

June 27, 2001

Dave Earling, Chairman  
Sound Transit Board of Directors  
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Seattle, WA. 98104

Charles Royer, Chair

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Dear Dave,

At a recent Sound Transit Board meeting Executive Director Joni Earl said that the light rail project is at a crossroads. We agree. The combined effect of the increased project cost estimates, the Inspector General's recent critical report, actions by the Secretary of Transportation to delay federal funding, and the resulting drop in public confidence in Sound Transit, have led the community to the verge of political gridlock over the Sound Move Plan. The current circumstances could result in the loss of significant federal funding for the light rail system.

For the past three months the Project Review Committee (PRC) has reviewed the history of the Sound Move Plan, held numerous briefings with Sound Transit staff regarding light rail and other features of the Plan, reviewed project documents and developed decision criteria to help identify a preferred course of action. In light of the Board's pending decisions on June 28<sup>th</sup> regarding the proposed three-month work plan, we are offering our recommendations and insights about the work that needs to occur over the summer months. These recommendations represent the consensus of the PRC, as described in our operating guidelines.

Because the circumstances surrounding this project have changed so dramatically since the Board created the PRC, we have found it useful to develop a set of principles to help chart a course through these often-confusing waters. The following principles were used to develop preliminary recommendations:

- *Stay focused on implementing the voter approved Sound Move Plan.*
- *Look for opportunities to integrate Sound Move investments with future transportation improvements.*
- *Build what the region can afford.*
- *Keep the federal government as an active funding partner.*

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- *Ensure compatibility in the planning for the rail and bus systems.*
- *Build upon recent success.*
- *Remember that we are building a long-term regional transportation system in phases.*
- *Maximize the capacity of the existing transportation system to improve the quality of the commute today.*

Based on these principles the PRC developed the following recommendations for your consideration.

### Recommendations Regarding the Three-Month Work Program for Light Rail.

1. **Continue work to plan for the construction of the light rail line in phases.** Despite the numerous criticisms of the way in which the project has been managed, and the numerous suggestions for alternative technologies, the PRC believes there is an opportunity to construct a significant portion of the light rail line the voters approved in 1996. The three-month work program should help answer some important questions, such as cost and ridership, before proceeding with the project.
2. **Consider construction of the south segment of the light rail system first.** Construction to the south would be consistent with the original Sound Move Plan approved by the voters. However, during the next three months planning for the construction of this segment should focus on the following three elements:
  - **The northern terminus should initially be at the south edge of downtown.** The PRC does not believe the Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel (“DSTT”) should be converted for joint rail/bus use until such time as construction is funded and underway on the northern segment of the light rail line. Only at the point that increased ridership is sufficient to justify closure of the DSTT for more than two years should the tunnel be retrofitted for light rail (or for joint rail/bus use). During the next three months the PRC would like to see Sound Transit study the potential for an interim northern terminus station at or near the current International District station, in addition to the proposed Royal Brougham terminus.
  - **The southern terminus should be at the airport.** This route would represent a true first phase of a regional light rail system. The thirteen miles of track is more than half of the twenty-two mile system approved by voters. Sound Transit should work with the Port during the next three months to explore opportunities for locating a temporary station at the airport. This would allow service to commence prior to the estimated 2012 completion of the new airport terminal. During the next three months Sound Transit staff will also need to prepare a recommendation for an affordable and appropriate route through Tukwila.
  - **Develop a plan for a north alignment.** Completing the light rail line to an interim terminus north of the University District in a location suitable for a transit collector is essential to addressing the traffic problems of our region. During the next three months, Sound Transit should take all necessary steps to develop a conceptual plan to build North, assuming

reasonable funding and cost assumptions. However, the PRC understands that final environmental review and project engineering work may not be completed prior to a decision to build South.

3. **Stop work on the Capitol Hill tunnel alignment.** It has become clear that there are major cost and community issues that are extremely difficult to resolve. The proposed tunnel, with its deep station connections, is too expensive to construct in the first phase of the project. We urge the Board to direct Sound Transit staff to stop all work, including any property acquisition, on the Capitol Hill alignment until other alignments (see # 4 below) can be studied and compared.
4. **Focus analysis in the north on the South Lake Union/Eastlake alignment.** It is essential that we continue to work aggressively toward selecting an affordable route to the north. The South Lake Union/Eastlake route appears to hold promise for reducing costs and avoiding some of the challenges of the deep tunnel route. We recommend the Board direct the staff to provide as thorough an evaluation as possible of this alternative during the next three months.
5. **Revise the Sound Transit financial plan.** The PRC would like to see a revised financial plan for the first phase of construction that assumes the Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel is not used for joint operations, or exclusively for light rail during this phase. The new plan should exclude the capital cost of retrofitting the DSTT and the expense associated with assuming King County's outstanding debt service payments for the tunnel. In addition, the revised plan should exclude the cost of third party agreements relating to the original University Link segment of the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA). The PRC also encourages Sound Transit staff to work with the FTA to make reasonable assumptions about the potential reprogramming of the \$500 million in federal funds (currently earmarked for the University Link) to the southern alignment.
6. **Expedite the decision to select an operator for the light rail system.** Sound Transit is scheduled to select an operator for the light rail system after design work for the first phase of construction is nearly complete. The PRC urges the Sound Transit Board to expedite the decision on who should operate the proposed rail service to provide compatibility and accountability in the planning phase for light rail. The selection should be made through a competitive process to minimize costs and maximize returns to Sound Transit. Early inclusion of an operator will insure that service can be effectively planned and functionally integrated with the bus system. The ability to successfully implement the light rail system will be enhanced by a partnership between builder and operator at this early stage.
7. **Take advantage of opportunities to integrate the planning for light rail with other major regional transportation projects.** We have a unique opportunity to integrate the planning for light rail with planning efforts underway for two significant transportation corridors. The City of Seattle and the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) recently announced a "scoping" process to consider replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct. This raises intriguing possibilities about the potential construction of a new tunnel under downtown. A second tunnel could be a solution for eliminating potential future bus/rail conflicts in the existing Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel. In addition, the current work on the potential SR 520 expansion suggests an opportunity to provide a meaningful link between a north/south light rail line and a major east/west

transportation corridor. An effective connection between these two corridors is crucial to providing a useful regional transportation system.

### Recommendations Regarding Other Strategies Related to the Sound Move Plan

8. **Proceed expeditiously to complete Sounder to Snohomish County.** Sound Transit should aggressively pursue completion of the commuter rail line between Everett and downtown Seattle, assuming that funding for the project does not interfere with plans for the light rail system or other parts of the Sound Move Plan. Completion of the Sounder line in the north is an opportunity to develop a near-term successful rail program in Snohomish and North King Counties. Construction of additional stations in North King County (at Ballard or Broad Street) would significantly improve the value of the rail line to King County residents. The three-month work program should include immediate communication with members of the congressional delegation in an attempt to secure federal funding for the Sounder project in the FY 2002 federal appropriation cycle. Federal funds could be made contingent upon state funding for the project.
9. **Maximize the use of the downtown bus tunnel now.** The Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel is currently operating at approximately half of its designed capacity. The PRC believes there is an opportunity to put additional buses in the existing tunnel and make a significant, and immediate reduction in - downtown peak hour traffic congestion. The PRC understands that new dual mode buses will need to be purchased soon to replace the existing fleet.
10. **Continue to aggressively pursue completion of HOV access improvements and express bus service.** Sound Transit needs to continue to make improvements in the current transportation system before the first phase of light rail construction is completed.

We hope this is helpful in your deliberations this week about how to proceed with the light rail project. We look forward to discussing these matters with you. If we can answer any questions please feel free to call upon us.

I have been very impressed with the thoughtful and deliberate approach of our committee members. They have undertaken your assignment with a sense of grave responsibility and diligence. To a person our committee members understand that we are being asked to advise the Board on strategies that will have a profound impact on generations to come.

Sincerely,

Charles Royer, Chair  
Project Review Committee

cc: Sound Transit Board Members  
Joni Earl, Executive Director  
Project Review Committee Members