

\$79 Million Allocation via PSRC TIP to Sound Transit Should Be Better Spent

Sound Transit Getting 29% of TIP Transit Funds for 12% Market Share

A Public Statement to PSRC Transportation Policy Board

by John Niles, Co-Chair, Coalition for Effective Transportation Alternatives, October 8, 2009

I invite the Board's attention to the PSRC staff's recommended allocation of \$79 million in TIP funds to nine construction projects of Sound Transit. Because of Sound Transit's generous voter-approved local funding, as well as the current funding crisis in other segments of regional public transit that are not Sound Transit's responsibility, this proposed allocation is unjustified, a case of robbing the poor to support the rich.

\$79 million to ST is 29% of the \$270 million total in TIP funds going to transit. The other 71% of the TIP transit allocation is going to the five other transit agencies: King County Metro, Pierce Transit, Community Transit, Everett Transit, and Kitsap Transit. The \$191 million in TIP funds now proposed by PSRC for these long-standing agencies supports them carrying collectively the vast majority of daily transit riders in today's region, 88%.

But why shouldn't these local agencies receive the same 88% fraction of the money as their ridership, or at least closer to it, instead of 71%? Sound Transit had only 12% share of the transit market as of 2006, but is getting 29% of TIP transit funds.

As you probably realize, the main reason that \$79 million to Sound Transit in discretionary Federal TIP funds would be a public policy error is that other local transit agencies in the present day are facing the prospect of service reductions in the near future.

News media have covered the immediate funding crisis now ongoing in all four counties of the PSRC constituency, most prominently in the high ridership systems of King County Metro and Pierce Transit. All five local systems are stressed in the current economic climate. Overall, the present day situation overall is a fiscal emergency.

Yes, Sound Transit has also been talking up its long-run problem in funding all of its multi-decade Phase 2 construction promises. However, it is arguably the most well-funded transit agency in the United States, drawing 9/10 of 1 percent sales tax plus MVET and car rental tax to the tune of approximately \$2 million per day from regional citizens and businesses. ST has full authority to stretch out its construction schedule to fit its revenues, as it has done before in recent memory. The \$79 million from TIP to Sound Transit equals about 40 days of its local tax revenue.

All the other transit agencies in the PSRC region are collectively serving many more people right now, and desperately need revenue help from the transportation policy leaders sitting in this room.

So 29% of TIP dollars is about to be voted by you for a single transit agency that serves about 12% of regional transit customers. Is this allocation somehow anticipating the future of transit?

The answer is “no.” The predominance of non-Sound Transit services in regional public transit will continue into the future. Even with the planned 82 miles of commuter rail and 70 miles of light rail in 2030, non-ST vehicles – buses -- will still be involved in serving about 67% of all transit trips, either on journeys not covered by Sound Transit routes, or as feeders to ST train stations. With the downward spiral that King County Metro is in, will those feeder services survive?

The frosting on the cake in the pending allocation to Sound Transit before you is that \$40 million of this agency’s \$79 million TIP funding is divided between the increasingly controversial Tacoma-Lakewood commuter line – the one to be placed on an urban berm -- and for parts of Sound Move light rail on both ends of the current Seattle-SeaTac Link. These rail segments in South Tacoma, in the University District, and to South 200th Street in SeaTac were originally in 1996 said to be fully funded by voters.

Will delaying these rail extensions a little bit really matter in the big scheme of things, compared to the economic and social damage from cutting the bus service of today’s daily riders?

It’s all up to you. I have been informed by PSRC staff that the \$43 million part of this Sound Transit funding bump called “FTA Earned Share” is just as discretionary with your votes as the \$19 million part called “FTA competitive” and the \$17 million portion from the Regional Project Evaluation Committee. Those three columns added together, the entire \$79 million, is up to you.

If you want to help keep present day transit services from sinking further by redirecting some or all of Sound Transit’s \$79 million in TIP funding to other transit agencies, you could vote that to happen. CETA urges that you do so.