design for the Rainier Valley. Area residents claimed the rail line would bisect the neighborhood, disrupt traffic and pedestrian activity, and devastate local businesses. “They are saving money on the south end, like usual,” remarked one long-time resident (Foster 1998b). Sound Transit board members, however, maintained that the alignment decision was based on topography and land use. The hilly terrain and denser development of downtown Seattle made a tunnel necessary; in contrast, MLK Way was flat and wide, at 108-feet wide, providing ample room for a rail and requiring relatively few property acquisitions.

¹¹ According to the 2000 Census, 41.6% of the neighborhood’s population is Asian, 22.3% is Black or African-American, and 24.4% is White. Thirty-eight percent of the Rainier Valley’s population is foreign born, and median household income is \$42,993, well below the \$65,800 median household income of the Seattle Metropolitan Statistical Area (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

The decision to build at-grade through the Rainier Valley was clearly a sound decision for the transit district as a whole; with limited funding, any tunneling not necessary for topography or land-use constrictions would require cutting-back service in another part of the plan. And the precedent of putting rail underground would surely complicate negotiations with other neighborhoods in the district. Sound Transit's approach to the challenging politics in the Rainier Valley, however, worsened its relationship with the most vocal critics. Greg Nickels recalls that the initial designs for the light-rail route south of downtown would have bypassed the Rainier Valley all together. So public officials in Seattle challenged the plans, maintaining "We've got to take it through the Rainier Valley so we actually serve people" (Nickels 2010). There is little evidence that the board reached out to neighborhood activists to engage them in this early decision, however. Once the process for the stations and route planning began, Rainier Valley residents were vocal in expressing their concerns about the MLK Way alignment as well as their suspicions that the neighborhood would be treated unfairly. At a community workshop held by Sound Transit, neighborhood activist Suzanne Scomodau told agency staff, "This is the most diverse population in the county, and we don't want something shoved down our throats" (Foster 1998a). But weeks later, the 18 different routes selected for study for the light-rail system did not include a tunnel alternative through the Rainier Valley. For the local activists, this suggested that Sound Transit considered their concerns irrelevant. Residents eventually sued Sound Transit on civil rights and environmental justice grounds. Though the legal challenge failed in federal appellate court, it stalled progress on contract negotiations and property acquisitions for a critical link of the transit line.

After its initial missteps, Sound Transit was more proactive in building trust with local communities. The Sound Transit board created a \$50 million economic development fund to be used to help Rainier Valley businesses forced to relocate or negatively impacted by construction. The fund helped assuage some concerns, particularly when the community was given significant authority over its management and dispersal. As the construction project broke ground, Sound Transit staff were on-hand in the affected neighborhoods, communicating frequently with businesses and residents to trouble-shoot any problems that they could. And the investment in relationship-building seems to have paid off. As Mike Peringer, executive director of the Sodo Business Association described, "They've been probably one of the most cooperative public agencies around as far as our community is concerned....When we did have a few problems when they were putting in those casings, they immediately addressed the problems and solved it" (Hadley 2004).

Challenges from the ballot box.

Beyond the planning and public-relations challenges of building a new transit system, Sound Transit had to contend with several threats posed by voter initiatives. Though the Agency owed its existence to direct democracy, Seattle's notorious populist streak presented two significant sets of challenges for the fledgling transit agency during its first decade. The first, a grassroots effort to create a citywide monorail system, threatened to complicate the light-rail route planning, erode trust in public transit, and generate competition for future tax revenues. The second, a series of statewide anti-tax initiatives proposed to cut-off one of Sound Transit's primary sources of revenue.

Shortly before the Sound Move election, a local activist proposed to take the city's worsening traffic congestion into his own hands. Dick Falkenbury, a cab driver and city tour guide drafted Initiative 41 which called for the city to establish the Elevated Transportation Company (ETC) to raise private financing for a citywide monorail. The measure designated a 40-mile X-shaped transit system to link the city's four corners with its downtown core, but it did not include a public price tag or levy a tax.

To the astonishment of the city's political leaders, who had largely dismissed the measure as irrelevant, Initiative 41 won with a 53 percent majority. After considerable debate, Mayor Paul Schell and the city council created a 12-member ETC board, and allocated \$200,000 to fund its first year of operations.

Though voters had been told the monorail showed great promise for attracting private investment, financing the project proved elusive. In 2000, with City Council threatening to repeal the monorail initiative, the ETC returned to voters, winning approval for \$200 million in municipal borrowing capacity. Two years later, the monorail was back on the ballot for a third time with Initiative 1, which won a razor-thin majority in support of a 1.4 percent car-tax increase that would help pay for the estimated \$1.75 billion transit plan.

For Sound Transit, the monorail introduced a new complication to its light-rail routing and site planning. Sound Move had promised voters "seamless integration" of the region's transit networks, and the 1996 plan was the result of years of bargaining and coordination among the four transit agencies, 51 cities, and three counties in the transit district. The entrance of the monorail reopened several hard-fought agreements; several miles of the proposed elevated route would parallel the city's light-rail line, which

for some represented an absurd redundancy in a transit-starved region. Dueling opinion pieces in the press called simultaneously for Sound Transit to abandon part of its light-rail system (Johnson 1999), and for the monorail money to be used to improve the light-rail system (Himma 1999). But the monorail's potential impact on public opinion was perhaps a greater threat to Sound Transit than the added complexity of service integration. With Initiative 1, the monorail became a public transit agency. Any misstep would reflect poorly on the ability of publicly run entities to deliver transportation services. In describing feedback from voters on transportation issues, State House Transportation Chair Judy Clibborn observes, "Most people don't recognize that Sound Transit is its own entity" (Clibborn 2010). So as the Monorail project fell into deeper financial troubles, Sound Transit officials worried that the beleaguered regional transit system would suffer the repercussions.

Shortly after the Monorail began collecting its first tax revenues, it was apparent that the vehicle excise tax had been significantly overestimated. The monorail scrambled to scale-back the plan and shore-up private financing. But ongoing negotiations with the project's only private bidder were going poorly, and the project's costs ballooned—reaching at one point an estimated \$11 billion. In November 2005 yet another monorail initiative—the fifth since 1997—was put on the ballot.¹² Voters rejected the measure by a margin of 64.5 percent to 35.5 percent, derailing the eight-year monorail effort. The agency was \$110 million in debt, and Seattle car owners would continue to pay vehicle taxes through June 2006 for a transit system they knew would never be built.

¹² A fourth initiative in 2004, the "Monorail Recall" was soundly defeated by voters.

Most accounts of the monorail attribute its failure to poor financial management and overly optimistic cost estimates. Regardless of the accuracy of these critiques, the popular perception that the Monorail mismanaged public funds helped fuel a series of anti-tax measures that posed an even greater threat to Sound Transit.

The tax measures were spearheaded by Tim Eyman, a self-taught activist with a passion for small government and a penchant for ballot initiatives.¹³ Eyman's general interest seemed to be to minimize government; in a documentary charting his impact on Washington politics, Eyman proclaims "Olympia is gorging itself. Priorities of government was replaced with pig-out on government" (Fraser 2006). But many of his efforts were directed more pointedly at transportation. In 1999, Eyman sponsored the successful Initiative 695, which cut the statewide motor vehicle excise tax to a flat \$30.¹⁴ In 2000, Initiative 745 proposed to earmark 90 percent of state and local transportation spending for road construction and maintenance. The State's Office of Financial Management estimated the initiative could shift as much as \$2 billion from transit spending every two years (Garber 2000). With a coordinated campaign involving transit and environmental activists, city and county officials, and many of the state's biggest employers, the measure was defeated.

Eyman, however, was undeterred, and in 2001 he launched Initiative 776, a measure to eliminate local motor-vehicle excise taxes (MVET). Though the measure appeared on the ballot in all 39 of the state's counties, its provisions applied only to four,

¹³ Between 1998 and 2009, Eyman spearheaded seventeen separate ballot measures which achieved enough signatures to go before voters. The initiatives ranged from prohibiting affirmative action to cutting property taxes to earmarking transportation spending for road building. Voters passed eight of Eyman's initiatives, though several were subsequently declared unconstitutional.

¹⁴ Initiative 695 was subsequently declared unconstitutional, but Governor Locke, fearing a backlash from the anti-tax proponents, rolled the state's car tax back to \$30.

including the three counties in the Sound Transit district that had implemented a local-vehicle tax. Eyman was explicit in targeting the transit agency in his campaigning. “Sound Transit has been sucking money down the drain,” he charged at a debate on the measure (Godden 2002). The motor vehicle tax accounted for approximately 20 percent of the agency’s budget, and though the MVET repeal wouldn’t on its own eliminate the agency, pundits and activists agreed the measure was “a weapon to stop light rail” (Ramsey 2002).¹⁵ On November 5, 2002 Initiative 776 won a 51 percent majority statewide. Voters within the Sound Transit district rejected the measure, a fact which the agency quickly cited as a vote of confidence for the regional transit system. But the majority approval statewide raised the possibility of a major budget shortfall for Sound Transit, just as the agency was emerging from its most challenging crisis since the 1996 election.

The Dark Days

Joni Earl, Sound Transit CEO, describes the period from 2000 to 2001 as the agency’s “dark days,” when Sound Transit was on the brink of collapse (Gutierrez 2009). She attributes the troubles to the lack of organizational infrastructure within Sound Transit after the 1996 election. “It was just bigger than what the agency in its startup mode was really able to really do...It was an agency in over its head” (Earl 2010). According to Earl, in its early years, Sound Transit lacked good systems for cost

¹⁵ Environmental organizations including 1000 Friends of Washington, the Sierra Club, and the Transportation Choices Coalition were a part of the opposition campaign. But environmental groups seemed to prioritize another statewide ballot measure—Referendum 51, sponsored by the State Legislature, which proposed to increase the state’s gas and sales tax for a \$7.7 billion package for roads spending. Each of the organizations’ websites in the month before the election featured the No on 51 Campaign prominently, whereas support for the I776 opposition was less apparent. Moreover, press coverage of R51 frequently cited the referendum’s potential impact on pollution and global warming, while only one article on I776 raised environmental concerns.

estimates and budget tracking. Under pressure to meet the ten-year timeline promised to voters, staff made commitments to communities, increasing the scope of the project without compensating for the increased costs. “They weren’t tracking all the yeses...They literally didn’t know what they didn’t know” (Earl 2010).

A few weeks before Earl joined the staff, rumors began circulating that the design-build process for the first light-rail segment was in trouble. Perhaps to save time or money, the agency had short-listed only two bidders to submit a full proposal—less than the range of three to five considered ideal by industry standards (Palaneeswaran and Kumaraswamy 2000). The agency selected Modern Transit Constructors, a decision immediately maligned because of the contractor’s role in Boston’s Big Dig fiasco. So when reports emerged that Modern Transit’s bid was \$350 million over the agency’s budget estimates, rail opponents sprang to life, declaring that the light-rail project was “tapped out,” and claiming the burgeoning rail costs could lead to “siphoning money from the bus system” (McGann 2000a; Lewis 2000). A group of more than 50 elected officials and civic leaders, including King County councilmembers Rob McKenna and Maggi Fimia and former governor Booth Gardner—all long-time rail opponents—demanded that Sound Transit disclose the details of the contract bidding, and called for an independent audit of the agency’s light-rail project. But Sound Transit flatly refused to open its books, claiming another study would “kill the project.” “No more delays. No more process. No more magic bullets...Just build it!” bellowed board member Ron Sims (McGann 2000b). Executive Director White expressed confidence in the contract negotiations, maintaining that contractors bid high to leave themselves room to negotiate. Meanwhile the agency released a report claiming the initial light-rail line from

downtown to the University District could be completed with savings as high as \$255 million.

Pressure on the regional transit agency, however, continued to rise. One attack in the press by rail opponent Richard Morrill criticized the growth-management objectives of the transit plan, calling the light-rail planning process “faddish, elitish, and unfair to many,” and condemning commuter-rail service as “an inconsequential toy” (Morrill 2000). McKenna and Fimia led a King County public forum to address concerns about light rail’s escalating costs, with a panel of seven elected officials critical of light rail and a national expert on transit tunnels. The forum concluded with a renewed call for Sound Transit to release its detailed cost estimates.

Surrendering to the pressure, Sound Transit’s board abruptly announced it would launch an independent review of the light-rail tunnel. Seattle Mayor and Sound Transit board member Paul Schell explained the agency’s about-face: “There has been an erosion of public confidence in Sound Transit....What we’re beginning is a process to restore that confidence” (Lange 2000). Three days earlier, Joni Earl had joined the staff as chief operating officer, and was asked to conduct a comprehensive internal review of the struggling light-rail project.

The agency had more to rebuild than confidence, however, after failing to heed warning signals that its light-rail project was off track and staunchly denying any troubles. Earl’s review revealed the depths of Sound Transit’s problems; the light-rail system was \$1.1 billion over budget—three times the rumored tunnel overruns—and three years behind schedule. Earl turned quickly to creating new internal systems “to monitor, manage and control the budget, cost and schedule goals for the project”

(Sound Transit 2001). She also reorganized the agency's external-relations staff to manage the "constant challenge to have consistent, timely, and proactive communication with so many stakeholders simultaneously" (Sound Transit 2001). Earl recalls telling the Sound Transit staff, "The only way we're going to get our credibility back is just to do the work. I can go out there and say we're better, we've improved, but it's not going to mean squat until we deliver stuff" (Earl 2010). Earl's strong leadership illustrated by her efforts to build regular and transparent communications, and her commitment to ensuring accountability, was instrumental in salvaging the agency from its near collapse.

Earl's focus on rebuilding the organization also seemed to bolster the board, which despite calls to abandon light rail, voted in January 2001 to expand the budget and timeline for the controversial project. The vote came just in time to secure a \$500 million full-funding grant agreement with the federal government before President Bill Clinton—considered more supportive of transit than his successor—left office.¹⁶

The board's commitment to continue light rail, however, did not quell the criticism from outside skeptics. The revelation of the agency's severe financial and organizational troubles gave fuel to a series of political attacks aimed at destroying Sound Transit. Opponents lobbied representatives in the state house to revoke the agency's authorizing legislation, and urged federal lawmakers to deny the agency funding. Rail foes on the King County Council worked to block the transfer of the downtown transit tunnel to Sound Transit (an agreement brokered just months earlier, and necessary to

¹⁶ Three months later, the agency's federal funding was suspended until the U.S. Inspector General could complete an audit of Sound Transit's light-rail project, a process which would take two years.

proceed with plans to retrofit the tunnel for light rail). And a flurry of radio ads called on citizens to demand another vote on the regional transit agency.

Earl recalls that the press coverage during that period was “absolutely unrelenting” (Earl 2010). Reporting on the January board meeting, *Tacoma News Tribune* journalist David Quigg described the “long parade of public speakers” opposing light rail. His story quoted several critics, including rail foe Emory Bundy, who attacked the decision to expand the light-rail budget and timeline, “You claim that voters gave you a blank check and an open schedule” (Quigg 2001). Shortly after that meeting, Executive Director Bob White announced his resignation, explaining that new leadership “unencumbered by past issues and decisions” could better restore public faith in the transit agency. The *Post Intelligencer* story on his decision highlighted the disparaging comments from board member McKenna, who called White’s resignation a “smokescreen.” “You can’t put lipstick on a sow. And this project is a pigand we haven’t even started building it yet” (McGann 2001a). In May 2001, *Post Intelligencer* reporter Chris McGann released a story asserting that Sound Transit had deliberately concealed light-rail’s true costs from both voters and bond investors (McGann 2001b). But six days later, after Earl and her staff produced volumes of evidence contradicting the article’s claims, the paper was forced to retract the story.

The *Post Intelligencer*’s admission of its shoddy reporting was an indication that the agency had turned a corner in managing its public relations, and marked the beginning of a slow, but steady restoration of Sound Transit’s credibility. Through tireless dialogue with state and federal politicians, Earl slowly shored up the light-rail project’s political support. To fend off another budget shortfall, agency lawyers

challenged the Eyman initiative's cut to Sound Transit car-tax revenues.¹⁷ Meanwhile, with solid management systems, the agency began meeting important milestones, and celebrating the achievements in the press. In August 2003, Tacoma Link—the first light rail segment of the plan—began service between the Tacoma Dome and the city's downtown, and quickly exceeded ridership expectations by more than 50 percent. Two months later, the Federal Transit Administration signed the \$500 million full funding grant agreement for the Central Link light rail system.¹⁸ And in December 2003, Sounder commuter rail service opened in Everett, completing the rail line promised to voters in 1996. Attention to the agency's community relationships also seemed to be paying off. When the Rainier Valley's \$50 million economic development fund was launched, the project was praised for its degree of community oversight and its promise to strengthen the neighborhood. As the fund's board chair Nemesio Domingo expressed, "[T]his community is going to have what it's never had before and that's money...It means self-determination" (Hadley 2003a). With mounting evidence that the "dark days" were in the agency's past, the board turned again to long-range visioning, launching a process for a second-phase ballot measure to expand the regional-transit system.

¹⁷ The appeal was a partial success. The state's Supreme Court decided that because the revenues were already pledged to repay bonds issued to fund the Sound Move plan, the agency could continue to collect the car tax. Sound Transit could not use the car tab for future projects, however.

¹⁸ After receiving a clean Inspector General's audit, Sound Transit got top ratings in the federal grant process. But funding was nearly denied again when Congresswoman Dunn, a Republican representative from the Eastside, tried to kill the agency's application, citing concerns that the Seattle light-rail project would raid funds from the Eastside's revenue pool. Congressman Dunn, Democrat from Tacoma and strong Sound Transit supporter described the particularly partisan politics, "I've been in Congress a long time, and I've never seen the delegation, frankly, go at each other as it did on this particular project," (Hadley and Pope 2003). The FTA grant agreement stipulated that the Board sign a commitment "not to siphon away money from the Eastside or other areas for the light rail project" (Hadley and Pope 2003).

Sound Transit II

That process began with an update of the Regional Transportation Long-Range Vision. Building from the original vision statement adopted in 1993, the board demonstrated a clear focus when it unanimously adopted the following goals:

- Provide a public transportation system that helps ensure long-term mobility, connectivity, and convenience for the citizens of the Puget Sound region for generations to come
- Preserve communities and open space
- Contribute to the region's economic vitality
- Preserve our environment
- Strengthen communities' use of the regional transit network (Sound Transit and Brinckerhoff 2007, 16).

Especially notable given the history of opposition from the Eastside was the support from Bellevue Mayor Connie Marshall, a new member of Sound Transit's Finance Committee. Journalist Jane Hadley described Marshall's enthusiasm: "Bellevue loves the projects Sound Transit has built so far and wants to start on more" (Hadley 2003b). The five sub-areas devised during Sound Move planning were preserved, and seemed to be a critical, if imperfect, mechanism to continue regional cooperation. Within a year, Sound Transit released a supplemental environmental impact statement for a revised long-range plan, and the board began devising a strategy for a Phase II ballot measure in 2006.

Highway proponents, however, saw an opportunity in the preparations for a new transit ballot measure. The state's roads and bridges by all accounts had deteriorated to the point where a crisis was imminent. Some 40 bridges were critically in need of repairs, and plans to address urgent safety concerns on regional highways, including the Alaskan Way Viaduct and the 520 Floating Bridge, were mired in debate. Meanwhile

worsening traffic congestion fueled appeals for new road capacity to relieve the area's worst bottlenecks. The need for highway investments, however, far outstripped the revenues available from the state. Revenues for Washington's highways came primarily from the state's gas tax, which had not kept pace with inflation. Moreover the Eyman car-tab initiative had slashed funding for many state transportation projects.

To begin to address the shortfall, the legislature had created the Regional Transportation Investment District (RTID) in 2002, authorizing King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties to collaborate in raising money for regional transportation projects. The authorizing legislation prioritized the addition of "lane capacity" to "highways of statewide significance" as well as the replacement of earthquake-damaged structures (like the Alaskan Way Viaduct). The RTID created a draft plan listing priority roads projects in the three counties. But polling suggested that the package was unlikely to pass on its own; voters were more likely to support a measure that included investments in the region's rail system (Evans McDonough Moore Information 2003). So the RTID Board began to explore a joint ballot initiative with Sound Transit.

The transit agency responded amicably to RTID's proposal for collaboration—"We would want to continue our dialogue if in the future if it becomes likely that RTID is taking a regional package to the ballot," the Sound Transit board chair wrote to the RTID (Ladenburg 2004). But Earl remembers that most Sound Transit board members were opposed to a joint roads-transit ballot, and although talks with RTID continued, Sound Transit continued planning to advance its own ballot for a second phase of transit expansion in the fall election (Earl 2010).

Reformers in the statehouse were pushing hard for a “Regional Transportation Commission” to force cooperation between RTID and Sound Transit. Tacoma’s *News Tribune* welcomed the proposed reforms as a way past political impasse:

The politics of transportation in this state have been so dysfunctional...Political infighting, including bitter rails-vs-roads squabbles in King County, have long kept the Regional Transportation Investment District from consensus on what projects to fund...it would be a shame if the Legislature failed to seize this opportunity to cement a strategic rails-and-roads alliance in the Puget Sound region. (Anon. 2006a).

The *Post-Intelligencer* was more tentative in its endorsement: “For better or worse, the legislation links roads to transit in a sink-or-swim-together relationship...Sound Transit officials were hoping to go to the ballot this year, and may well have their doubts...But...now it’s time to move forward” (Anon. 2006b). According to Earl, the state had never discussed the proposed alliance with Sound Transit’s leadership. So when Governor Gregoire announced in a press release that she had signed into law a bill blocking a 2006 transit-only ballot and requiring a joint RTID-Sound Transit ballot measure in 2007, “People were furious...my staff was devastated” (Earl 2010).

Roads and Transit Ballot Measure (November 2007)

From the start the “shotgun marriage,” as it was frequently described in the press, was a rocky relationship. As the two agencies worked to patch together a joint \$47-billion initiative, Mayor Nickels expressed concern that the highway package was too broad, arguing that “If it tries to be all things to all parts of the region it’s going to have troubles” (Galloway 2006). Shawn Bunney, RTID Chair jumped to the defense of the roads spending, “I would be interested in their recommended projects to be cut...The majority of the mega-projects either tie to Seattle or are in the city of Seattle” (Galloway 2006). King County Executive Ron Sims, former chair of the Sound Transit

board, was initially ambivalent about the merged effort, but as the election approached, he turned against the initiative, citing both the environmental impact of the roads expansion and some unnecessary expenses in the light-rail plan.

Meanwhile, the ambitious measure gave fodder to the most fervent opponents of roads and transit alike. Anti-rail advocates reunited to assault plans for “a crushingly expensive and inefficient regional light rail system” (Van Dyk 2007a). As the campaign proceeded, Kemper Freeman and other allies spent \$100,000 per week on TV and radio ads, bombarding voters with the package’s price tag, which the anti-rail opposition estimated at \$157 billion. One ad, aired during a popular University of Washington football game, spelled out the costs against a crimson background: “\$157,000,000,000. Prop one is the biggest local tax increase anywhere in America, ever...Because it costs so much and does so little, that’s why so many people say no to Prop One” (notoprop1.org 2007; Lindblom 2007a).

For environmentalists, the combined roads and transit package presented more of a dilemma. Mike O’Brien, chair of the Sierra Club’s Cascade Chapter at the time, recalls the core question for the group, “Can the Sierra club oppose a package that has rail? This was a very interesting discussion for us. We asked ourselves, ‘Will this package as a whole make global warming worse?’” (Michael O’Brien 2010). The combined plan included 182 miles of roads, 84 percent of which were general-purpose lanes (in contrast to HOV or transit-only lanes), and 50 miles of new light rail. The Sierra Club decided that the heavy emphasis on new highways outweighed the transit expansion. O’Brien argued passionately in a debate with other environmentalists: “One hundred and eighty-two miles of roads. They’re going to fill up with cars. Look at cities

with great transit. Their roads are still packed.... If we add 182 miles of highway lanes to our system, we're going to have that much more greenhouse-gas emissions" (O'Brien, in Strangervideo 2007). So the Sierra Club decided to oppose the initiative. "How could we tell Sierra Club members to vote for something that would make climate change worse?" O'Brien (2010) asks.

Most environmental groups took the opposite position, however, maintaining that the proposed expansion of light rail was too big to pass up. The Transportation Choices Coalition (TCC) and Futurewise (formerly 1,000 Friends of Washington), led the pro-transit grassroots campaign in support of Proposition 1. As TCC Director Rob Johnson argued in a debate among environmental groups,

If we vote yes on this package, the 50 miles of light rail that we build out of this package are going to totally transform the way we think about land use, the way we think about density, the way we think about sprawl... If you build light rail, you get density around those stations. We've got to figure out, if don't build light rail, where are those people going to go. And guess what, they're going to go to sprawly, away-from-the-city places without the density and transportation choices to support their mobility. We're going to see increased greenhouse gas emissions, and we're going to see a lot more traffic congestion. (Johnson, in Strangervideo 2007).

TCC concluded that if the measure failed, any future initiative would include less light rail, and would still expand roads. Moreover, TCC reasoned "We had some levers on the roads side to be able to stop projects from moving forward, through the NEPA process, or through lawsuits or through environmental reviews. We could showcase that there would be problems" (Johnson 2010). So as the election approached, environmental organizations were campaigning on both sides of Proposition 1.

Unlike the previous transit ballots, climate change emerged as a major issue in the public debate on Proposition 1, largely as a result of the Sierra Club's campaign. Between May 2007, when the Sound Transit board approved the transit plan for the ballot, and the election in November, one-third of the articles about the initiative in the *Post-Intelligencer* and *Seattle Times* mentioned either climate change or global warming or greenhouse gas emissions. The Sierra Club was very deliberate in

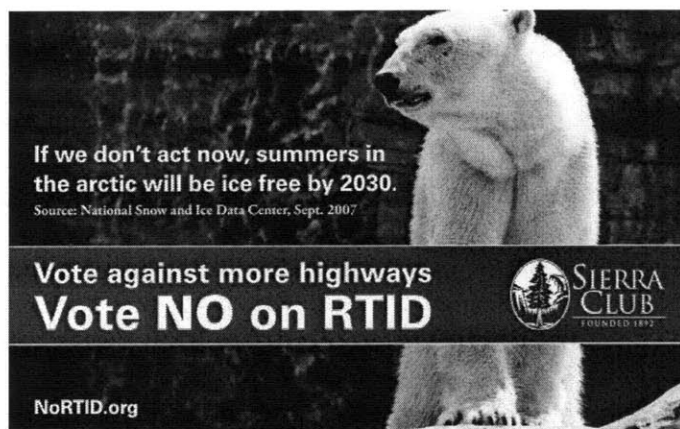


Figure 5: Materials from Sierra Club's campaign against the 2007 Proposition 1. Source: Notoprop1.org

its public message throughout the campaign. In flyers and newspaper ads, the group featured polar bears and the vanishing arctic ice cap with the simple message "Proposition 1 makes global warming worse" (figure 5). A TV ad that aired shortly before the election delivered this message against time-lapse satellite images of the North Pole: "In 2007, the Arctic ice cap melted at a record rate. Proposition 1 makes global warming worse. 182 miles of new highways. 15 million tons of new carbon emissions.

You can do something. Vote No on Proposition 1. There is a better way” (Sierra Club 2007).

Though proponents of the measure also began touting its global-warming benefits, their message focused more on the costs of inaction.¹⁹ One ad asked, “What will happen if we turn down the roads and transit measure? Things will only get worse. More traffic. More congestion. Fewer transit choices. More pollution. We need to address our transportation problems. Yes on Roads and Transit” (Keep Washington Rolling 2007).

Though the joint ballot purported to bring the two modes together into one cohesive plan, press coverage leading up to the election illustrates the intense polarization between road and transit supporters. Articles criticized the “Anti-car zealots” and described the “Eight-foot pile of elephant dung that is Sound Transit” (Van Dyk 2007b). Transit activists were somewhat less spiteful toward opponents, but their disdain for road-building was nonetheless apparent. As Seattle Times columnist and transit support Danny Westneat described, “Around here it's like we've jolted back to the '50s, to relive the allure of the highway era. Last week the state auditor and the editorial page of my newspaper took turns bashing light rail and saying the answer to our woes is to build more highways” (Westneat 2007). Just as climate change had surfaced as a major issue in the campaign, discussions of automobility were growing more frequent in the media. This explicit treatment of automobility and the climate impact of transportation in the press illustrate that the transportation problem was no longer

¹⁹ For example, Representative Jay Inslee, Democrat from the Eastside, wrote in a *Post-Intelligencer* column, “Approving Prop. 1 to expand transit options and unclog traffic bottlenecks is consistent with local efforts to reduce carbon-dioxide emissions and lead the nation in the fight against global warming” (Inslee 2007).

defined strictly as one of traffic or mobility. While transit opponents in the 1990s could focus exclusively on sitting in traffic as a compelling storyline to describe the troubles with transportation, by 2007, their message often included more underlying values associated with the automobile. As the negative impacts of the automobile were becoming better understood and frequently discussed, the simple message of traffic problems was no longer sufficient to compel widespread public support.

On Election Day, the Roads and Transit measure lost by a margin of 56 to 44 percent. A poll conducted for the Sierra Club found that the global-warming message moved about six percent of the voters, perhaps enough to have swung the election (Lindblom 2007b). Though taxes and cost were the primary concerns for most voters, the consultant who conducted the poll described the global warming opponents as “a new group that played a decisive role” (Lindblom 2007b). But just as important as the voters the Sierra Club mobilized was the impact on public debate, building widespread acceptance that transportation and climate are inextricably linked. Mike O’Brien, reminiscing about the campaign observes that “We didn’t really have the idea that we would defeat it. This was a great opportunity to talk about climate change and transportation, to frame the discussion. I think we did a pretty good job” (O’Brien 2010).

Joni Earl says she knew the Roads and Transit measure was in trouble in the final weeks before the election. As she talked with the public in countless campaign events, people expressed more concern than confidence. The road plan in particular was less a cohesive proposal than a laundry list of projects, illustrating the clash of cultures between transit planning—disciplined by elaborate federal grant guidelines to complete system-wide plans—and highway planning—accustomed to piece-meal

allocation for projects. “It was a kitchen sink, it wasn’t a plan” (Earl 2010). The “shot-gun marriage” mandated by the state promised a new, integrated model for transportation planning, but did not provide guidance or time to allow two very different agencies to get to know each other before ‘tying the knot.’ It is not surprising, therefore that the measure failed.

Immediately after the election, Sound Transit began gearing up for a new ballot measure. “We decided the minute the election was over, we were going to go in the field, and we were going to get our own research about what happened” (Earl 2010). The polling suggested that transit stood a better chance of passing on its own, and that a shorter construction time was more important than price in motivating voters’ support. In addition, the survey indicated that the sales and property taxes were the least popular finance mechanisms for a transit package (supported by 23 percent and 22 percent respectively), outranked by car tabs (51 percent), tolling (49 percent), and gas taxes (42 percent) (Roberts 2007). Car tabs, however, had been eliminated by Eyman as a future revenue source, while gas taxes were constitutionally mandated to fund only roads projects. And in contrast to the implications of the poll, policy-makers consider tolling to be politically risky (Howard 2010). Thus despite its relative unpopularity, the sales tax would remain the sole local revenue source for Sound Transit’s next ballot measure.

Sound Transit II Ballot Measure (November 2008)

The board quickly got to work crafting a plan that could be put in place more quickly. Unlike previous years, Sound Transit developed two preliminary proposals, which differed in scope and taxing levels, and circulated them for public feedback on the agency’s website and in community meetings. Both packages reflected much of the

voters' preferences suggested by the post-election survey: they projected 12 years of construction time (compared to 20 for Roads and Transit) and cost just a fraction of the \$47 billion package of 2007.

As the 2008 Sound Transit plan came together, the press coverage of advocates on either side of the measure was notably more subdued than it had been the previous year. Perhaps because media attention was focused on other, high-profile races (the presidential contest, Governor Gregoire's re-election bid, the latest Eyman initiative), the press portrayed fewer virulent attacks over the initiative. Though not devoid of all gibes—one commentator, for example, described light rail as a “cult-like cause” while another criticized the “entrenched ignorance, inertia and obstructionism” of rail opponents (Connelly 2008; Clarke 2008)—the debate was generally more civil. Freeman was an active member of the opposition campaign, participating in a televised debate with Greg Nickels, for example, and contributing heavily to the advertising campaign. But the core of his message—the plan costs too much and does too little—was, in its fourth iteration, beginning to sound tired. Even the opposition's television ad was recycled from the previous year, with an identical theme and very similar message.

Nonetheless, Earl recalls fierce political debate leading to the plan's adoption by the board. Regional and modal tensions again came to the fore, as Snohomish county representatives argued that the draft plan short-changed their county with too little light rail. Meanwhile, Bellevue activists maintained that voters could not support the measure unless a detailed alignment through the Eastside was defined. And King County Executive Ron Sims, long supporter of light rail, reversed course and argued vehemently that the plan should invest in “more immediate solutions such as expanded

bussing” (Roberts and Sztajno 2008). A more general concern among the board was about the timing of the ballot. Many argued adamantly that asking voters for a tax increase in the midst of a prolonged recession was folly, while others suggested holding off on the election until light-rail service—scheduled to open from downtown Seattle to SeaTac the following year—could demonstrate Sound Transit’s success. Greg Nickels, now Sound Transit’s board chair, however, was adamant that the new initiative be placed on the 2008 ballot, in another presidential election year. “We didn’t need to learn that lesson over again” (Nickels 2010).

As Earl recalls, most members supported moving the plan to the ballot, but no one wanted to be the twelfth (and decisive) vote. Less than a month before the vote on the draft plan, only nine of the eighteen Board members had committed to voting yes, kicking off what Earl describes as “two weeks of some of the most intense politics... Greg Nickels was calling everyone to gain support to go to the ballot, and I was meeting with them, trying to broker between them” (Earl 2010). On July 24th, 2008, after several last-minute amendments—including an immediate expansion of regional bus service, and further investments in light rail and HOV ramps in Snohomish County “if sufficient additional funding and/or cost savings are identified”—the Board voted 16-2 to approve the transit system plan(Sound Transit 2008c). And with a second, unanimous vote, the plan was scheduled for the November election.

The ballot measure proposed adding the following to the Sound Move system plan: 36 miles of light rail with 19 new stations, south from SeaTac Airport to Redondo/Star Lake, east from Seattle across the I-90 Bridge through Bellevue to Overlake, and north from Nothgate to Lynnwood in Snohomish County (Figure 6). In

addition, the proposal included commuter rail system improvements, with a 65 percent capacity expansion between Seattle and Tacoma, 100,000 hours of increased express bus service in the region's most trafficked corridors, and a feasibility study of passenger rail on the Eastside I-405 corridor. The package would be completed in 15 years and increase the sales tax in the transit district 0.5 percent (an estimated \$125 annual expense for an average household), for a total cost of \$17.8 billion.

Reflecting the growing salience of sustainability, the proposal featured a stronger emphasis on growth management and climate change. A

preface to the plan, printed against a backdrop of the region's beloved Mount Rainier warns: "Another one million people are expected to call this region home in the next 25 years. That's about a 30 percent increase in population and is more than the current combined populations of Seattle, Bellevue, Everett and Tacoma" (Sound Transit 2008a). The introduction then describes that the growth jeopardizes the region's

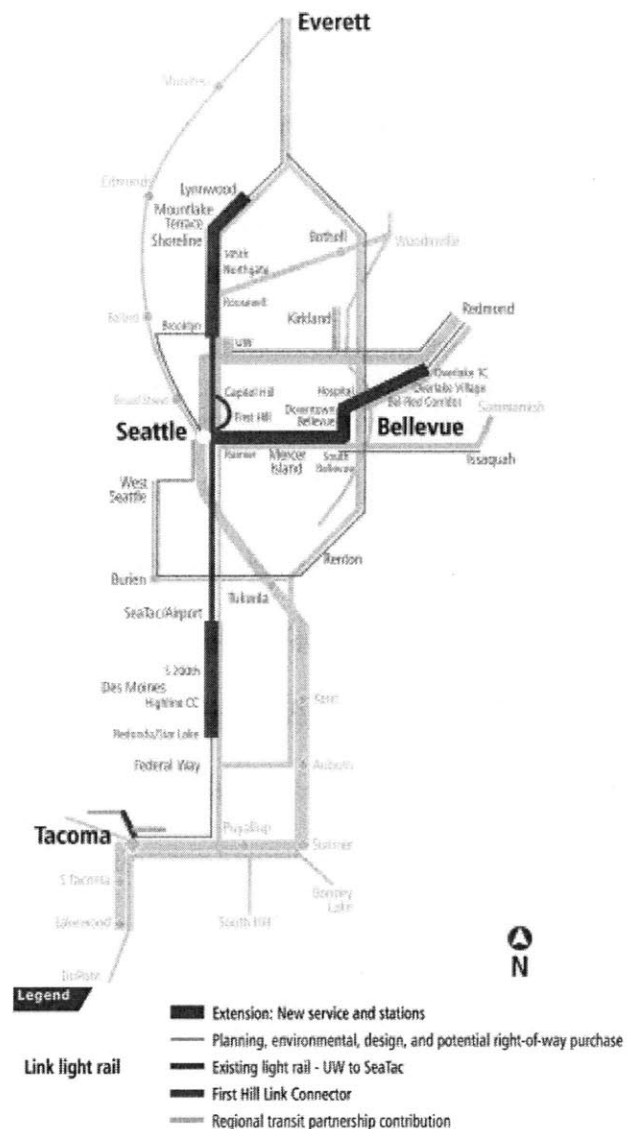


Figure 6: Sound Transit 2 Light Rail Expansion Plan. Source: soundtransit.org

economy and threatens the environment if nothing is done. And in a detailed appendix, the plan compares the system's estimated carbon impact to other alternatives, and outlines the land use-climate change connection. As the plan summarizes,

Overall, the ST2 Plan represents an important step towards addressing the challenge of global warming by offering a reliable alternative to motor vehicle travel. The ST2 Plan will reduce vehicle miles traveled on our region's roadways which in turn reduces greenhouse gas emissions such as carbon dioxide.... In addition, the ST2 Plan fosters transit-oriented development around stations, helping provide for compact, urban, sustainable communities that have relatively smaller carbon footprints. (Sound Transit 2008b).

Earl attributes the plan's emphasis on climate change in part to the persistence of the Sierra Club. "We were the first plan in the country that did a greenhouse gas emissions analysis at a programmatic level. That was something the Sierra Club asked for" (Earl 2010). The climate impact of transportation permeated much of the media coverage during lead-up to the election, though without the pointed campaign messaging evident the previous year. As one reader wrote, "Sound Transit's Proposition 1 is all about taking a big step beyond oil dependency, toward regional transportation based on renewable energy. A transit backbone of electrical light rail will be the key to getting around for a lot more people as climate catastrophes and gas prices accelerate over the next decade" (Burkhardt 2008). Nickels was frequently quoted in the press pushing the global warming benefits of the plan. As a *Post-Intelligencer* article described Nickel's concern that "we will have to start living and working closer together so we pollute less" (Lange 2008b). Less than a month before the election, a study commissioned by Sound Transit estimated the light-rail expansion could generate substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions based on "how transit leads to more compact developments that reduce use of cars" (Lange 2008a). Though the report projected that the light rail system could cut car and truck travel by

nearly a third, the clear emphasis in the media coverage was on greenhouse emissions—a notable departure from the fixation on traffic impact in the earliest transit ballots.

Similarly, a growing number of articles illustrated that automobile dependence was no longer assumed without question. Sierra Club supporters again joined the campaign in support of Sound Transit, though this time their message was less pointedly about global warming emissions but focused more generally on automobility. “The new station areas...have the potential to transform the way we live by creating sustainable living centers around transit hubs where people can walk, bike or take transit to meet most of their daily needs. This will require Sound Transit to work with local government, neighborhoods and developers to create a future where we reduce our reliance on cars and expensive gas” (Mike O'Brien and Gould 2008). After a *Seattle Times* editorial claimed that “Most people don't want to get out of their cars,” several readers wrote to criticize the paper’s position. “Actually, most people don't want to make themselves—and others—dependent on their cars and on being stuck in traffic,” countered Seattle resident Mitch Gitman. Another resident wrote “Sound Transit's Proposition 1 is all about taking a big step beyond oil dependency, toward regional transportation based on renewable energy. A transit backbone of electrical light rail will be the key to getting around for a lot more people as climate catastrophes and gas prices accelerate over the next decade” (Rosenthal 2008).

Thus by the 2008 ballot measure, automobility was not always assumed without question in the public debate. Some of this shift in the debate arguably could be attributed to the Sierra Club’s 2007 pointed campaign messaging, as the link between

climate and transportation was reiterated. But more generally, the inclusion of automobility and climate change in the public transportation debate was likely the result of the increasing acceptance of climate change as problem. Rob Johnson describes this effect: “As those issues [of greenhouse gas emissions] started to creep to the front page of the papers, climate change started to become a part of our collective conscience. As data started to come to light, it was clear that a lot of our emissions came from things like transportation. So that’s when it started to become a bigger issue” (Johnson 2010).

On Election Day, voters overwhelmingly approved the Sound Transit 2 expansion, with 58 percent support throughout the district, and margins higher than 65 percent in Seattle. Of the three counties, only Pierce rejected the measure with just 46 percent of voters’ support. For Earl, the victory was particularly poignant given that the impact of the nation’s economic recession was already sharply felt in the region. “Every day was more bad news” (Earl 2010). A month before the election, Washington Mutual, a national bank headquartered in Seattle collapsed, casting a gloomy shadow over the region’s economic future. But “voters wanted our product,” and were motivated by the “compelling regional vision” for a robust transit system, so Sound Transit 2 was a success (Earl 2010). For O’Brien, the election signaled “a new reality...that the age when we can get around exclusively by car is over” (Lange 2008c).

Epilogue

Light rail service opened between SeaTac and downtown Seattle in 2009, on time and \$100 million under budget (Earl 2010). Despite the success story of Sound Transit’s nearly twenty-year struggle for light rail, many of the biggest disputes—the contest between transit and the car, competition between cities in the region, the use of

state and local finance—today threaten other important regional transportation projects. Though inching toward resolution, planning for both the 520 bridge and the Alaskan Way Viaduct replacement has been engulfed in political debate, with disputes in both cases about the relationship between roads and transit and the competing interests of different jurisdictions. In 2009, Greg Nickels lost his bid for re-election in a primary upset by Sierra Club activist Mike McGinn. In the same election, Mike O'Brien was elected to the City Council. Transportation and climate change were key themes for both candidates, as debates about the Alaskan Way Viaduct raged between advocates pushing for a new underground highway and those arguing for the highway's removal. Meanwhile, 40 bridges remain in critical need of repair, and the state estimates an increasing gap in revenues for basic road maintenance as the gas tax diminishes. Establishing light rail and the other elements of the Sound Transit system is an enormous step forward for the Seattle region, and the shift in public debate observed over the course of the 20-year planning process gives hope that climate change impact has become a necessary consideration in any serious transportation dialogue. The region's other looming transportation problems present both opportunities and challenges to build from the lessons of Sound Transit's experience to achieve a more sustainable transportation system.

Conclusions

Despite the increasing prevalence of climate change and automobility in arguments about transportation, traffic congestion remains the problem most frequently considered in transportation debates. This is no surprise; cars are still the overwhelming mode of choice for most people in the U.S., and sitting in traffic is a frustrating, wasteful

and expensive experience. The challenge for sustainability activists—one that Seattle environmentalists rose to admirably—is to ensure that traffic does not remain the primary rationale for transportation decision-making. Instead considerations like land-use, climate change and social equity must be included in balanced transportation planning and debates.

Though rapid-transit planning in Seattle often resulted in polarized debates between advocates for roads and advocates for trains, an emerging policy recommendation supported by some participants on both sides gives hope that the divergent interests are not completely irreconcilable. Road tolling should be considered by policy makers both as a local revenue source and a transportation demand management approach. It is a promising strategy in its potential to appeal to the most vocal participants in current transportation debates. Rail-transit opponents, like Kemper Freeman, espouse a belief system that values freedom of mobility and prefers market-based solutions over government regulation. Tolling, therefore, is an amenable policy because it reduces traffic congestion through market mechanisms. On the other hand, some environmentalists support tolling as a means to reduce driving. There are some important sustainability considerations in the implementation of tolling. First, to ensure adequate mobility for people who are unable to pay the added cost of road tolls, robust, affordable alternatives to driving must exist. Second, a significant portion of revenues generated through tolls should be dedicated to alternatives modes to the car, like transit, biking, and walking. Finally, when tolling and other transportation measures can achieve lasting reductions in traffic volumes, planners should consider reducing road capacity.

In addition to finance issues, several governance concerns are illustrated by the Sound Transit case. First, ballot initiatives present both challenges and opportunities for sustainable transportation planning. By forcing public debate about transportation, ballot measures can have a positive impact by propelling new issues of public concern into the decision-making process. The roads-and-transit ballot measure, for example moved the issue of climate change more squarely into the debate about highway expansion. On the other hand, ballot measures are likely to remain a popular tool for transit opponents and other foes of environmental protection to undermine progress toward sustainability. Similarly, transportation projects that require local tax increases will continue to rely on direct democracy for authorization. So sustainable transportation advocates must be able to engage effectively in electoral politics. For public officials in the Sound Transit case, this was accomplished when agency leaders acted deliberately to build grassroots support, reaching out to natural allies like environmental organizations. It was also facilitated by the strong public confidence Sound Transit was eventually able to garner through its commitment to accountability and transparency. Advocacy groups were most successful in initiative campaigns when they were able to tell a consistent and compelling story, utilizing salient issues like climate change, to frame the political debate.

The preponderance of transportation-ballot measures, however, (at least 16 between 1995 and 2008) overwhelms the capacity of voters, advocacy organizations and public agencies to engage in thoughtful dialogue about critical transportation issues, and erodes public confidence in the ability of public officials to make decisions.

Though not utilized in Sound Transit's development, advisory ballot measures should be considered a tool of last resort by planners and policy makers.

The Sound Transit case also illustrates the many challenges in moving from a victory at the ballot box to implementation of the voters' mandate. Again cultivating public trust through effective leadership and communication will help make these challenges easier. But another important consideration is the difference between the simplified issues utilized as rhetorical devices in electoral politics and the intense and nuanced interests involved in on-the-ground political disputes. Issues of land use provide a helpful example. As Transportation Choices Coalitions director Rob Johnson describes, "We despise sprawl, but we hate density. There's a big disconnect between what we want. What we haven't done a very good job of as a region is talking about what density really means, what the positive vision of density looks like" (Rob Johnson 2010). In the Sound Transit ballot measure campaigns, growth management was often described as a positive benefit of rail transit. But as Sound Transit and the City of Seattle have begun to implement the vision for compact urban villages surrounding new train stations, some neighborhood activists are resisting change. Seattle can build on its strong traditions of both neighborhood and sustainability planning to help navigate these challenges. Indeed, the city has launched an effort to update neighborhood plans to reflect the new reality of light-rail. As light-rail service is extended outside of Seattle, the city can serve as a model for others in the region by identifying some best practices and key lessons as it tackles the issues in these neighborhood disputes.

Seattle's ability to lead other cities in the region depends on its relationships with these other jurisdictions. The experience of regional collaboration in the Sound Transit

case, however, illustrates the many tensions among cities. Unless higher-order governments can intervene to mediate relationships between jurisdictions, the intense competition between cities presents a barrier to regional cooperation. Though far from ideal, political compromises like the sub-area equity policy may be the only way to hold regional alliances together. It is possible that the state, represented by the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT) on the Sound Transit Board, could have served as an effective mediator among cities. WSDOT's historical legacy as a highway builder, however, makes the agency an unlikely leader in this role. Finally, at their core, regional tensions were about competition over limited funding. If the federal government were to provide a greater share of funding for transit projects, regional tensions could be eased.

Though not elaborated in this thesis, the Sound Transit governance structure was one element that helped to hold the regional collaboration together. Elected officials from the transit district are appointed to Sound Transit's board by County Executives, and each county's representation is proportional to its population. Major agreements, like approving a transit plan, can only be made with super-majority support of at least 12 of the 18 members. This particular aspect was deliberately designed so that no one city or county can dominate. Seattle, despite its power as the biggest city in the state, does not hold a super majority of seats on the board—nor does King County—and therefore the city cannot control Sound Transit decision-making by veto. In addition, to help integrate Sound Transit's planning and service delivery with that of local agencies, one-half of all appointments in each county must serve on the board of a local transit agency. This is an innovative policy, though further analysis is necessary to determine the extent to which it accomplishes its intended objective.

A third important aspect of the structure of Sound Transit's board is that members are appointed not elected. At several points during Sound Transit's development, political leaders, journalists and residents have called for democratic elections for Sound Transit's board of directors. Given the success of transit foes like Tim Eyman and Kemper Freeman in captivating the public debate around transportation issues, such recommendations should be carefully considered. Joni Earl points out that Sound Transit board members join the board because they believe in the agency's mission. This does not imply, however, that the board is uncritical; reviewing fifteen years of board meeting minutes and documents reveals that the board consistently engaged in substantive debates and conducted detailed analysis around all its major (and often minor) decisions. By filling its board through political appointment rather than electoral process, Sound Transit has enjoyed the consistency of leadership and the protection against manipulation by transit opponents necessary to withstand its many challenges. Nonetheless, because democratic representation is valued for good reason, this issue of governance in regional transit agencies warrants further study. A comparative analysis of Sound Transit and Metro in Portland, Oregon could be illustrative.

Finally, the U.S. Congress is preparing to reauthorize the federal transportation act, presenting an opportunity to consider changes to the level of funding, the relative amount allocated to different modes, and the criteria for awarding grants. Sound Transit has fared relatively well in securing federal support, thanks to an effect. It should be noted, however, that Sound Transit's success has come at other agencies' expense. Transit projects in other cities that have failed to win federal support are not necessarily

less important than light-rail in Seattle. Federal granting, therefore, should not pit transit projects against each other, but should instead evaluate projects on their own merits and relative to goals established by the project's local community. Similarly, roads funding should be given equal treatment, and evaluated based on criteria that reflect both sustainability objectives and integration with regional transportation plans.

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List of Interviews

Craig Benjamin, Conservation Program Coordinator, Sierra Club Cascade Chapter

Representative Judy Clibborn, Chair, Transportation Committee, Washington House of Representatives

Richard Conlin, President, Seattle City Council

Jan Drago, King County Councilmember

Joni Earl, CEO, Sound Transit

Charlie Howard, Director of Transportation Planning, Puget Sound Regional Council

Rob Johnson, Director, Transportation Choices Coalition

Jon Layzer, Capital Improvements Manager, Seattle Department of Transportation

Gary Manca, President, Friends of Seattle

Cary Moon, People's Waterfront Coalition

Greg Nickels, Former Mayor, City of Seattle

Mike O'Brien, Former Chair, Sierra Club Cascade Chapter; Current Seattle City Councilmember

Peter Steinbrueck, Former City Councilmember, City of Seattle

Tayloe Washburn, Chair, Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce