

## Voters Aren't Getting What Sound Transit Promised.

**It's time to hit the brakes on Sound Transit.** Finish the light rail projects Sound Transit began constructing, but before any new ground is broken as part of Sound Transit 3 (ST3), we need accountability.

Voters have received a string of broken promises from Sound Transit resulting in a snowballing, staggering financial burden for generations with minimal benefit. **Alternative options** that get people around the region and also to existing transit stations **are a better way forward.**

### Broken Promises:

In 1995, light rail was first rejected by voters because of its high costs. In 1996, the plan was trimmed and promised moderate taxes:

"For the average family, \$8 a month is a responsible investment in our community, ourselves, and our future generations. This plan enhances our quality of life, saves us time, and reduces air and water pollution." (1996 Sound Transit marketing)

### In 2024, this is the reality:

- **Households pay \$149/month** on average or \$1788/year for Sound Transit – **taxes that never sunset** under current language.<sup>1</sup>
- Only 3% of trips in 2050 will be on Sound Transit trains.<sup>2</sup>
- Just 64,000 new riders will be using light rail by 2050, a fraction of 1% of all trips made by car, transit, ferry, walking, biking.<sup>3</sup>
- Our region will see **only a 6% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.** The goal is an 80% reduction. Greenhouse gas emissions from ST3 construction are also not being counted.<sup>4</sup>
- **Voters approved \$54 billion** for ST3. Sound Transit's **actual costs have soared to more than \$148 billion** (which includes cost overruns from ST1 and ST2).<sup>5</sup>
- Almost half of Sound Transit's rail passengers aren't paying – and Sound Transit's board just-voted to have fares cover only 22% of operating costs instead of the longtime 40% goal.<sup>6</sup>
- Bottom line: **Sound Transit does not deliver projects on time or on budget.**
- The vast majority of people paying for Sound Transit projects since the 1996 vote have received no actual benefits from the largest tax increase in Puget Sound history.

In a Seattle Times OpEd from May 24th, business and economics columnist Jon Talton wrote: “The success of light rail in the Puget Sound region will depend on keeping promises made to the voters...as well as ensuring that projects come in as scheduled and on or under budget.”

**The simple fact is Sound Transit has broken its promises.** Projects have not come in as scheduled or on budget and, despite its ballooning price tag, Sound Transit fails to meet the substantial transit needs of this rapidly growing region.

#### **For example:**

- Sound Transit promised light rail would arrive in the U-District by 2006 but it didn’t arrive until 2016. And the second station in the U-District did not open until 2021.
- Light rail was to be running to the Eastside from downtown Seattle in 2020. Inferior workmanship still delays the I-90 bridge crossing with Sound Transit tentatively saying this crossing will be ready by late 2025
- The Federal Way light rail connection was pushed from 2024 to 2026 – with the line only being completed under threat of lawsuit.
- Sound Transit’s tax increases are the largest ever levied in the Puget Sound Region.<sup>7</sup>

**This isn’t what voters were promised.** If Sound Transit seeks to break more ground, then voters deserve more accountability.

## **So What Do We Propose Instead? Flexibility & Accountability.**

### **FOR TRANSIT**

Flexibility to meet shifting transit needs. Transit ridership was upended during the pandemic with the effect that ridership numbers severely declined. Commuting realities have changed since that first vote in 1996 -- up to 35% of us work from home in the Seattle area alone.

We’ve shown that ridership numbers are nowhere near what Sound Transit originally promised. Most recently, they said they would take existing ridership and quintuple it as part of Sound Transit 3. Again, this promise isn’t based in current reality.

The true issue we're facing is to acknowledge that light rail is not the appropriate technology for our very spread-out region, and **we need real alternatives to encourage ridership.**

- Increase the viability and on-time reliability of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and BRT lite and create more of these lines.
- Get more people to existing transit stations and eliminate transit deserts by providing more vanpools, carpools, electric bikes, and on-demand Microtransit van services like Metro Flex.
- Electrify all buses and Microtransit vans using dollars earmarked for ST3.
- Have the WSDOT double-down on its promise to keep HOV lanes moving at 45 mph 90% of the time.
- Expand incentives for commuters to use the existing 310 miles of HOV lanes.

## FOR FUNDING

Accountability for Sound Transit leadership. This means publicly electing Sound Transit board members to ensure accountability, rather than county executives appointing officials to the board. Sound Transit has had 25 years to build light rail, and we should celebrate and encourage ridership for what's been built. But Sound Transit didn't deliver the system voters were promised, so it's time to pause new groundbreaking.

Sound Transit needs to be truthful about the costs and benefits of proceeding with ST3, which is still in the planning stages. Their own numbers show we need a better approach.

Accountability starts with voters being able to elect Sound Transit board members by district using only public (not private) funds for these elections. With billions spent so far, there are many entrenched interests who want nothing to change with the way Sound Transit operates, thus making public funding essential to avoid conflicts of interest in an election. Voters deserve accountability. Therefore, the Legislature needs to install new guardrails around Sound Transit by making these proposed changes a reality.

## What's Wrong With ST3?

ST3 is the latest \$53.8 billion dollar transit package voters passed in 2016 – and like Sound Move (ST1) and ST2, it's severely over budget. ST3 includes the light rail extension down to the Tacoma Dome, the Ballard and West Seattle light rail extensions, extending light rail from Lynnwood to Everett, the Overlake to Redmond extension of East Link, and a new line from Bellevue to South Kirkland and Issaquah, as well as other non-light-rail projects that include some bus rapid transit.

The immediate issues are with the West Seattle and Ballard Link Rail Extensions. The numbers simply don't add up for the billions of dollars expended. Sound Transit shows the line from Ballard to downtown would be under-used – less than half the seats full during peak hours at a cost of \$11 billion.

### **The problems with the West Seattle Link Extension (WSLE) are numerous.**

- At **\$1 billion per mile**, it's the country's second most expensive urban rail project.
- **There is no transit benefit:** Current Metro buses carry the same number of people faster than light rail will in 20 years.
- There is great community cost: For instance, an entire shopping center and the apartments above it will be demolished, including the closure of at least 70 businesses and 500 jobs.
- There is great environmental cost: The project's Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) states many of the habitat losses are un-mitigatable and there's a massive carbon construction footprint (614,000 tons) – with no transit ridership benefits.
- West Seattle traffic will be snarled for 6-8 years creating a much worse situation than the closure of the West Seattle Bridge during the pandemic, and that carbon load hasn't even been estimated.
- WSLE doesn't meet any of Seattle's global warming or transit goals for the future.
- For a fraction of the proposed \$4 billion, electric buses could serve the entire West Seattle Peninsula and into Burien, well before the 2032 rail extension's estimated completion.

## Footnotes:

1 <https://ofm.wa.gov/sites/default/files/public/dataresearch/pop/special/rta.pdf>

<https://www.indexmundi.com/facts/united-states/quick-facts/washington/average-household-size#map>

<https://www.soundtransit.org/sites/default/files/documents/2024-financial-plan-proposed-budget.pdf>

Three 2024 Sound Transit budgeted local tax categories (\$1.84B sales tax + \$0.38B car tabs+ \$0.17B property tax = \$2.39B) divided by 1.34 million households in the taxing district = \$1,784 per household budgeted in 2024. Divided by 12 yields \$149 per month. ST tax district has 3,392,527 population per OFM: 2,086,356 in King, 801,341 in Pierce, and 504,830 in Snohomish. Bringing in the persons per household in each of the three counties yields 848,112 households in King, 302,393 in Pierce, and 188,369 in Snohomish, for a total of 1.34 million households in the taxing district.

2 “Justification Information:”

<https://smartertransit.org/justification-for-smarter-transits-analysis-of-2050-rail-transit-mode-share-for-the-central-puget-sound-region/>

3 Sound Transit response to “Letter from Notables” July 23 2016:

<https://smartertransit.org/2016-letter-from-notables-to-sound-transit/>

4 <https://www.psrc.org/media/5942> pg. 7, (see 3rd and 4th bar)

5 <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/sound-transit-will-pay-600k-to-new-megaproject-leader-hired-from-lax/> (Paragraph 4)

6 <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/sound-transit-looks-to-other-cities-as-it-considers-fare-gates/> (Paragraph 14)

7 Sound Transit response to “Letter from Notables” July 23 2016, Question 10:

<https://smartertransit.org/2016-letter-from-notables-to-sound-transit/>