

Comments by John Niles to the Puget Sound Regional Council General Assembly, March 25, 2004: PSRC leadership should order a comprehensive performance audit of Sound Transit that evaluates the agency's contribution to the achievement of Vision 2020.

Good afternoon. I'm John Niles of Seattle, technical director for CETA, the Coalition for Effective Transportation Alternatives. I'm also a Research Associate for the Mineta Transportation Institute at San Jose State University. I've been a transit user and advocate since the early 60s, when I used city bus service to travel 18 miles each way from my family's suburban Detroit home to a center city high school. I have been a regular transit user in Boston, Pittsburgh and Washington, DC. More recently, I have experienced this region's express bus service on routine trips to destinations including Olympia, Tacoma, downtown Bellevue, the Microsoft campus, Everett, and Arlington. As you fellow riders know, express buses on HOV work pretty well, and they do exploit our massive investment in HOV lanes. With coming smart vehicle technology, H-O-T lanes and GPS-based road pricing, and plain old more frequent service, our existing bus system could evolve into a true, high-tech Rapid Bus service, as seen on selected routes here and in Vancouver BC.

I'm here today to confess that I simply don't understand how leaders like yourself can let Sound Transit continue on its present path. By spending way too much for way too little, Sound Transit's wanton spending for underperforming and even damaging investments is detrimental to the implementation of Vision 2020, meaning of course, 23 urban centers connected by high capacity transit.

The Sound Transit centerpiece, Central Link Light Rail, has become a nationwide joke. The most expensive light rail project in world history, Central Link is light rail for the price of a heavy rail subway like San Francisco's BART, but with a fraction of the performance. One reason: Link includes 23 at-grade track crossings for buses, cars, and/or trucks, unlike BART, unlike DC Metro, and unlike the Seattle Green Line Monorail.

In 1996 voters approved a 24 mile core rail system that supposedly was funded for ten years to connect four urban centers -- U District, Capitol Hill, Seattle CBD, and SeaTac -- with an authorized but unfunded extension to a fifth urban center, Northgate. Instead, we are getting (to date) a 13 year program to connect Seattle CBD via a street trolley with a bus stop just outside the SeaTac urban center for a two-mile shuttle ride to the airport. This route will take longer from downtown Seattle to SeaTac airport than the present direct express tunnel bus. The Supreme Courts says this is legal, but polls show that this result is not popular.

Up north, not only is the train to Northgate still unfunded, but extensions of the light rail Initial Segment to Capitol Hill, U District and, SeaTac have become underfunded, partly because of soaring costs, and partly because of a statewide taxpayer revolt that targeted Sound Transit in 2002. I-776 is so far succeeding in tying up Sound Transit's ability to issue new bonds, despite a clever legal counterattack by government-funded municipal bond specialists.

There is now trouble all along the route of light rail. At the south end, the Tukwila City Council refused to approve the Memorandum of Agreement with Sound Transit and is paying for its own study with an eye toward forcing a redesign of the southern terminus.

In the Rainier Valley, the light rail design selected by Sound Transit will send 272 trains per day, each 190 feet long, at 35 mph down the unfenced median of a city boulevard crossing 18 streets at grade. Historical experience with street trains portends eight unnecessary collision deaths every decade.

In downtown Seattle, the same crew that for a decade has been unable to effectively utilize the Bus Tunnel beyond half its coach capacity now plans to run an intermodal operation that mixes light rail trains with buses, and puts all future express bus growth onto the downtown streets. Sound Transit's first light rail initiative, the Tacoma shuttle trolley that distributes tourists and workers from a parking garage near the Tacoma Dome, is already interfering with Pierce Transit bus operations that provide the bulk of transit service in that county.

There are other issues with Sound Transit's work besides light rail. The rush hour Sounder service to Tacoma and Everett, much loved as the SUV of transit by the few who ride it, is an incinerator of transit resources. In the Sound Transit express bus facilities program, there is resource misallocation as well, the most grievous of which is the bizarre attempt to make a five story, 1200 space parking garage the centerpiece of Transit Oriented Development in center city Federal Way, another Vision 2020 urban center, one that will now be crippled by Sound Transit's unorthodox approach to TOD.

Sound Transit in its short and stormy history has created a field of rocks, under many of which is a wormy mess. The big boulder to which I would especially invite your attention is the frenzy to lay railroad tracks in a region where public opinion polls reveal that expanding bus service shows both higher positives and lower negatives than extending light rail.

I have used existing computer model runs from PSRC staff to show the 2010 mode share in key north-south corridors where Sound Transit wants to lay new railroad tracks. The model shows in 2010 that after spending \$7 billion to build 24 miles of light rail, buses will still carry twice as many people in these corridors as trains. Regionwide, the bump up of net new transit riders because of light rail will be barely noticeable. CETA knows from its work that spending billions on trains is a nutty way to increase transit ridership when a relatively massive ridership upside from affordable, high-tech express bus improvements is so readily available.

Bottom line: The PSRC leadership should arrange for an independent comprehensive performance audit of the entire Sound Transit program, a step that Sound Transit refuses to take even though it is a required part of the plan we voted in 1996. A PSRC-arranged audit should be aimed directly at finding out where the implementation of PSRC's land use and transit vision for 2020 and beyond could be made to come out much better, much sooner, for far less expense than we have seen coming from Sound Transit to date.

Puget Sound Highways are Critical Infrastructure for Transit and Carpools

(A working paper from John Niles, Research Associate,
Mineta Transportation Institute, March 1, 2004)

Decision makers seeking the right “balance” between road and transit funding in the coming Regional Transportation Investment District (RTID) package can find indicators in the projected 2010 modal split modeled by the Puget Sound Regional Council in its latest Metropolitan Transportation Plan, *Destination 2030*.

Transit in the Puget Sound Region includes both trains and buses. In addition, the promotion of carpools – including vanpools – is carried out by transit agencies. Often, general purpose lanes are used by HOVs. For example, the Alaska Way Viaduct in Seattle provides access to downtown Seattle for about 440 buses per day, carrying over 10,000 passengers. Buses and carpools are thus dependent on the adequacy of both HOV lanes and general purpose lanes.

The officially approved PSRC 2010 Action Strategy assumes light rail completion from Northgate to South 200th in SeaTac. The results of this Strategy show that even with trains in operation, the carpool and bus HOV modes in 2010 are forecast to move more than ten times the number of peak period travelers in the I-5 corridor than rail transit will carry. The mode share of bus transit is twice the mode share of rail transit.

The table below summarizes the modal split across four screenlines selected to highlight the role of rail transit. The screenlines divide north from south at the Alderwood Mall, the Ship Canal, the City of Seattle in the SODO district, and the Pierce-King County Line. They measure travel along all corridors at these dividing lines. They capture the 2010 transit ridership resulting from Sounder commuter rail from Seattle to Tacoma and to Everett on existing tracks, and from Central Link light rail in Seattle running between Northgate and Tukwila.

Across these four screenlines, as shown in the table below, the 2010 peak period mode share for rail calculates to a 4 percent average, while the bus mode share comes in at 9 percent and the carpool share at 36 percent.

These percentages suggest that funding for the preservation and upgrading of roadways in the RTID package is critical to the importance of personal travel in modes other than SOV.

Person Trips Modeled Across Five Screenlines
Measuring AM Peak Period Trips in North-South Rail Corridors

SCREENLINE (*)	SOV	Carpool	Bus	Rail	Total
North-South @ Alderwood Mall (46)	57,900 (64%)	28,500 (32%)	3,300 (4%)	300 (0.3%)	90,000 (100%)
North-South @ Ship Canal (35)	84,700 (46%)	65,500 (35%)	24,600 (13%)	11,900 (6%)	186,700 (100%)
North-South across Seattle @ SODO (32)	67,300 (45%)	56,600 (38%)	19,600 (13%)	6,200 (4%)	149,700 (100%)
North-South @ King- Pierce Line(10-11)	66,400 (60%)	41,400 (37%)	2,000 (2%)	1,000 (1%)	110,800 (100%)
Weighted Average Mode Share	51%	36%	9%	4%	100%

Source: *Destination 2030: PSRC Metropolitan Transportation Plan*, Appendix 8, Table 8-13 and communications from PSRC. Trips rounded to the nearest 100. Screenlines selected to emphasize the rail transit share in the I-5 corridor. *PSRC reference number indicated. The cooperation of PSRC staff in providing data is appreciated.