



FROM: Media Response Team
DATE: July 2, 2008
SUBJECT: Crosscut.com transit series by Doug MacDonald

Issue Summary

Seattle online news site Crosscut.com published a series of articles between June 23 and 27 written by former Washington State Department of Transportation Secretary and Sound Transit Board Member Doug MacDonald critiquing Sound Transit's proposed plans for expanding the regional transit system. MacDonald asserted that investments in rail-based transit infrastructure could be better spent on regional bus services.

The three-part expose can be seen here:
<http://www.crosscut.com/sound-transit/15258/>

Background

Since leaving WSDOT and the Sound Transit Board, MacDonald has become a frequent critic of the agency and its priorities for expanding the regional mass transit system.

Addressing the assertions

MacDonald has a different vision for the region – one that relies more heavily on a bus-based mass transit system than a broad expansion of rail services to be complimented by expanded bus services

- MacDonald's vision reflects fundamental opposition to Sound Transit's mission of providing excellent regional transit service that gives people choices on where to live and work while managing growth and reducing environmental impacts. He would have Sound Transit take its REGIONAL tax base and supplement the local services that have used their full taxing authority.
- MacDonald seems to have developed a different vision for the region than the one he helped create as a Sound Transit Board member. Mr. MacDonald in 2005 participated in the Sound Transit Board of Director's meeting where the update of the Regional Transit Long-Range Plan was unanimously approved by the Board (<http://www.soundtransit.org/x2397.xml>). That plan laid the foundation for establishing a regional system that relies on a mixed bag of transit investments, including light rail, commuter rail, ST Express bus and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). The expansion plans currently under consideration by the Board for a potential 2008 ballot measure constitute

a balanced investment proposal that invests a mixture of all in all four of these transit technologies.

- MacDonald professes to have gained “*new insights about the connected questions of energy scarcity, population growth, fairness to taxpayers, strengthening of neighborhoods, and protection in the Puget Sound area of water quality, the regional landscape, and natural habitat against sprawl and climate change.*” A bus-only system will not address any of these concerns or insights. Continued focus on petroleum based rubber-tired technology only exacerbates our vulnerability to diesel prices, harms our regional environment, congests our local and arterial streets, and destroys our landscape.

Assertion: It is more cost-effective to serve growing demand with more buses

- It's a false “either/or” approach to argue that our region would be best served by a bus-only system. We need a balanced multimodal transit system. In reviewing transit options available in 20 peer metropolitan areas it is clear that that a multimodal approach is needed to support a diverse and growing metropolitan region.
 - Eighteen of the 20 peer regions have a mix of rail and bus service - 14 of which have light rail with the remaining operating heavy rail and commuter rail
 - Only 2 of Puget Sound's 20 peer metropolitan regions (10 with more population, 10 with less population) have bus-only systems – Detroit and Cincinnati
- In terms of cost per passenger trip, data compiled by the FTA for the 2006 National Transit Database (NTD) makes the point that next to large subway systems, light rail is the most efficient technology available for moving mass numbers of people.
 - For those 14 peer metro areas light rail is 37% less expensive per passenger trip than bus (\$2.73 v \$3.73 respectively)
 - Locally, it costs our bus operators 43% more per bus trip (\$5.34 per trip) than in our peer regions (\$3.73 per trip) – we have to be more efficient
 - For long haul trips, commuter rail is the least expensive per passenger mile at \$0.45; light rail is \$0.74 per passenger mile for fleets greater than 20 vehicles; bus is \$0.80 per passenger mile for fleets with at least 100 vehicles
- Link light rail will open between downtown Seattle and SeaTac International Airport by the end of 2009. Light rail from downtown to the UW will open by 2016. By 2020 those lines combined with Sounder and the Tacoma Link light rail line will carry over 40% of all transit passenger miles in the region. The commuter rail and light rail expansions proposed in ST2 would increase that even more. At the completion of ST2, Sound Transit will be serving more transit passenger miles than any other provider in the region – just what a regional service provider should be doing.

Assertion: Sound Transit is ignoring some bus-only options

- Current roadway capacity cannot accommodate the expected population and employment growth coming to the Puget Sound region. As the bus systems grow, the roadway capacity diminishes (a bus is equal to multiple cars in terms of roadway capacity), requiring either widening of roads or displacement of cars and trucks to accommodate the added buses.

Even if HOT lanes are implemented on freeway corridors, the problem of getting buses into and out of the places where people live and work remains. That requires new interchanges and dedicated bus lanes, especially at the local arterial level.

Regarding I-90 BRT proposals, what happens to all the buses when they reach downtown Seattle and Bellevue? Seattle and Bellevue streets cannot handle the number of buses required to operate the systems proposed – an issue not solved or even mentioned by BRT proponents.

- It is misleading to suggest you can have true BRT service without major capital investments. BRT means that the service can mimic the speed and reliability of rail service, i.e. it is frequent enough to not need a schedule (true for both the 545 and 550, among other local and regional routes), fast enough to provide a travel time advantage (not true for any transit route that operates in mixed traffic), and reliable enough that people can trust its on-time performance (meaning they do not have to plan “just in case something happens” time into their trip).

Buses can only provide that level of service through extensive investments in capital infrastructure that separates them from automobiles. That is very expensive. Partially because rail technology operates in its own right-of-way it can achieve phenomenal on-time performance as compared to bus. Today buses average 70-75% on-time performance, while Sounder commuter rail is on-time 98% of the time. The capital investments needed for BRT to achieve 98% on-time performance are nearly as costly as light rail, while providing less carrying capacity at higher operating costs.

- ST is only proposing new light rail be built in corridors where current transit ridership demand calls for the frequent and reliable services that only rail can provide. In fact, the light rail system under construction today will replace the region's highest volume bus routes (such as routes 7, 71/72/73, 41, 194, etc) so that those resources can be redeployed elsewhere in the region. And future light rail services are aimed at the most needed corridors.

By 2030, daily transit trips across Lake Washington will increase by 54,000 – a growth rate of 150% over today. In contrast, transit demand on I-405 between Lynnwood and Bothell will increase 560% by 2030. However, while growth of 560% is impressive, in this case it equates to 8,000 new daily riders – not quite comparable to the 54,000 new riders expected across Lake Washington ([ST Summary Needs Assessment](#), January 31, 2008). ST has done a complete needs assessment and market analysis to identify the highest need corridors across the region of high capacity transit investments.

- MacDonald states investing in ST services is ineffective because the agency carries only 9% of the regional transit ridership. According to the 2006 NTD data, ST carried 9.1% of transit riders in the region, but it also carried 20% of regional transit demand in terms of passenger miles. And, it did this while consuming only 7.5% of the regional transit operating expenditures. This is similar to the fact that local and arterial streets carry the vast majority of daily automobile trips, but to conclude that since they carry more auto trips they should replace all highways would be false logic. To make an analogy, ST is the regional highway system and the other service providers are the local and arterial components of the system. Each has a very important role in region.

Assertion: Light rail is too expensive an investment

- We can't afford not to invest in light rail.

- The 12-year plans being contemplated by the Board represent an annual cost of \$69 per adult living in the region. That equates to 15 gallons of gas at \$4.50 a gallon.
- Expanding the mass transit system will save the region time and money. The cost of doing nothing equates to a stalled economy and lost performance as the region sits in gridlock. Transit gets people out of gridlock – a result that translates directly into better regional economic performance and personal freedom to spend disposable money on things other than putting it in the gas tank.
- Our country divested in urban passenger rail technology a long time ago. All but two of our 20 peer metropolitan areas have reinvested, lamenting ever tearing up the old tracks in the first place. The Puget Sound region is way behind the times in developing sustainable transportation investments. Ninety percent of our peer regions have righted their course by reinvesting in rail – the time is now for us to correct the mistakes of our past transportation investment strategies.
- Over the past three years, diesel fuel has risen from 8% of total bus operating costs to 11% today. Comparatively, electricity has held steady at 1% of total Tacoma Link light rail operating costs for the past three years.

Assertion: Sound Transit has not listened to the will of the people

- Since the defeat of Proposition 1, Sound Transit has held 7 public meetings, and received more than 10,000 comments from the public about the need for more transit.
- Look at Sound Transit's buses and trains to see what our customers want. Ridership is up almost 30% in 2008 with many Sounder trains operating at standing room only capacities.
- Sound Transit talks to – and listens to – customers and constituents. Our riders consistently tell us they prefer our train and bus services because of their speed, reliability and comfort. Their #1 complaint is the need for more service, and particularly more rail service.