

TRANSIT SYSTEMS AND SERVICES IN SEATTLE

Author: Peter Lindsay

Updated: May 20, 2015

INTRODUCTION

On a typical weekday about 40 percent of commuters ride a bus or take a train to work in downtown Seattle. While the City of Seattle does not directly operate transit systems, the City does own transit assets. The [City of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan](#) (page 3.9), states that "providing convenient and accessible transit service can help reduce reliance on single-occupant vehicles, slow the increase in environmental degradation associated with their use, and increase mobility without building new streets and highways."

On April 16, 2012, the City Council passed [Resolution 31367](#), which adopted the Seattle Transit Master Plan ([TMP](#)). The TMP provides a 20-year look (through 2030) to the type of transit system that will be required to meet Seattle's transit needs. It is an extensive update of the 2005 TMP, which identified key corridors linking urban villages and established performance standards for transit service. The 2012 TMP expanded that work and includes an evaluation of rail modes, rapid bus services, light rail station design, and capital infrastructure. The TMP addresses many critical issues, including:

- Identification of the city's most important transit corridors that carry high ridership today, as well as potential new ridership markets that will emerge as Seattle grows in jobs and new residents.
- Selection of transit modes, such as bus rapid transit, light rail or streetcar that would work best on those corridors.
- Integration of transit capital facilities and services with walking and biking infrastructure, as well as using transit to make great places.
- Enhancement of bus transit performance through roadway investments such as bus bulbs and traffic signal priority.
- Coordination with King County Metro Transit and Sound Transit to create a seamless, fully integrated, and user friendly network of transit services.

TRANSIT SERVICE PROVIDERS

Four agencies, including the City of Seattle, provide and/or support transit services within the City's boundaries. Each agency has a unique mission and service area. Table 1 summarizes salient figures relevant to each agency.

TABLE 1: TRANSIT AGENCY SERVICE SUMMARY

Transit Agency	Annual Ridership	Annual Operating Budget	Assets	Operates
King County Metro Transit (in 2013)	119 million trips	\$640 million	Buses	Buses, Light Rail, Streetcars, Commuter Rail
Sound Transit (in 2014)	30 million trips	\$220 million	Buses, Light Rail, Commuter Rail	Not Applicable (NA)
Community Transit (in 2013)	9 million trips	\$164 million	Buses	Buses
City of Seattle (in 2015)	2.7 million trips	\$9 million	Streetcars, Monorail	NA

KING COUNTY METRO TRANSIT

King County Metro Transit (commonly referred to as “Metro” or “KCM”) is the largest transit provider in Washington State. It operates over 200 routes with a fleet of diesel coaches, diesel-electric hybrid buses, and electric trolley buses. Metro provides both inter-city and intra-city transit service throughout King County and provides the majority of transit service to the City of Seattle. In addition to fixed-route bus service, Metro provides paratransit services, vanpool services, and light rail operations (funded through a contract with Sound Transit). Budgetary authority and oversight is provided by the nine-member King County Council.

Metro’s annual operating budget is about \$640 million with the largest portion – roughly half – funded from sales tax revenues collected within Metro’s service area. The second largest source of operating funds comes from passenger fares. Metro’s current one-zone peak adult fare is \$2.75 (last increased in March 15, 2015). Metro’s six-year (dated 2013 to 2018) capital improvement program identifies \$1.3 billion in projected spending funded from a mix of local, state, and federal sources.

SOUND TRANSIT

Sound Transit is a “regional transit authority” (RTA) formed and operating under Revised Code of Washington (RCW) Chapters 81.112 and 81.104. Its formal name is the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority. Sound Transit encompasses the urbanized areas of King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties (see map on page 3). This regional taxing district generally follows the urban growth boundaries created by each county in accordance with the state Growth Management Act and electoral precincts. Voter approval of “Sound Move” in 1996 authorized the agency to collect sales taxes, rental car sales taxes, and motor vehicle excise taxes (MVET). Sound Transit’s 2014 operating budget for regional transportation services was \$220 million.

As described next, Sound Transit plans, builds and operates light rail, commuter train services, and express buses that connect cities and towns with a regional transit network:

- Sound Transit’s light-rail high-capacity service, known as “Link Light Rail” currently runs from downtown Seattle to Sea-Tac Airport. Extensions from downtown Seattle to

Northgate, Redmond, and South King County are funded and under construction. A third round of service expansion, called Sound Transit 3 (ST3) is in the planning phase.

- Sounder commuter rail service operates between downtown Seattle and regional centers such as Everett and Tacoma. Sounder runs on freight tracks owned by the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway.
- Sound Transit Express Bus service operates between regional centers to provide network continuity.

Governance and oversight of Sound Transit is provided by an 18-member board appointed by the King County Executive. The Board includes three members from Snohomish County, ten from King County, and four from Pierce County. The State Transportation Department Secretary serves as an ex-officio member. Generally, the Mayor of Seattle and one or two Seattle City Councilmembers serve on the Sound Transit Board.



Figure 1: Sound Transit Boundaries

COMMUNITY TRANSIT

Community Transit (CT) is the public transit authority of Snohomish County, excluding the city of Everett. Established in 1976, it operates local transit bus, paratransit and vanpool services within Snohomish County, as well as commuter buses to downtown Seattle and the University of Washington campus. CT is publicly funded by sales taxes and fare box revenues paid by Snohomish County residents, and other subsidies, with an operating budget of \$164.3 million in 2013.

CITY OF SEATTLE

The City owns a number of transit assets including the Monorail and two streetcar lines. The City does not directly operate buses or streetcars, and is prohibited by state law from operating a light rail system. However, the City works closely with all transit providers to improve service within the city limits. SDOT leads the City's work on transit. The 2015 Adopted Budget established a new Transit Division within SDOT to implement the TMP and oversee contracts with transit providers.

SDOT subsidizes the operation of both streetcar service and some Metro bus routes. Federal and state grants, as well as other partnerships, help fund capital projects that enhance transit speed and reliability. Transit corridor improvements are also made with funds raised solely within the City, such as the Bridging the Gap levy approved by the voters in November 2006. Two other City transit investments, street cars and the monorail, are highlighted below.

The TMP identifies a long-term goal of establishing a network of streetcars. The City owns the South Lake Union streetcar and contracts with Metro to operate it. Table 2 provides a list of completed and planned streetcar lines and their current status:

TABLE 2: STREETCAR LINE STATUS SUMMARY - JANUARY 2015

Streetcar Line	Status
South Lake Union Streetcar	Operational since 2007.
First Hill Streetcar	Construction completed and awaiting fleet delivery in 2015.
Broadway Streetcar (Extension of First Hill Streetcar)	Planning and environmental review completed. Final design and construction not yet funded.
Center City Streetcar	Planning and environmental review completed. Final design and construction not yet funded.
Downtown to University District	Concept development only; other phases not yet funded.
Downtown to Ballard	Concept development only; other phases not yet funded.

The Seattle Center Monorail, which was built for the 1962 Seattle World's Fair, operates along 5th Avenue on a one-mile elevated guideway between Westlake Center and the Seattle Center. The Monorail carries approximately two million passengers annually, generating approximately \$900,000 in annual concession revenue for the City. It is owned by the City of Seattle and operated by a third-party concessionaire under a contract with the Seattle Center. The City

Council approved a new contract with Seattle Monorail Services (SMS) on December 15, 2014 with a term of up to 20 years ([Ordinance 124674](#)). The contract confers responsibility to SMS for day-to-day maintenance and fare collection. The City and SMS collaborate on major maintenance initiatives (typically defined as capitalized renovations or repair work that extends the useful life of an existing asset) and Council approval is required for all one-way adult fares exceeding \$4.00. The current one-way adult fare is \$2.75.

5. SEATTLE TRANSPORTATION BENEFIT DISTRICT

In 2010, the City Council passed [Ordinance 123397](#), which established a quasi-governmental municipal corporation known as the Seattle Transportation Benefit District (STBD). The boundaries of the STBD are the Seattle city limits, and its governing board is comprised of the entire City Council. According to the state statute, Transportation Benefit Districts have the authority to levy and impose various taxes and fees to generate revenue in support of transportation improvements within the district.

Ordinance 123397 established an annual \$20 Vehicle License Fee (VLF) to spend on transportation improvements within the City. In November 2014, STBD Proposition 1 was approved by Seattle voters. This ballot measure instructed the STBD to raise the VLF by \$60, to \$80 per year, and to increase the sales tax rate by 0.1 percent from 9.5 percent to 9.6 percent on retail purchases within the City of Seattle. The projected revenue from Proposition 1 is about \$45 million per year, and it must be spent on Metro service in Seattle or on creating a VLF rebate program for low-income households. The City Council adopted an agreement with Metro in February 2015 that outlined the additional service that will be provided by the STBD funding.

As noted in the following link, Appendix A summarizes recent transit policy and planning efforts that affect future transit service in Seattle.

[Appendix A: Plans and Policies Affecting Transit Service in Seattle](#)