

Testimony for House Transportation Hearing
From John Niles, April 4, 2003

Mr. Chairman, I'm John Niles, a transportation policy analyst from Seattle. I commend your statement in your op-ed in the *Seattle Times*, January 29, about making our transportation system more accountable and efficient. I support HB1960, which will cause agency consolidation to be studied. And I also urge the Committee's support of SB 5538, to create an elected board for Sound Transit, and SB 5674 which codifies an important regional funding policy into law.

With the passage of 5538 I'm sure that the election of new Sound Transit board members would be hard fought, with the outcome for the future of particular Sound Transit programs continuing to be uncertain, the case now. There is every indication from the past several years that Sound Transit will do whatever it takes to build rail transit, so the passage of these bills is no guarantee of a change in direction. However, I do feel that a public discussion of certain controversial issues would be good for the community.

For example, the costs of constructing Central Link are unusually high per mile, highest in the world history of light rail, in fact, and high compared to the resulting transportation benefit of new riders. Sound Transit's capital requirements were revealed in January as 54% of the existing ten year transit capital financing capability of the entire State of Washington, and of course some would like to see even more tax dollars assigned to Sound Transit. If 5674 were law, there would be a more intense public focus on costs and the financing plan for those costs.

Finally, a Sound Transit staff presentation about safety on March 27 to their Board of Directors revealed to me that any community fatalities or serious injuries that were to result from future accidental collisions of light rail with automobiles, buses, trucks, bicycles, or pedestrians (despite signs, signals, and driver education meant to prevent collisions) would not be chargeable to the agency. In effect, these fatalities would be a reasonable risk for the train ridership achieved. I don't agree with this position. Some greater visibility and accountability for this little known community safety policy would be worthwhile, and a new Board election is probably the quickest way to get there.

So to get these important issues out in the open, I urge that the entire House of Representatives get behind bills SB5538 and SB5674. Thank you!

Biography: John Niles is a researcher, analyst, and writer based in Seattle, focused on transportation and telecom issues. Since 1999 he has worked as a Research Associate with the Mineta Transportation Institute conducting transportation planning studies. He is an appointed member of the Telecommunications and Travel Behavior Committee of the Transportation Research Board, part of the National Research Council. He is also a Senior Fellow of Technology and Transportation at the Discovery Institute and an invited participant in the STELLA collaborative research program on sustainable transportation from the European Union and the U.S. National Science Foundation. He earned degrees at MIT and Carnegie Mellon University.

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