



King County

Dow Constantine
King County Executive

News Release

Date: August 12, 2011

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County Executive's agreement provides supermajority needed to preserve Metro bus service

**County Council on Monday to consider bus-ticket incentive program, right-sizing of
transit service, and phase out of downtown Seattle Ride Free Area**

King County Executive Dow Constantine today announced a supermajority of County Council support needed to enact a two-year \$20 Congestion Reduction Charge and avert a 17 percent cut of Metro bus service starting in 2012. Nearly 1,500 County residents turned out to four public hearings in July to call for this action by the Council.

Constantine today thanked members of the Council – including Councilmembers Jane Hague and Kathy Lambert, who announced their support today based on a package of amendments that paves the way for councilmanic action at Monday's Council meeting. Councilmembers Larry Phillips, Bob Ferguson, Larry Gossett, Joe McDermott, and Julia Patterson had previously stated their support.

"The people of King County voted with their feet, and they overwhelmingly turned out to tell us to save Metro Transit and keep bus service on the street. They have been heard," said Executive Constantine. "This agreement creates value for drivers who pay the fee, and provides an incentive for them to give the bus a try. I want to thank these seven Councilmembers for stepping up. This is a collaborative approach that shows how government is supposed to work."

"This bipartisan agreement addresses my primary concerns and offers real reform for Metro," said Council Vice Chair Hague. "It's critical that we keep people and businesses moving on the Eastside – especially during these tough economic times. This new package creates jobs and provides equity for the Eastside."

"We're working together in a bipartisan fashion, unlike those in Washington, DC," said Councilmember Lambert. "People in these uncertain economic times need certainty that they have an alternative method such as buses to get to work. There are many systemic changes in the new package that will help meet the needs of efficiency, transparency, and providing transportation."

"The people of King County spoke up in unprecedented numbers to tell us that transit is critical to their daily lives and the effects of deep service cuts would be devastating," said Councilmember Larry Phillips, lead sponsor of the congestion reduction charge legislation and Chair of the Transportation, Economy, and Environment Committee. "Their message compelled us to come together and find creative solutions that allow us to broadly support enacting the temporary, emergency congestion reduction charge to save transit in King County."

"This is an agreement that ensures a vital transportation link will remain strong as we work out a long-term financing solution," said Council Chair Larry Gossett. "Those with the least, who depend on public transportation the most, can continue to use Metro to go about their everyday lives."

The County Council is set to consider amendments to the proposed Congestion Reduction Charge at its next regular meeting on Monday, August 15. Under the proposed legislation, King County Metro Transit would:

- **Develop a Transit Incentive Program to provide eight bus tickets worth up to \$24 for each car tab renewal.** People can use the tickets for rides to work, play or special sporting events. They may also choose to donate the value of those tickets to a pool of nearly 150 human service agencies to provide mobility for those in need.
- **Phase out the downtown Seattle Ride Free Area in October 2012.** The Council's 2009 performance audit called for Metro to update its formula for collecting revenues in the Ride Free Area (RFA). When first established in 1973 as the "Magic Carpet Zone," a city subsidy funded 100 percent of the fares Metro no longer collected in that area. Today the city of Seattle pays Metro \$400,000 a year to support the RFA, which is about 18 percent of the \$2.2 million annual cost for Metro to operate the RFA.
- **Increase the pool of funds that provides sharply discounted bus tickets to human service and homeless programs.** Metro now discounts tickets worth nearly \$2 million annually. The tickets are currently sold to human service agencies at 20 cents on the dollar. Metro will either increase the current ticket allocation, or further reduce the discount while giving the public the option of donating their tickets under the incentive plan to those in need. Metro will seek the advice of human service agencies in how to best help those in need.
- **Implement right-sizing of service consistent with the Transit Strategic Plan.** In communities where it makes sense, Metro will deploy lower-cost, more efficient Dial-a-Ride Transit service (DART), community access transportation services, Vanpools and vanshares, making service more efficient and responsive to our riders.
- **Consider routes that carry more riders due to the effects of highway tolling as candidates for added services.** This language in the proposed legislation is consistent with the principles to enhance Metro's productivity developed by the Regional Transit Task Force and adopted in the County's Transit Strategic Plan.

"As a regular bus commuter, I am thrilled that we have reached an agreement that will protect the transit service that workers and their families rely on every day."

This agreement will keep our economy moving at the time we need it most," said Councilmember Bob Ferguson. "I thank Executive Constantine and my colleagues for working to find common ground. On my way home tonight, I look forward to sharing the good news with my fellow riders on the #41 bus."

"Today's developments are the result of hours of public testimony, hundreds of messages and thousands of emails about the vital role Metro plays in the lives of King County residents," said Councilmember Joe McDermott. "My colleagues and I will continue to work together to find long-term, sustainable funding for Metro to keep our region moving for years to come."

"From our experience with past incentive programs, we know that people who become familiar with riding Metro are more inclined to ride the bus again. Using free tickets to shop, get to work or to a sporting event can save money and take one more car off the road," said Council Budget Chair Julia Patterson. "More importantly, the vouchers could expose a whole new generation of riders to Metro bus service, and the option to donate unused vouchers to the poor is incredibly valuable in these difficult times."

Under the state's authorizing legislation, the Congestion Reduction Charge would take effect six months after the measure is signed into law.

"Today we are doing what it takes to keep buses on the streets, but this is only an interim measure," said Executive Constantine. "This gives us time to work statewide on a permanent solution for funding transit and other critical transportation needs."

BACKGROUND

TRANSIT INCENTIVE PROGRAM

The incentive program is intended to reach beyond the bus riders who already account for 108 million annual trips on Metro. Each King County resident renewing their car registration would receive a request form from Metro when they receive their new license tabs. To receive eight free-ride tickets, each car owner must fill out the form, which will also offer the option of donating the value of the tickets to a pool for distribution of bus tickets to support low-income residents who depend on transit to access services in their communities. The bus tickets will apply only to regular Metro Transit bus service and will not be transferable to other transit modes. Past experience with other incentive programs has shown that people who try riding Metro are more inclined to ride the bus again.

RIDE FREE AREA

In downtown Seattle about 9,000 free bus rides are taken every day between Jackson and Battery Streets and in the Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel. The service was initially launched to help spur retail development in the downtown business core.

According to Metro studies, about half of all riders traveling in the RFA carry a pre-paid bus pass. Another 18 percent have paid for their trip and are making transfers in the RFA. About one-third are making trips as unpaid riders.

Among the benefits riders will see from the phasing-out of the RFA:

- Riders will pay as they board, rather than paying as they exit after leaving the RFA– a policy many customers found confusing.
- A “pay as you enter” fare system will reduce fare evasion on outbound trips, reduce fare disputes between drivers and passengers.
- On trips leaving downtown, riders would be able to use all doors to exit and, especially on a crowded bus, would no longer have to work their way up the aisle to the front of the bus to exit.

Before the change, Metro will reach out to travel and convention groups to discuss how best to accommodate visitors who want to use Metro buses during their stays in downtown Seattle.

Metro will work with human service agencies to determine how their clients might be impacted by the change. Currently Metro contributes nearly \$2 million worth of discounted tickets annually to charities and other human services groups. These tickets help clients get to job training, shelters and medical appointments.

RIGHT-SIZING OF BUS SERVICE

Recognizing that one type of transit service may not meet the needs of all communities, Metro will explore a variety of alternatives for “right-sizing” services. These alternatives are called for in the new Transit Strategic Plan, and provide promising new tools to help maintain transit services for communities that do not have high ridership due to their rural character. Under right-sizing no community currently served by Metro would be left without transit travel options.

To offset service reductions or eliminations on routes that are less productive, Metro will identify a menu of “right-sized” transit services that can effectively replace up to 20,000 hours of traditional fixed-route bus service by June 2012. These more cost-effective services could include alternatives such as Dial-a-Ride Transit (DART) service, community access transportation, vanpool or volunteer transportation programs and would benefit communities in east and south King County that are adjacent to rural areas.

Over the next year, Metro will reach out to community organizations and groups to explore partnerships for creating these various lower-cost services, and invite residents to help shape these right-sizing strategies.

***Learn more about how Metro can have a sustainable future at:
www.kingcounty.gov/metro/future***

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King County provides regional services to nearly 2-million residents including 305,000 people living in unincorporated areas. Services include Metro transit, public health, wastewater treatment, courts, jails, prosecutors, public defenders, community and social services, the King County International Airport, and local services such as police protection, roads service, and solid waste transfer station and landfill services. King County is the 14th largest county in the nation by population, and covers 2,134 square miles, 39 cities, 760 lakes and reservoirs, and six major river systems with 3,000 miles of streams.





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List of Attendees

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King County Executive Dow Constantine*
Jane Hague – King County Councilmember*
Kathy Lambert – King County Councilmember*
Larry Phillips – King County Councilmember*
Larry Gossett – King County Councilmember*
Matt Griffin – Downtown Seattle Association*
Leslie Lloyd – Bellevue Downtown Association*
George Allen – Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce
Charles Knutson – Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce
Katherine MacKinnon – Downtown Seattle Association
Irene Plenefisch – Microsoft Corporation
Paul Bachtel – Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)
Sara Franklin – Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)
David Freiboth – ML King County Labor Council
Shefali Ranganathan – Transportation Choices Coalition
Andrew Austin – Transportation Choices Coalition
Ezra Basom – Washington Conservation Voters
April Putney – Futurewise
Rita Ryder – YWCA
Josh Kavanagh – University of Washington
Scott White – Washington State Senator
Joe Fitzgibbon – Washington State Representative
Tom Rasmussen – Seattle City Councilmember
Sally Bagshaw – Seattle City Councilmember
John Chelminiak – Bellevue City Councilmember
Dave Asher – Bellevue City Councilmember

* = Speaking role



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Metro Ticket Incentive Program

What is the Metro Ticket Incentive Program?

The incentive program is intended to reach beyond the bus riders who already account for 108 million annual trips on Metro. Each King County resident renewing their car registration would be able to obtain vouchers for eight free rides on Metro. Past experience with other incentive programs has shown that people who try riding Metro are more inclined to ride the bus again.

How will the incentive program work?

Motorists renewing their annual registration will receive a request form from Metro when they receive their new license tabs. To receive eight free-ride tickets, each car owner must fill out the form, which will also offer the option of donating the value of the tickets to a fund for distribution of bus tickets to support low-income residents who depend on transit to access services in their communities. The bus tickets will apply only to regular Metro Transit bus service and will not be transferable to other transit modes. The tickets will be good for at least 60 days. Each home address can receive 8 tickets during a 12-month period.

What are the benefits of donating your free ride tickets?

Metro and human service agencies know how important the bus is to people who do not own cars, yet need to get to shelters, job interviews or medical appointments. Donating bus tickets is an innovative way to support the nearly 150 social service agencies in King County that purchase deeply discounted tickets from Metro and distribute them to clients in need, especially with the proposed phasing out of the Ride Free Area in 2012.

How much will the incentive program cost?

Metro estimates the incentive program will provide between \$700,000 and \$2.5 million in trips each year, many of which would not have been taken without the incentive, and which will ultimately result in increased ridership over the long term.



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Metro Ride Free Area (RFA)

What are the benefits of phasing out the Ride Free Area?

Phasing out the RFA will increase revenue and have a net positive impact on Metro's bottom line. It would make it simpler for riders to pay fares throughout the system. A more consistent fare collection system is expected to reduce fare disputes and fare evasion. In a 2010 survey of Metro's bus operators, eliminating the RFA was listed as the leading strategy to reduce fare evasion.

When was the RFA established?

What was originally called the "Magic Carpet Zone" was established in 1973 to support economic development in the downtown core. It was expanded in 1975 to include the International District and in 1978 to include Belltown. Free rides after 7 p.m. were curtailed in 1987.

How is the RFA funded?

A city subsidy in 1973 funded 100 percent of the fares Metro no longer collected in the "Magic Carpet Zone." Today the city of Seattle pays Metro \$400,000 a year to support the RFA, which is about 18 percent of the \$2.2 million a year it costs Metro to operate the RFA.

How many people use the RFA?

In 2010, there were about 28,000 one-way trips made on Metro entirely within the RFA. About half of the trips within the RFA are made by passengers who use a pass. Another 18 percent have paid for their trip and are making transfers in the RFA. About one-third are taking trips as "free" riders.

How will this affect people who rely on free rides in downtown Seattle?

Metro will spend the next several months working with human service agencies and others to identify ways to ease the burden on people who need bus service to access social services. Metro already provides nearly \$2 million annually in deeply discounted tickets to human service agencies. Metro will also reach out to convention and tourism organizations to identify strategies for making ORCA cards available to visitors.

What are the boundaries of Metro's RFA in downtown Seattle?

The RFA is located between Battery Street to the north, Jackson Street to the south and between 6th Ave. and Elliott Bay. Riding Metro Transit is free in downtown Seattle from 6 a.m. and 7 p.m. daily.