

REPORT CARD FOR SOUND TRANSIT

This Report Card, issued in year eight of Sound Transit's Ten Year Plan, evaluates the agency's performance. The standard for comparison is the assurances conveyed to the region's voters and taxpayers in 1996, contrasted with what has transpired. The package of costs, benefits, and development schedules represented in "Sound Move: The Ten-Year Regional Transit System Plan" is what was conveyed to voters. That same information had been relied upon to select the projects included in Sound Move, rather than other options.

What Sound Transit has done--as will be described and commented on at the conclusion of this report--is finagle and manipulate data, in order to evade and hide from this proper standard of evaluation.

SOUNDER COMMUTER RAIL	F
TACOMA LINK LIGHT RAIL	C
CENTRAL LINK LIGHT RAIL	F
REGIONAL EXPRESS BUSES	C

Data for the Report Card have been extracted from:

- **Sound Move: The Ten-Year Regional Transit System Plan, the program submitted to and adopted by voters in 1996, and the ensuing Environmental Impact Statement, 1999.**
- **Official Sound Transit data of actual capital and operating costs, ridership benefits, and pace of implementation, as reported in the agency's annual Financial Plans, and annual reports to the Washington State Department of Transportation.**

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Sounder commuter rail F

Project Implementation F

- Sounder was to be in full operation starting in 2002, with fifteen daily trains. Nine were to serve the Seattle/Tacoma route, some continuing on to Lakewood, with six daily trains running between Seattle and Everett.
- In 2000/2001 Sound Transit ordered 11 locomotives and 75 coaches for its Sounder lines. It would have needed that equipment if its performance was satisfactory. But the discrepancy was so great between the plans and pace of its project implementation, and the contrast was so vast between the ridership it projected and actual demand, the agency was forced to sell or lease four superfluous locomotives and 47 excessive coaches. One can travel to Virginia, or California, and see Sound Transit's surplus trains that were leased to other agencies.
- At the outset of 2005, only four trains are in operation, three running between Seattle and Tacoma, none serving Lakewood, and one in the Seattle/Everett corridor.

Capital Cost D

- Sounder commuter rail was to cost \$650 million (\$539 million in 1995\$). Sound Transit's current, projected cost is \$1.23 billion, an 89 percent cost overrun, so far.
- Applying the Federal Transit Administration's accounting methodology¹, the annualized capital cost of Sounder is \$96 million. In 2004, capital cost per boarding was \$100.

Operating Cost F

- The Operating Expense for Sounder was to total \$1.9 million per train in 2004--\$28,555,000 for 15 trains.
- In 2004 Sounder's Operating Expense totaled \$18.55 million for four trains, \$4.64 million per train. That's nearly 2.5-times the promised figure.
- The 2004 operating cost per boarding on Sounder was \$19.40. The daily cost for a two-way commuter was \$38.80, over \$10,000 for the year's service.
- If one adds the 2004 operating cost per trip to the annualized capital cost (\$100), the cost of each one-way trip in 2004 was \$119.40. That's an annual cost of \$62,000 for each daily commuter.
- Sound Transit's 1996 promise, and current policy, is to recover 40 percent of its trains' operating costs from farebox revenues during Phase I, 1996-2010.

¹ *FTA uses a conventional accounting procedure that distributes the total capital cost over the life-cycles of its component parts.*

- In 2004, Farebox Revenue was \$2,257,000, scarcely 12 percent of Operating Expense. Taxpayers subsidized nearly 88 percent of the operating cost, on top of 100 percent of the capital cost. Combining the two, fares covered two percent of costs, and the 98 percent balance was subsidized by taxpayers.
- Voters were promised "economies of scale"--i.e., as time passes, fares are supposed to cover a growing share of the operating costs. But the opposite is occurring. Starting in 2002, the share of operating subsidy has grown every year. That trend is projected to continue in 2005 and 2006. The promise of 40 percent farebox recovery of annual Operating Expense is departing further from performance with each passing year. At its highest, 2002, it was 15 percent. By 2006, Sound Transit predicts 10.3 percent.

Ridership

F

- In its first full year of service, 2001, Sounder commuter rail attracted 58 percent of its projected ridership (promised--969,000, actual--563,000). In 2002, 37 percent (1,798,000 vs. 672,000). In 2003, 27 percent (2,806,000 vs. 751,000).
- Sounder was projected to attract 2,984,000 boardings in 2004. It actually served 955,000, 32 percent as many.
- In the face of failing patronage, Sound Transit began to "fix" the numbers. In 2002, when ridership was 37 percent the level promised, the agency announced it had beaten its target by ten percent. The press reported it that way. The manipulation of data--both costs and benefits--became a notable characteristic of Sound Transit once Joni Earl became executive director. The agency systematically uses deception to make poor performance appear good--and it's getting away with it.
- In 2004, Sound Transit lowered its target from the promised 2,984,000 to 900,000, a reduction of 70 percent. Then it beat its finagled target by six percent. Another triumph.
- From one year to the next Sound Transit adjusts its target to a number woefully short of what it promised voters it would achieve, when it wanted their vote. As a given year approaches, the ridership prediction for that year continues to diminish. No matter how poor its performance, Sound Transit sets the number so low it can "beat its target."²
- The proper comparison is between the costs and benefits used to select and justify the investment--and get the public to vote the necessary taxes--and actual performance. By that standard, Sounder is a failure, even though there are patrons who enjoy and appreciate their fabulously subsidized commuter train trips, perhaps the most costly in the country.

² *This matter will be described in detail in a Postscript to the Report Card.*

Tacoma Link Light Rail C

Project Implementation A-

- Tacoma Link was completed in August 2003, almost on schedule.

Capital Cost B-

- Tacoma Link was projected to cost \$61 million (\$50 million in 1995\$).
- It was completed for \$80.4 million, a 32 percent cost overrun. Sound Transit claimed it completed the project "under budget," by finagling the numbers.

Operating Cost F

- The 2004 operating cost in the first full year of service was \$3.94 million, to serve 740,000 boardings.³ That's \$5.30 per boarding, for a 1.6-mile system, average trip less than one mile. By comparison, King County Metro Transit costs \$3.90 per trip, and the average trip is about four miles.
- Sound Transit promised that its rail systems would recover 40 percent of operating costs from fares, in Phase I (through 2010). In order to inflate ridership, Sound Transit subsequently decided to provide Tacoma Link service free of charge. The \$5.30 operating cost per trip is 100 percent subsidized by taxpayers, on top of the 100 percent subsidized capital cost. Plus Sound Transit provides free parking for Tacoma Link users.

Ridership C

- Ridership on Tacoma Link has been touted by Sound Transit's press releases as a huge success--proving the agency can do something right. The projected number of boardings for 2010, 600,000, was exceeded in 2004 by 140,000 boardings, total 740,000.⁴
- Tacoma Link riders, traveling free of charge, exceed the projection premised on a fare-based service. It is Sound Transit's sole successful performance. The cost for every project has been excessive, and every other ridership performance has fallen short.
- Any useful service offered for free will attract more takers than the same service provided at a cost. Sound Transit is deceitful in bragging about its Tacoma Link ridership accomplishment, while failing to admit the cause for it--free fares, plus free parking.

³ *That is the number claimed by Sound Transit. No fares are charged, and there's no reliable data for riders. The agency asks its drivers to guess.*

⁴ *This is another example of how Sound Transit manipulates data. When it changed its policy to free fares for Tacoma Link, it did not increase projected ridership. That set up its current bragging about how successful its trolley is.*

Central Link Light Rail F

Project Implementation F

- The 21-mile Central Link light rail, extending from Northeast 45th Street in the University District to South 200th Street in SeaTac,, was to be fully completed and operating in 2006, "for certain," according to Sound Move.
- Only the easiest segment is under construction, Convention Place to South 154th Street. It is scheduled to begin operation in 2009.
- The portion between the University District and downtown Seattle was so ineptly studied, selected, and cost-estimated that it had to be abandoned, and a new alignment selected. Yet Sound Transit repeatedly claimed it had thoroughly studied that segment for a decade, and insisted that its viability and cost estimate were solid and reliable.⁵
- Sound Transit planned the north terminus of Central Link at Northeast 45th Street. The University District already is severely congested, with air quality problems, a foolish place for a rail terminus that would generate lots of associated traffic. The agency now accepts that the terminus must be further north, preferably Northgate.
- The cheaper, easier segment, Airport Link⁶--15 miles, from Convention Place in downtown Seattle to SeaTac Airport--now is scheduled for completion in late 2009, mostly under the rubric Initial Segment.
- When the balance will be completed--to South 200th, and to north Seattle--is problematic. Sound Transit repeatedly, falsely claimed it had the money in hand to complete Central Link. Eventually the agency had to concede that it needs a lot more money, billions of dollars--though it refuses to admit how much more.

Capital Cost F

- Central Link light rail was to cost \$2.36 billion, according to the Sound Move Plan (\$1.75 billion in 1995\$). That was represented as a "very conservative" estimate, with the agency's promise it would "make sure" it was met.
- Now the cheap portion, Airport Link/Initial Segment (Convention Place to SeaTac Airport), is projected to cost \$2.7 billion. So-called Initial Segment is

⁵ C/f *New Starts Reports to the Federal Transit Administration, 1999 and 2000.*

⁶ *The nomenclature is complicated. The original Airport Link was 14 miles, from South Lander to South 200th Street, an alignment 80 percent identical with the current, 14-mile Initial Segment project. The latter includes about 2.6 miles from Convention Place to South Lander, formerly part of University Link, but not South 154th to South 200th, nearly three miles, which was part of Airport Link. However, recently Sound Transit said it would extend Initial Segment an additional mile in order to reach SeaTac Airport.*

budgeted at \$2.44 billion, and the final mile to SeaTac Airport is projected at an additional \$225 million.

- Sound Transit temporizes on providing a comprehensive cost estimate for the balance of Central Link--especially the portion to north Seattle, the most challenging, costly part. If cost overruns on that segment are proportionate to those of Initial Segment, 150 percent, that portion will approximate \$3.5 billion, with a total cost for 21-mile Central Link of \$6.2 billion, a cost overrun of \$3.84 billion on a \$2.36 billion project.
- However, Sound Transit admits that its plan to have a Link terminus in the University District was ill-considered--and now plans to site it at Northgate, which will add three miles, and \$800 million to \$1 billion capital cost. The final capital cost will be \$7 billion or more--if construction starts fairly soon. But it can't, because billions of dollars more must be located. Further delays will add to that stupendous figure.

Operating Cost

NA

- Even the scaled-back Airport Link/Initial Segment portion of the Central Link project is four-plus years from being put in operation, so there is no way to evaluate operating cost performance.
- All other Sound Transit projects--REX, Sounder, and Tacoma Link light rail--manifest operating costs markedly higher than projected. There's no credible reason to presume Sound Transit will operate Central Link in accord with its 1996 cost projections.
- The agency claimed that farebox revenues for Central Link would cover 55 percent of the operating costs, possibly 68 percent. That facile assurance must be weighted against the agency's claim that farebox revenues from its set of rail projects would cover 40 percent of operating costs in Phase I, 2000-2010. In 2004, rail fares of Sounder and Tacoma Link covered only ten percent, and it will be worse than that in 2005 and 2006.
- In 2010, the benchmark, concluding year of Phase I, when performance should be at its highest level, fares are projected to cover but 17 percent of operating costs for Sounder, Tacoma Link, and Initial Segment/Airport Link. The 17 percent likely will prove unrealistically optimistic.

Ridership

NA

- It is impossible at this time to evaluate ridership performance for Central Link. It will be a but a small fraction of that projected for 2010 in Sound Move. Only the least productive portion of Central Link will be in operation in 2010. Plus, all other projects are falling severely short of riders--save Tacoma Link, due to free fares.

Regional Express Buses (REX) C

Project Implementation B

- Sound Transit completed implementation of its promised 20 REX routes only modestly behind schedule.
- Most of the routes are simply pre-existing express bus services provided by the local transit agencies, King County Metro Transit, Pierce County Transit, and Community Transit. Those agencies continue to operate them, now under contract to Sound Transit, adding a layer of bureaucracy and additional cost. Some routes were modified, and a few were added.

Capital Cost B-

- The capital cost performance of REX is impressive--compared with Sounder and Central Link. In Sound Move, the capital cost to implement REX was \$92 million in 1995\$--about \$110 million in year-of-expenditure dollars. Now the total is projected at \$147.5 million, a cost overrun of 34 percent.

Operating Cost D

- At \$135 per operating hour, REX is one of the most costly bus services in the nation, 57 percent beyond the \$86 per hour average.
- Operating costs were to be \$269 million through 2010--in 1995\$, approximately \$355 million in year-of-expenditure dollars. But the 2005 Sound Transit Financial Plan projects \$611 million operating costs through 2009, a cost overrun of 72 percent.
- That said, REX is a bargain when compared with Sounder commuter rail or Tacoma Link light rail. The operating cost per-boarding is \$7.30. Of that, \$1.33 is covered by fares, hence a per-trip operating subsidy a bit under \$6. That's a fraction of Sounder's (\$19.40, minus \$2.46 average fare, a \$17 subsidy). REX, at \$6 subsidy per boarding, costs only modestly more than the operating subsidy of Tacoma Link--\$5.30--for much longer trips.

Ridership D

- The 1996 Sound Move Plan predicted 15.8 million trips for REX in 2010. In 2004, with all 20 routes in operation, it served 8.25 million trips. That seems encouraging--but most of those trips are simply the same riders on the express buses formerly provided by their local transit agencies.
- Attracting additional riders will not be easy, because they must be new transit patrons. Indeed, Sound Transit recurrently revises its 2010 projection downwards, and now predicts only 9.6 million boardings that year, merely 60 percent of those promised in 1996.

SOUND TRANSIT: PROMISES VS. PERFORMANCE

In its Sound Move Plan, Sound Transit promised voters it would serve 52.2 million trips in 2010:

Central Link Light Rail	32 million trips
Tacoma Link Light Rail	600 thousand trips
Regional Express Buses	15.8 million trips
Souder Commuter Rail	3.8 million trips ⁷

It proclaimed those numbers were very conservative, and insisted it almost certainly would do better than that--and do so on time and on budget. Subsequently, it announced that it is free to take as long as it likes, and spend as much as it wants on its projects, especially Central Link.⁸

The agency also said that the transit resources it would free-up for the local transit agencies--by contracting and paying for regional express buses--would result in an additional 6 million annual trips by those agencies. By 2010, the total additional transit trips would meet or exceed 58.2 million --beyond those that normally would accrue with a growing population, and incremental increases in local transit agency budgets.

As of the 2005 Financial Plan, Sound Transit's projections for 2010 are as follows:

Airport Link/Initial Segment	8.7 million trips
Tacoma Link Light Rail	800,000 trips
Regional Express Buses	9.6 million trips
Souder Commuter Rail	3.0 million trips

Total 22.1 million trips, 42 percent of the 52.2 million trips promised in 1996 when Sound Transit was seeking voter support for taxes. Further, there's no evidence that the promised six million additional trips are being added by the local agencies, with their freed-up resources.

⁷ In 1996, Sound Transit gave a Souder ridership range of 3.2 to 4.4 million trips in 2010, average 3.8 million.

⁸ On September 27, 2002, Sound Transit's chief legal counsel, Desmond Brown, announced in open court, in the presence of executive director Joni Earl and board chairman Ron Sims, that the agency has no legal obligation to honor either the budget or the schedule it presented to voters when soliciting their approval. It can spend as much as it wants, and take as long as it likes to implement Central Link, or some portion of it, as it sees fit. (C/f Seattle Times, 9.28.02) Neither does it accept any obligation for its ridership claims.

The current estimates for 2010 are excessive, just like those of 1996, and will be recurrently revised downward as 2010 approaches. This is part of Sound Transit's manipulation of data. When the year is safely in the future, Sound Transit estimates high, to give an exaggerated value. As the year approaches, it lowers the estimate, and expectations, in order to claim success when the diminished target is met. The press cooperates in this dissembling process.

For example, Sound Transit predicts that the Seattle/Everett Sounder line will serve 600,000 trips in 2010, only ten percent less than the 663,000 originally predicted for that year. But in 2004 it had only 28 percent as many trips as predicted for the initial year, 100,000 vs. 357,000. And now Sounder/Everett will at maximum run four trains, not the promised six. There is no plausible prospect that Sound Transit will reach 90 percent of its 1996 prediction for 2010. But it serves the agency's current PR purposes to pretend it will.

Sounder, in its fourth full year of operation, had only 32 percent the ridership predicted for 2004. It is not credible it will have 76 percent six years from now.

In just the past year Sound Transit's 2010 prediction for REX plummeted by two million trips, reflecting the growing gap between promise and performance. However, Sound Transit prefers trains, and is fairly indifferent to the performance of its buses. This year it will jack-up fares for REX, which will cost patronage--but no fare increases for Sounder, and Tacoma Link rides free. Also, it recently announced it will cut-back REX service in Pierce and South King County, due to the staggering cost overruns on its rail projects.

The Initial Segment/Airport Link portion of Central Link light rail will start service in 2009. The current projection for that segment, 8.7 million trips, is in accord with the original estimate. Since there will be no experience until 2009, there's no way to test its plausibility. But every other Sound Transit project is falling woefully short--save Tacoma Link, due to free fares. Sound Transit's current over-all projection for 2010 is merely 42 percent of that in 1996, with every component falling short. So the likelihood that Initial Segment will come out of the blocks and attain 100 percent is remote. And when it doesn't, the 42 percent will plummet further.

BUDGETS, RIDERS, AND TRANSIT MARKET SHARE

Along with the standard basis of comparison--promises versus performance--the key issue is whether Sound Transit is contributing to more cost-effective transit service, and improving transit market share. It's doing neither.

In 1998, without Sound Transit, the four local Central Puget Sound transit agencies (King County Metro Transit, Pierce County Transit, Community Transit, and Everett Transit) received \$506 million in revenue. They had a solid record of improving transit market share, unlike most local transit agencies in the US.

Current projections are for Sound Transit alone to receive \$453 million in 2010, with nearly \$850 million more going to the local agencies, bringing the regional total to approximately \$1.3 billion. In inflation-adjusted dollars, regional transit revenues will double between 1998 and 2010--primarily due to Sound Transit.

In 1998, the four local agencies served 118 million trips, without Sound Transit. In 2010, they are projected to serve 156 million trips, with Sound Transit--and that includes implausible ridership projections by Sound Transit. That's an increase in ridership of 32 percent spread over 13 years, a compounded annual increase slightly over two percent per year. That's notably lower than the region's total annual growth in transportation trips, hence losing transit market share. The 32 percent ridership gain will be obtained in tandem with a 150 percent increase in transit revenue, in absolute dollars (\$506 million in 1998 to \$1.3 billion in 2010), double the amount when controlling for inflation.

The region's cost per transit trip is escalating sharply and, in spite of all that additional money, transit market share is declining. That is precisely the opposite of what Sound Transit claimed--that market share would increase, and transit would become more cost-effective.

In 2010, 14 years into its ten-year plan, Sound Transit will add 36 percent to the region's transit bills. If its latest predicted ridership materializes--22.1 million trips--it will contribute 14 percent of the region's transit trips. King County Metro Transit will get 46 percent of the revenue, \$577 million, and provide 104 million trips, 66 percent of the total. Sound Transit will receive nearly four-fifths the money Metro Transit will, and provide little over one-fifth as many trips.

In 1998, the four local agencies served 118 million trips. If Sound Transit's 52.2 million trips promised for 2010 actually materialized--plus the six million it claimed the other local agencies would serve with the resources it would free-up--that alone would amount to 176 million trips in 2010. Even if the local agencies made no incremental increases in service on their own. The miserable outcome now forecast for 2010--156 million trips--is due primarily to the terrible performance of Sound Transit. Because Sound Transit's numbers still are exaggerated, actual performance will be worse than that.

Sound Transit now claims that, if only it can have another huge tax bite, it will increase transit patronage by 150 percent. That's an echo of its duplicitous 1996 claims. **As transit revenues have doubled, in constant dollars, transit market share is falling, not rising.**

Before Sound Transit came along, the region's local transit agencies were incrementally improving transit market share, outperforming most of the nation's urban areas. No longer. Not even with an immensely higher transit tax imposed on the region, the biggest increase in history.

Personal postscript on Sound Transit's manipulation of data

Data manipulation and PR spin is a lavishly-financed, ongoing process at Sound Transit, engaging on-staff and contracted expertise, buttressed by multi-million dollar annual buys of media time and space. It has persuaded many people that failure is success. The following examples illustrate how it works:

In Sound Transit's 2001 Financial Plan, the goal for 2002 Sounder ridership was 1,798,000, as it had been from the outset. Anticipating poor performance, during 2001 Joni Earl lowered the number to 700,000, merely 39 percent of that promised. Later, seeing that even that low number would not be met, she reduced it again, to 580,000, in order to set up the following: When actual ridership was 638,000 boardings--35 percent of what had been promised--she declared victory and assigned her PR operatives to hype the agency's success. She was rewarded with favorable press coverage, including this puffery:

""That exceeded our projection for the year by 10 percent,' said King County Executive Ron Sims, who is the current chairman of the Sound Transit Board of Directors." (King County Journal, January 13, 2003)

The 2003 Sounder ridership figure, originally promised at 2.8 million, was reduced to 1.1 million. As it became clear the agency still would fall short, it was reduced again, to 750,000. That number was met, just barely: 751,000.

That narrow escape prompted Ms. Earl to cut the 2004 target, previously reduced by 284,000, by an additional 1,800,000--from 2.7 million to 900,000--even though a fourth train was to be added. The agency cut the original estimate for the first year of the Seattle/Everett train in half, and pegged the target for the three Tacoma/Seattle trains well under the level accomplished in 2003. That way, when Sounder served 955,000 trips, 32 percent as many trips as promised originally in 2004, Sound Transit could say it beat its goal.

The 2005 projection originally was 3,060,000. By the 2004 plan, the target had plummeted to 1,100,000. But now, to set up another success, it's been reduced further, to a safe 981,000, requiring minimal gain.

The 2006 projection was 3,137,000. By last year, it was down to 1,500,000. Now it's only 1,132,000. Next year it'll come down yet again, if that's what it takes to enable the agency to pretend that it's achieving its goals.

Another aspect of deception is the way the agency exaggerates ridership numbers--when they're safely off in the future. For example, the original 2007 ridership projection for Sounder was 3,213,000. That goal has been reduced to 1,881,000--but even that demands an implausible increase of nearly 650,000 boardings during 2007. The agency's best-ever, one-year Sounder gain is 205,000, less than one-third as many. But keeping an exaggerated, future

number on the books enables Sound Transit to create the impression it's in the process of accomplishing more than it will. As 2007 approaches, the bar will be lowered enough to claim another success.

The package of project costs and ridership benefits represented to voters in 1996 was guided by elaborate polling. That polling informed Sound Transit how to manipulate the public in order to win the tax revenues it wanted.

When Tacoma Link construction was completed for \$80.4 million, Sound Transit proclaimed it had come in "under budget." Even though it was a 32 percent cost overrun, as the cost portrayed to voters in 1996 was \$61 million. That deception was rewarded with favorable press coverage. Emboldened, Sound Transit even conveyed the Tacoma Link misinformation to the senate transportation committee of the state legislature--whose members either welcomed being deceived, or didn't know they had been.

The same is true of construction contracts for Initial Segment. There are recurrent agency press releases that this or that major contract is "under budget"--glossing over the fact that the latest Initial Segment budget is about 2.5-times the cost represented in 1996. First Sound Transit raises an estimate by, say, 160 percent, and when a contract comes in 2.5-times the cost promised to voters, it stages a PR operation that brings it favorable publicity for competent estimates and prudent fiscal management.

In 1996 Sound Transit packaged its cost projections with proclamations that they were "conservative," "very conservative," "conspicuously conservative," etc. The agency claimed it had management oversight practices, policy guidance, plus generous contingencies that would "make certain" the budgets were met.

Sound Transit even used and corrupted an "Expert Review Panel" process to lend credence to its misrepresented capital and operating costs, ridership benefits, and construction schedule. Recently another Expert Review Panel was created, to affirm the costs and benefits Sound Transit will put forth for Phase II. Since nothing has been done to investigate and correct why the first ERP was so far off the mark--billions and billions, years and years--there's no reason to anticipate better performance the second time around. Once again, the staff for the panel has been selected by, and will be directed by Sound Transit. It will strive to see that ERP2, like its predecessor, is guided to the premises, data, perspectives, and conclusions desired by the agency.

One member of the original Expert Review Panel--Scott Rutherford, of the University of Washington engineering faculty--made candid remarks about the process to a symposium at Portland State University, January 10, 2003. The following transcription provides relevant, recorded passages that bear on Sound Transit's work and methods. It begins with an explanation of how less-costly,

more-productive bus options for this region were surreptitiously set aside in favor of more costly, less-productive rail projects:

"I can't think of any place where the client didn't already know what they wanted before they started the study. I thought we were going to get there [i.e. a fair, objective process] in Seattle a few years ago when doing an alternatives analysis for what we were going to do. Because [when] they started out, they were going to hire separate consultants for the bus alternative and for the rail alternative and let them sort of fight it out in the arena of choice. I forget what happened, but it just fizzled. As soon as the more powerful policymakers decided that rail was it, it was it. So, what can you say? It's kind of disappointing. We'd like to think, as engineers and planners, that we're going to go in there and do this totally objective thing and they're going to take our advice, [but] it doesn't happen very often. It doesn't happen very often...."

Since the "more powerful policymakers decided that rail was it," even-handed studies were quashed, and data was manipulated to make much more costly rail projects appear less expensive than more productive, cost-effective bus alternatives. Then the agency used its phony results to rationalize its course of action--a course it continues today.

Next there was the challenge to get a large federal grant, to move the project along, and help local people think they were getting something for nothing. That required an additional pattern of deception that explains why Sound Transit's promises don't correspond to reality.

"[Y]ou had to get a certain cost-effectiveness to be able to get funded or at least to get recommended for funding by the then Urban Mass Transportation Administration [now Federal Transit Administration]. So if you didn't have, if you weren't doing your trips for \$6 a trip, then you couldn't get funded. So the 'game' was, you know, if you could keep your cost estimate down and your rider forecast up, they were looking at this cost-effectiveness number, cost per new rider -- and those costs can get waaay out of line. And so the federal government is saying 'well we don't want to invest in something that has, you know, \$30 per new rider', and so what people did was sort of lowballed their cost estimates and goosed their forecasts so that that number comes down to sort of under \$10. I always thought that when I was out there, watching this that, you know, 'someone's gonna go to jail, these people are robbing the federal government of a billion dollars'. You know, they're defrauding the federal government basically--I mean what else could you say?--they're cheating. But the thing was that if you didn't cheat, you got nothing. If you cheated, you might get a billion dollars. So what do you think people do? I mean, duh!" [laughter]

When asked about his comments, Professor Rutherford said he was talking about Detroit, not Seattle. But he described a process common to those aspiring to build rail projects, which was applied in Seattle as in Detroit. If there's anything distinctive about Sound Transit, it's that it is developing the most wasteful, costly commuter rail system in the country, Sounder, and the most costly, wasteful light rail system, Central Link.

In 1996, while serving on a Regional Transit Authority/Sound Transit committee chaired by Dick Ford, I was introduced first-hand to the agency's propensity to distort and dissemble. From that experience, I wrote a short paper with several illustrations titled:

**IF THE RTA PROJECT IS DEFENSIBLE
IT COULD BE DEFENDED BY TELLING THE TRUTH**

(October 30, 1996)

But I could not imagine in 1996 how egregious and systematic Sound Transit's distortions and misrepresentations were, and how they would grow and elaborate. Only time and experience has revealed the scale, and the systemic nature of the mendacity. But I correctly identified the motive: Sound Transit's projects are indefensible, and would not gain support if people knew the truth. So, to get the money, they lie--what the scholars in this field, seeking to explain the consistent pattern of deception, dub "strategic misrepresentation."

Absent accurate information, the region is destined to spend more and more money for extravagant transit options, higher per-trip costs, with diminished transit market share. This is contributing to the worst possible outcome, more intense congestion in tandem with higher taxes and subsidies. With massive resources thus squandered, the useful and effective things that could be done, won't be done. Now Sound Transit is conspiring to obtain an enormous, additional tax increase. A large portion of that is required for the completion of Central Link light rail, which itself is merely "a starter rail." Sound Transit promised it would be completed and operating next year, 2006, fully paid for with the initial tax increase. The agency is spending \$2.7 billion just for the easiest, cheapest, least-productive portion of Central Link, and will require upwards of \$5 billion more for the balance. Taken in by the agency's "strategic misrepresentations," citizens voted \$2.3 billion for Central Link light rail in 1996, relying on Sound Transit's promise that it would complete it on budget, and on schedule, "for certain." And premised on operating costs and ridership benefits that will prove as distorted and manipulated as the capital cost estimates and construction schedule.

A senior colleague of Joni Earl recently said she is "nervous as a cat" these days, fearing that "everything is one banana peel away from a total collapse." What she has cause to fear is that the truth of her performance, and that of her agency, will become public knowledge.