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Is Light Rail on Track?

June 1, 2011

Sound Transit's Link Light Rail is facing some major hurdles. Ridership is falling short of projections, revenue shortfalls in South King County have forced the agency to deliver less of the line than it originally promised, fares have increased at a steady clip, and discord in Bellevue over how the eastern extension of the line will make its way through the city could lead to a lawsuit and has already delayed that extension until at least 2023.

King County Council member, council transportation committee chair, and Sound Transit board member, Larry Phillips argues that despite some hurdles, light rail is on track to succeed. Transportation researcher and longtime light-rail skeptic John Niles says disappointing ridership numbers and competing transit priorities have doomed light rail to failure. PubliCola's ThinkTank weighs in.

King County Council Transportation Chair and Sound Transit board member Larry Phillips

Global Telematics president John Niles, an independent transportation researcher in Seattle

We are less than two months away from the second birthday of Link light rail. I and other members of the Sound Transit Board will take advantage of the occasion to pause long enough to celebrate the system's strong start.

Link riders are the happiest transit riders you'll find in our region. In our January customer satisfaction survey, 88 percent of Link riders gave the service an "A" grade with another 10 percent giving it a "B." Link ridership is up 19 percent in the first quarter of 2011 compared to 2010.

We will not stop for long, though. There is too much work ahead to expand the system.

- Two weeks ago, we dedicated the tunnel boring machines that will connect light rail service from

Seattle's light rail to the airport is almost as fast as the [cancelled route 194 bus](#), provides nicer views, runs well in snow, and is suffering [fewer collisions than originally forecast](#).

Average weekday light rail ridership, however, is now 33 percent below a forecast made last summer that took the recession into account.

On an average weekday, only [21,191 people rode light rail](#) on an average weekday between January and April 2011, compared to [Sound Transit's forecast](#) of 31,750 per weekday throughout 2011.

The 2010 daily average was 21,026, which is 21 percent lower than the forecast of 26,600.

Low ridership means plenty of seats are available, but it's better to have riders standing in the aisle, because

downtown Seattle to Capitol Hill and the University of Washington in 2016—providing a six-minute ride through one of the most congested corridors in our region. This is one of the highest-rated transit projects in the nation in terms of benefits and cost-effectiveness, and it's providing more than 2,000 quality construction jobs at a time when our economy is fighting to recover.

- We remain positioned to open East Link to Mercer Island, Bellevue and Redmond by 2023 and even have the capacity to build the tunnel Bellevue wants in its downtown area if the city steps up with its half of the funding.
- There are hard decisions ahead about how to extend light rail as far south as possible. The challenge for Sound Transit's South King County subarea is greater than any other in the region, with a projected 31 percent reduction in revenue that means we don't currently have the means to get light rail all the way to South 272nd Street in Federal Way. The good news is that current projections show we have the capacity to expedite reaching South 200th Street and reach Highline Community College—just two miles north of South 272nd—by 2023.
- We are on schedule to expand light rail northward to Northgate and up to Lynnwood and are currently moving forward with studies looking at alignment and mode options.

As we move forward we are largely dealing with citizens and communities who overwhelmingly support our efforts to build a regional mass transit system that will stretch more than 50 miles. Yet, there will always be the vocal opponents.

A favorite line of attack: Light rail ridership is not up to projections. While it is true that our weekday ridership fell about 27 percent below the 26,600 projection for 2010 that we published a decade ago, what critics fail to mention is that transit ridership across the country is down. Fewer people working means fewer people riding transit to work. Driving is also down for the same reason.

Light rail opponents also continue to assert that buses could do a better job, even though bus service on busy corridors will continue to deteriorate as our population grows more than 30 percent in the next two decades. Bus travel times in our region slow by about one percent per year. This means bus travel times are expected to be about 22 percent slower by 2030.

Light rail also offers much cheaper labor, maintenance, and fuel costs over time. Sound Transit's forecasted operating cost per light rail passenger is \$1.34. That's a fraction of the \$5.34 per passenger cost for local bus service, as estimated by the National Transit Database.

The Sound Transit Board is united around the need to keep costs as low as we possibly can to complete Sound Transit 2 by 2023. That is our big challenge. If we can keep close to our target despite a 25 percent revenue hole caused by the global recession, it will help us earn the public's confidence for Sound Transit 3. Seattle wouldn't be the world-class city it is today if it turned its back at every challenge. We must keep moving forward.

Sound Transit's ridership predictions were the basis for the grants it received from the US government—\$500 million for the Airport line, and \$813 million for the University Link line that's now being tunneled to Capitol Hill and Husky Stadium.

Light rail has been running for two years now, and ridership isn't climbing fast enough to reach Sound Transit's promise to the feds of [45,000 riders per day by 2020](#), not including University Link. Year by year, light rail ridership is supposed to move closer to 45,000, yet in the face of an unexpected drop in ridership beginning last July, ST reduced its [2011 forecast](#) in April from 31,750 to 25,000 riders daily.

Four months into 2011, to reach an all-year average of 25,000 daily riders for the year, light rail will have to carry 26,900 passengers every single weekday the rest of this year, a number exceeded only on [three snow days last November and eight days last summer](#).

And so far in 2011, the trend isn't good. Rail ridership is growing more slowly, month over month, than it did last year.

Not coincidentally, ST recently spent [\\$2.1 million on a consultant](#) to support a so-called "ridership building initiative."

Many light rail proponents say ridership now on the airport line doesn't matter, because what really counts is ridership when the tracks go north to University of Washington, scheduled for 2016.

However, the same forecasting techniques that are failing to come true for Airport Link were also used to prepare the rider forecast for [University Link](#). Sound Transit claims that when this extension opens, an average 114,000 people will ride the train every weekday.

The details challenge credulity. For example, Sound Transit forecasts 14,000 boardings per day at the Capitol Hill station in 2030, about the same as at the [7th Avenue and 53rd Street subway stop](#) in Manhattan, a neighborhood with much higher density.

Sound Transit's forecast also claims that by the year 2030, 25,000 riders will board light rail trains daily at the UW Station on the campus edge—volumes comparable to New York City subway stops for Wall Street and Yankee Stadium. By comparison, the New York University Station, serving a school of comparable size, draws 17,000 riders daily.

Adding new caution about Sound Transit forecasting methods, the Puget Sound Regional Council recently published an independent rail forecast for 2040. Surprisingly, [PSRC predicts 47% fewer train riders in 2040](#) than Sound Transit promised for 2030.

Sound Transit has not offered any explanation for the discrepancy.

And now, the agency says it needs a [third federal grant of \\$600 million](#) to get the light rail tracks built to Lynnwood. Achieving this grant will be more difficult in an era of federal spending cuts if the forecasts that justified the two existing federal grants don't pan out.

In short, light rail ridership is trending well below the forecast that justified its funding, and the extension of

light rail northward depends on federal grants based on Sound Transit's ability to write accurate forecasts. (Light rail extensions to Bellevue and Federal Way are short of funds, too, but ST's ridership forecasts don't justify even applying for federal funding to support these.)

After 15 years,, Sound Transit carries one train rider for every 13 bus riders delivered by county transit agencies across the region. While keeping \$800 million in its treasury, Sound Transit is collecting [\\$1.6 million per day in taxes](#) and claiming it lacks the funds to build light rail extensions. At the same time, county transit agencies are crying poor even louder, cutting bus service, and scrambling for more tax revenue.

Can we please connect the dots?

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[PaulCuppy](#) 32p · 19 hours ago

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Larry Phillips amazingly claims light rail is more efficient than buses (!) and says the operating cost for light rail is "forecasted" to be \$1.34 per passenger trip in some magical day in the future. According to Sound Transit's Quarterly Ridership report, the cost of light rail operations today is \$9.30 per passenger trip, while Metro operates its buses at about \$4.00 per passenger trip.

Councilmember Phillips claims citizens support light rail. That's easy to say when Sound Transit consistently over promises and under delivers. During the 2008 election on ST2, Sound Transit officials promised voters the expanded rail portion (137 miles of light rail and commuter rail) would carry 310,000 passenger trips per day by 2030. However, the Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) estimates regional passenger rail ridership will actually only be 164,400 trips per day by 2040...half the service Sound Transit officials told voters they would deliver.

In 1996 voters were told phase one of Sound Transit would cost \$3.9 billion. The true cost is \$15 billion. Federal Way was told it would be served by light rail. Now Sound Transit officials say Federal Way won't be getting light rail. Here are some official Sound Transit promises compared with reality.

Promise: "[Sound Transit] is committed to building and operating a ten-year system plan that can be confidently funded and completed as promised to the region's citizens."

Reality: Today, the initial segment is already four miles shorter, billions over budget and more than a dozen years late compared to what was promised in 1996.

Promise: "If voters decide not to extend the system, [Sound Transit] will roll back the tax rate"

Reality: Voters rejected an extension in 2007, but Sound Transit officials did not roll back taxes.

Promise: Light rail will carry 107,000 riders per weekday by 2010.

Reality: Today, light rail carries around 20,000 riders per weekday.

Promise: "Sound Move is based on extremely conservative cost and ridership assumptions."

Reality: Sound Transit officials are spending billions more and carrying fewer riders than what they told voters.

Promise: Riders will pay more than half (53 percent) of the annual operating costs of light rail.

Reality: Today, Sound Transit officials say riders will cover less than 40% of operating costs.

Promise: "The light-rail system will provide significantly greater reliability than all other types of public transportation in the region."

Reality: Today, the Central Link light rail segment has an on-time performance of only 71 percent, while other modes average above 90 percent.

Promise: Sound Transit's initial light rail facility can carry 22,000 passengers per hour, per direction.

Reality: Today, the facility carries about 425 passengers per hour, per direction. Also, carrying capacity is not a measure of actual service. Saying a brief case that has the capacity to hold a million dollars, is not the same as actually having a million dollars.