

John Niles testimony to PSRC Transportation Policy Board, Julia Patterson Chairing, 9:30am, April 10, 2008

I'm John Niles from Seattle, and my topic is PSRC's responsibility to examine Sound Transit's new expansion plans.

If Sound Transit's current deliberations succeed in advancing a smaller, quicker-to-build phase 2 light rail plan for an autumn vote, this policy board and the PSRC executive board will have to decide whether Sound Transit's new plan meets PSRC's requirements for conformance with the adopted regional transportation plan.

My suggestion this morning is that broadly interpreting this charter would be a good idea, rather than using the rubber stamp of quick, pro forma approval. It's important for you to think through the transportation policy issues brought up in last fall's campaign and subsequent developments I'm about to mention.

Let me emphasize two areas of the formal conformance checklist:

(1) Consistency with Destination 2030 Policies

(2) Appropriate Benefit-Cost Analysis

Number 1, on consistency with policies, I urge you think through two of them: QUOTE, Manage travel demand to address traffic congestion and environmental objectives UNQUOTE and second QUOTE, Expand transportation capacity to offer greater mobility options. UNQUOTE

Is Sound Transit's new plan going to be sufficient in either regard?

The PSRC modeled forecast of the performance of the full ST long-range vision for 125 miles of light rail done for the Vision 2040 land use planning shows that billions spent by Sound Transit ends up with congestion tripling from today's levels. In 2040, PSRC's models show households on average being beyond 30 minutes-by-transit range for more than 98% of regional employment opportunities. Those are your PSRC staff's numbers.

Significantly, I now understand from monitoring the Pricing Task Force work as Chair Patterson suggested I do, that PSRC is within just a few days of publishing a Summary Report on its Traffic Choices road pricing test that had 275 families adjusting their travel over 8 months in response to road user charges.

Because of the startling results of the Traffic Choices experiment -- around a 10% reduction in driving -- for the first time ever, a new PSRC future vision holds out the prospect of dramatically reducing congestion with monetary incentives and penalties. Buses stuck in traffic would become much less of a problem. Buckets of money would be generated to fix bottlenecks. Traffic Choices was the nation's first demonstration on the

ground of what economists have been saying would happen from road pricing for over a quarter century. Road pricing is now supported by leading environmental groups and by the U.S. Department of Transportation as a replacement for the gas tax.

On the number 2 consideration for Sound Transit's conformity, Benefit-Cost Analysis, while there may be no immediate legal requirement for calculating life cycle Greenhouse Gas implications of light rail construction and operation, this is an environmental area that PSRC will soon be pursuing in the Destination 2040 planning work. Climate change will certainly come up in any future campaign for a Sound Transit tax hike. Climate change should be worked into Sound Transit's required benefit-cost analysis.

What's now going on with road user fees and tolling, with climate change policy, and with the oncoming recession, speaks to you PSRC leaders being very cautious about Sound Transit rushing a new plan to the ballot.

Governor Gregoire went on record in the Tacoma News Tribune last Sunday as "highly skeptical" about a 2008 vote. She is quoted saying "I think it's too early." The governor said, "we're in tough economic times."

Sound Transit could use more time to build its case. If Link Light Rail from Pine Street to the Airport were actually in operation, sailing through the 18 green traffic signals in the Rainier Valley, packed to standing room with happy travelers, ST would have an easier road ahead. But this coming November is too soon for Seattle's first light rail to start carrying passengers, and thus too soon for voting again to make the system bigger. I urge that PSRC's transportation planning authority be invoked broadly by you here to inform Sound Transit of the new realities.