

Analysis of Qualitative Public Input on Sound Transit System Expansion Options April 24 – June 19, 2008

Supplementing the questionnaire results you have received, this report provides qualitative analysis of the 4,105 written responses on system expansion options received from April 24 through June 19, 2008. The written responses were provided through open houses, e-mail, mail and responses to the open-ended question at the end of Sound Transit's web questionnaire. You are receiving a CD ROM containing all of the responses verbatim, grouped by subarea.

This qualitative analysis of the written comments is designed to identify and highlight major themes from these open-ended comments. The analysis was prepared by looking at the frequency of various recurring responses. Because this summary is based upon interpreting narrative comments, a level of subjective judgment was required. Sound Transit staff and consultants aimed to analyze this content neutrally. Representative comments are highlighted here.

The 4,105 narrative comments came from the following sources:

1. 204 written comments sent via e-mail (future@soundtransit.org) and U.S. mail (to 401 S. Jackson Street, Seattle, WA 98104);
2. 208 written comment forms submitted at seven public meetings;
3. 3,667 written comments submitted as part of the online questionnaire (out of 5,661 questionnaire responses, Sound Transit's received 3,667 responses to the questionnaire's open-ended question); and
4. 26 comments transcribed from voicemails.

Overarching themes

These general themes recur throughout narrative comments submitted during this time period:

- General recognition that the Puget Sound region needs transit in order to anticipate and accommodate growth, existing congestion, and to offer transit options with rising fuel prices is prevalent among respondents. Narrative comments consistently reflect desires for “better,” “integrated,” and “seamless” transit solutions to get from point A to point B. People are sometimes impatient in reacting to the fact it would require 12 or 20 years to see those options implemented. They want additional commuting and travel options for *today's* commutes – increased service, additional routes and expedited construction schedules.
- Most commenters continue to express desire for extension of the light rail system. Across all sources of comments, support of light rail remains one of the top topics.
- Some commenters do not believe light rail is the right mass transit solution for the Puget Sound region. Among respondents who oppose light rail, many express a preference for buses/bus rapid transit options, citing long-term flexibility and lower capital cost.
- “Getting something done” and “taking action” are pervasive themes. Many comments reflect the view that transit/transportation is a pressing problem that needs to be fixed as soon as possible.

- One less prevalent but periodic theme is that voters should see “proof” of the success of the region’s initial light rail system before considering an expansion vote.
- References to fuel costs were frequent. Commenters reflected upon the ability for a potential 2008 ballot measure to capitalize on rising gas prices to expedite decision-making.
- In the Pierce County subarea, most comments reference Sounder, frequency, and/or related parking issues with Sounder service enhancements. Many of these comments cite immediate needs for the Sounder system and how increased service might place additional pressure on current parking shortages in the south corridor.
- Some commenters favoring light rail show concern that if regional voters approved a 12-year option there would no guarantee of later passage of an additional measure extending light rail further.
- Some respondents from outside the North King subarea perceive current and proposed regional transit options as “Seattle-focused”. Many others recognize the advantages of a regional transit system and talk about expansion in terms of mobility and economic benefit.
- Comments that reflect outright opposition to any ballot measure, or opposition to Sound Transit’s mission, were infrequent. Twice the number of respondents want at least one of the three options than those who feel no option should be forwarded for voter consideration. Less than one percent of narrative comments received reflect a general opposition to Sound Transit.
- Many people recognize Puget Sound’s planning challenges but feel that this region needs to catch up with itself, with a frequent refrain that the region is already two decades behind.
- Many people would like to use transit today, but do not feel they can. Cited reasons include concerns that the current system does not work with their work schedules; parking at their transit centers is currently lacking; or transfers are confusing or hard to make.
- Some commenters are encouraged by increased transit ridership across the region.

Analysis of narrative responses by topic area

Comments were grouped across a series of categories, in some cases mirroring the categories used in previous comment periods. Observed themes and representative comment quotes are summarized below.

These opinions originated from all comment sources. Online questionnaire respondents who utilized the open-ended question at the end had already responded to the multiple-choice questions. Some respondents focused their open-ended responses to express views not covered in the multiple choice questions, so the below percentages need to be viewed with that in mind. The following themes reflect the most frequently-referenced topics:

Light Rail

(Referenced by 25% of all comments)

As noted above, light rail is a common topic, specifically as a reason to support system expansion, generally showing excitement for Central Link to open in 2009, or as a component of a mass transit system needed for the Puget Sound region to stay competitive. While many respondents show a strong preference for more and expanded light rail service, others explicitly

oppose light rail technology, citing bus rapid transit or expanded bus service as more flexible options for long-term mass transit.

Explicit support for light rail (20%)

I'm a huge fan of a large light rail plan for this area. I use the bus system here a lot and commute to work on bike. Any transit plan that helps me from keeping another car off the road is a big plus in my view. Even if the larger plans don't make it through, at minimum I would love a light rail link from Seattle to Bellevue.

Seattle needs to keep adding to its light rail capacity. Public votes should be kept to a minimum, and city officials should back the expansion of light rail. Remobilizing the construction effort is timely and expensive; construction on the whole effort should continue regardless.

I fully endorse plans for light rail and rail service. My only problem with your twenty-year plan is the time frame. The proposed increase in rail track is quite minimal but the time frame seems extraordinary.

The light rail project should be expanded and accelerated ASAP.

Explicit opposition to light rail (5%)

I don't believe that light rail is the right mode for the Puget Sound region. Right-of-way is too expensive, and fixed rail lines do not provide the flexibility that regular and express buses provide. I support more frequent and effective bus routing, plus substantial increases in parking capacity at outlying transit centers.

Light rail is very expensive and slow to build. The choice to have run it down MLK rather than near Boeing Field was stupid. Based on that mess, I strongly oppose more light rail, and will vote against any package that includes it. Buses are the right answer.

***Views on the Decision-Making process and “Let’s get moving” sentiments
(Referenced by 18% and 18% of comments, respectively)***

Many comments opine generally about the need to get moving as a region and “just make something happen.” They generally advise decision-makers that action should be taken as soon as possible to get something done. Many comments are either tied to a potential 2008 ballot measure or generally urge getting the measure on a ballot as soon as possible (without a definite year given). Out of all comments, five percent express explicit support for a 2008 ballot measure, yet many more (total 18%) urge for project implementation as soon as possible. They convey pressure to take action in light of rising gas prices, regional population growth, traffic congestion and long commutes.

Let's get this going. It is shameful how poor our region's transit is. The sooner this is done, the better (start this year!). 20 years is an awfully long time for our region's issues to continue to persist. Is there any way to speed this up? Also -- put the transit measure on the 2008 ballot!

With gas prices climbing forever into the future, there is a real need to expand now. The cost of construction and materials is only going to get more expensive so we needed to act

yesterday. We must get to work as soon as possible if we want this place to be a viable and livable city in the future.

Show some leadership and just do it! People are tired of being asked. Expanding mass transit is absolutely a no-brainer must-do. We are falling behind other cities.

Strike while the iron is hot and ask for a vote as soon as possible.

Whether you go with 12 year A, 12 year B, or 20 year, get it on the ballot in 2008. People are feeling the crunch of the gas price increases now.

A subset of these urgency comments equate possible successful near-term ballot success to rising gas prices. Gas and energy-related comments are fairly frequent (10% of all narrative comments), with comments referenced as follows:

Use fuel prices to drive home the need. \$69/year can be made up in 2 weeks for most people if this plan could replace their commute.

Because of increased fuel prices and people seeking new ways to get out of their cars for commuting purposes, a fall 2008 vote is well-timed.

As you will probably hear with the gas prices soaring and add that to commute stress already, nothing would be more inviting than to leave the "driving" to Sound Transit, especially with more direct routes.

Gas prices will start to play a significant role in how people vote regarding mass transit. People are finally realizing things must change; that we need to move forward with the foundation of a new transportation infrastructure.

Accessing the System

(Referenced in some form by 12% of all comments)

Many people want to access the Sound Transit system, and see transit as a viable commute alternative today – if only they could make it work for them. Some of these respondents feel that commuters who do not pass through downtown Seattle are underserved today.

What is really needed is a way to catch a bus in Everett and get to Redmond and that area without having to go downtown Seattle, to Bellevue, and then transfers to the other cities. My co-workers here in Redmond figured it takes about 6 transfers and 4 hours just to get to work if you live north of Seattle.

You seem to forget there are people who do not travel to Seattle for work and shopping. I will vote down any transportation package that does not address all areas of King County.

Options need to not be so Seattle-centric.

I'm extremely tired of Seattle-centric mass transit options. Bellevue and Redmond provide a large number of employees, and many of those employees live in north/south King County and beyond. I don't want to go through Seattle to get to Redmond.

Another area that desperately needs to be addressed is east-west transit on the south end of King County. Often I ride to Auburn to take care of things there from South Seattle; the trip is over 2 hours. This makes using my car quite attractive.

These comments go hand-in-hand with those respondents who want to access the current system with additional park-and-ride capacity (total of 8%). Many of these parking-related issues relate to Sounder stations.

Expand the Lynnwood Park-and-Ride. If you don't get there early enough in the morning, there is no place to park. It fills up quickly. There is very little parking on the nearby streets, so there is nowhere else to park.

Please excuse my yelling, YOU NEED MORE PARKING!!! Tacoma, Puyallup, Sumner have no capacity left to serve additional trains. Here is an idea. Combine Sumner and Puyallup stations and locate midway between the current stations next to the overpass that is being built in the middle of the field. Looks to me like you could build a good-sized parking garage there and eliminate an extra stop at the same time, which would help improve fuel economy and transit times.

Also, parking is saturated in Auburn, and the city keeps taking more spaces. The garage is full by the third train; no parking is left for the 4th and 5th trains. A second garage is needed.

South Kirkland Park-and-Ride needs 3 times as many parking spaces as it has now.

You need more parking at your park-and-rides and better security.

My husband and I do our best by using park-and-ride lots and trying to ride buses as much as possible, but now that Redmond has downsized the park-and-ride lot, it is almost impossible to find a parking spot.

It seems like the Sounder advertises and wants more riders, but how can you add riders when there's nowhere to park? I'm concerned that the Sounder does not have the means to support the riders it currently has, but more and more people are riding the train.

Schedule, Frequency and Increased Service (Referenced by 15% of comments)

Many comments refer to current commute issues related to frequency and schedule (15%), parking, and transfers required to make the system work for them. Observing growing ridership on the services, many current riders reflect that trains and buses lack the necessary service hours and stops to accommodate all potential riders today. Some 15% of all comments specifically refer to increased commuter rail and Sounder service, and some 13% of all comments support increased bus service.

I would like to see more Sounder departures and arrivals from the existing stations. Adding two more return trips to the south would accommodate hundreds more riders.

I would love to take the bus from my home to the Sounder and it would be doable if there were more buses and connections to the train. If there is any delay with the bus, you miss the train and then you have a 1/2 hour wait and you're late to work and might miss your connection at the other end.

I'm excited about this transit plan, but I hope there are also plans for improved bus service on local arterials. As much as I would like to ride the bus to work instead of driving, it would turn a 20-minute commute into a 1-1/2 hr trip with at least two transfers.

I think lots more people would ride buses now if there were more in use, more bus stops, routes through residential areas, more frequent schedules.

Please expand options for Sounder trains, more trips, at more times, and perhaps a Tacoma-to-Seattle Express train that makes no stops.

Costs and Tax Structure (Referenced by 11% of comments)

Some commenters suggest that Sound Transit find a different funding source. A significant number of people who support transit are against the idea of additional sales taxes. Some suggested alternatives include gas taxes, one-time payments (e.g. through the Department of Licensing), and tolls.

Although I am a huge supporter of mass transit, I have major reservations about continually paying for transit with sales tax increases. Washington already has some of the highest sales tax rates in the country, and as you know such regressive taxes fall mainly upon the poorest among us.

Neither of the ST2 options presented are acceptable. Sound Transit needs to work with the State Legislature immediately to enact enabling legislation that allows Sound Transit to seek public funding from sources other than sales taxes, e.g., MVET, gas taxes, fee per household (\$10/mo.), etc.

I don't really like the idea of using sales tax to fund this. We need income tax or tolls.

Is there another way of financing other than sales tax? Sales tax puts the burden on lower to middle income.

It is unacceptable to raise sales taxes for any reason - they are already too high, and unfair to middle and lower income folks.

Infrequent but Interesting Comment Topics

The following topic areas were not prominent in the input but nonetheless may be of interest to the Board.

Opposes ST Mission or All System Expansion Options

Fewer than one percent of all comments show adamant disapproval of Sound Transit as an agency, and its mission to connect urban and business centers in the Puget Sound region. The minority whose comments do reflect distrust ST or government sometimes worry that their tax dollars will not go toward proper implementation of transit improvements. Approximately three percent of all comments were opposed to all three system expansion options.

Where'd the money allocated by the 1996 vote go? We didn't get what we voted for and the tax remains?

Compliments to Sound Transit's current services, or public education

A number of comments express appreciation for Sound Transit and the regional transit options the agency is providing today. Others reflect that additional public education is warranted to

show the benefits of mass transit, the ease of riding, and so on.

I think the public education has been good. The website and fliers mailed to me have made me aware of the options.

Your express bus service is fantastic. They are clean, they operate mostly on time, and they offer a wider range of stops than either commuter rail or light rail.

I really do like the Sound Transit buses and will continue to ride to my job in Bellevue at least 10 more years. I really have enjoyed all of my bus drivers on Bus 564 and will support any changes in our mass transit and bus service.

Expand the Sound Transit District

A number of comments urge expansion of the Sound Transit district, specifically into Thurston County. Approximately 2% of comments came from Thurston County residents, who commented on the need for a regional transit system and that Thurston County should be included in Sound Transit's plans.

Sound Transit should "seriously" consider expanding the service south of Tacoma to our state's capital, Olympia. There is a train station in Olympia with parking. Extending service down the I-5 corridor makes more sense; it will service more people. Ramping up faster bus service could support commuters in the Bellevue and Redmond areas that the two plans are focusing on. Why not extend the service from Everett to Olympia? Thank you for asking our opinions.

If you are considering the region's need for mass transit, keep in mind that the region includes Thurston and Kitsap counties, which are currently being very obviously ignored by bus service planners. At the VERY least, the Sound Transit pass should start including those counties!