

# 7 BEST PRACTICES

## Regional Governance of Transit

PORTLAND, SAN FRANCISCO, BOULDER, GERMANY, AND SWITZERLAND

### WHAT IS IT?

Quality transit services and supportive land uses are critical in meeting both local and regional goals. Local jurisdictions, counties and entire metropolitan areas rely on public transportation to address mobility, social equity, economic development, and environmental objectives. The planning for, funding of, and delivery of transit is often viewed differently by the local and regional bodies that make up a metropolitan area. Long-established governance structures have often evolved from outdated political, funding or demographic realities; however, since these structures control funding and decision making they can be very difficult to change. Since transit services often cross jurisdictional boundaries, transit governance tends to be more complicated, layered and nuanced than land use governance, for example. Furthermore, transit governance is often separated from other municipal transportation services (streets, pedestrian, and bicycle facilities), isolating decision making in a way that can be counterproductive to addressing broader land use, mobility, access, and equity goals. Transit governance in Seattle is unique in many ways. There is almost no local transit governance (Everett Transit and City of Seattle's South Lake Union streetcar are rare examples); transit is governed at the County level (King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties), except for Sound Transit, which acts as a stand-alone agency with its own governing board charged with managing regional rail and express bus service.



**In Portland, the region uses major transit investments as a key tool to catalyze land use and create great neighborhoods.**

Source: Nelson\Nygaard

### WHY DO IT?

Major changes to transit or transportation/land use governance structures are uncommon and typically only happen when there is strong incentive for change or a new funding authority allows opportunity for growth. However, minor policy adjustments to address funding or decision-making imbalance are more common. Likewise, new layers of governance are at times added to improve cross-agency coordination and improve the effectiveness of decision making. Since transit agency staffs and local jurisdictional staff work together frequently, they often have a strong understanding of the challenges or constraints faced by a city, region, or system. Common motivation at

the staff level is often too little to affect change since funding is usually tied to specific programs, geographies or service types. In an environment where staff level coordination yields little result in the board room or council chambers, staff can become disengaged or retreat to their area of influence. Action toward governance reform is often a matter of timing, requiring jurisdictions to act when political seating and funding conditions align (often a recession is a more powerful force toward change than times of economic strength). Lean economic times result in the need to prioritize and ensure equitable access to resources and services while making efficient use of available transit service and administrative staff.

The most important reason to consider governance reform should be quality of the end public service to the user, in this case transit services consumed by current or potential future users. In multi-agency transit environments there are great challenges to creating a set of services that hold together as a high-performing network with consistent information, wayfinding, tactile form, branding, fare policies, transfer requirements, accessibility policies and designs, etc. The development of the ORCA universal fare card is an example of a coordinated regional effort that benefits transit users who travel on multiple regional systems. However, many would also point to the duration of time in development, complexity, and limitations of this regional effort as a sign of the need for regional governance reform.



Portland has strived to integrate transit into the urban fabric. Here the streetcar winds through the Portland State University Urban Plaza.

Source: Nelson\Nygaard

## WHO IS DOING IT?

### Coordinated Regional Planning: Portland

TriMet provides bus, light rail and commuter rail service in the Portland metro area. The agency was formed in 1969 (previously Rose City Transit) after the Oregon Legislature passed House Bill 1808 allowing the creation of transit districts and providing them with the power to raise revenue through a payroll tax. TriMet's formation was, in part, an attempt to save transit in the Portland region at a time when Rose City Transit, the primary provider of transit, was facing bankruptcy and had threatened to cut all service. Shortly after the agency formed, the TriMet Board of Directors adopted a payroll tax to fund operations. Oregon has no sales tax, a common funding mechanism for transit agencies in other states. The agency is governed by a seven-member board of directors, appointed by the Governor of Oregon. Due in part to a long string of Democratic governors, the TriMet Board has seen relatively less controversy and divisiveness than other governing bodies with elected or appointed structures.

Metro, meanwhile, is an elected regional government with responsibility for planning. Metro serves as the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), but has substantially more legislative control than a typical MPO. Metro has control over regional land use, and uses an Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) and the 2040 Growth Concept, a regional transportation and land use plan developed in the 1990s and continually updated, to manage regional land use and development. Transportation and land use decisions at Metro are guided by a complex committee structure that includes representatives from all regional cities and

counties, as well as transportation providers including TriMet. To further the coordination of land use and transportation, Metro has control over planning for High Capacity Transit (HCT). HCT is formally defined in the Regional Transportation Plan as transit service operating in completely dedicated right-of-way with a high level of service quality and limited stop spacing. Metro's Corridor Planning Division has the primary responsibility of identifying future major transit corridor investments and working with the FTA, other federal regulatory agencies, TriMet, the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), and local jurisdictions to develop Alternatives Analyses and Environmental Impact Statements for major transit projects. Metro works in close partnership with TriMet, which often leads design work for light rail and other high capacity transit projects. The institutional capacity and relationships with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) that have been developed over the last two decades have been critical in the construction of over 52 miles of light rail and 14.7 miles of commuter rail transit.

This strong relationship with the FTA is boosted by having a limited set of agencies involved in all regional major transit investment projects. Portland is also respected by federal funding agencies for its ability to demonstrate a common regional vision and support for major projects. Continued advocacy for transit in the U.S. Congress and a willingness to innovate has helped Portland continue to be competitive for federal capital funding, even as national competition has increased.

In 2009, Metro (working with TriMet and all 26 regional cities and counties) developed a Regional High Capacity Transit System Plan. The intent of this effort was to build on the previous 1982 plan



Commuter's wait for MAX light rail train in downtown Portland under lighted shelters on the City's newly rebuilt transit mall.

Source: Nelson\Nygaard

by planning the next 30 years of expansion for the region's high capacity rail and bus transit network, as well as to set near-term priorities for corridor study and development. One outcome of this effort is most emblematic of how transit governance in the Portland metropolitan region is able to leverage a common land use vision to establish an effective, equitable decision making framework: the High Capacity Transit System Expansion Policy (SEP), adopted by Metro in 2009.

The SEP emphasizes fiscal responsibility by ensuring that limited resources for new HCT are spent in jurisdictions with supportive land uses, high quality pedestrian and bicycle access, management of parking resources, and demonstrated broad-based financial and political support. The purposes of the SEP are to: 1) provide a transparent process by which jurisdictions can work to advance their priorities for future HCT, and 2) establish quantitative and

qualitative targets by which to guide local land use and transportation planning and decision-making. The SEP also provides a process for prioritizing regional funding for HCT in a future Regional Transportation Plan using actions taken by local jurisdictions. The SEP's key objectives are to:

- Promote transit-supportive land uses in future HCT corridors
- Promote local policies that increase the value of future HCT investments (e.g., parking management, street design and connectivity, Transportation Demand Management, etc)
- Provide local jurisdictions with a fair and measurable process for developing and receiving funding for future HCT services
- Provide Metro with a tool to allocate limited planning resources to the most supportive, prepared communities
- Ensure that transit serves low income households

Measure	Description
Density of People	Current households and jobs per net acre within ½ mile of proposed transit corridor or stations
Density of Urban Living Infrastructure (ULI) Businesses*	Number of ULI Businesses within ½ mile of proposed transit corridor or stations
Transit Oriented Zoning	Assigning values to regional zoning classifications within ½ mile of
Average Block Size	Density of acres of blocks within ½ mile of proposed transit corridor or stations
Sidewalk Coverage	Completeness of sidewalk infrastructure within ½ mile of proposed transit corridor or stations
Bicycle Facility Coverage	Access to bicycle infrastructure measured as distance to nearest existing bicycle facility within ½ mile of proposed transit corridor or stations
Transit Frequency	Buses/trains per hour serving station area or corridor

\* Urban Living Infrastructure (ULI) is a term used for neighborhood businesses that support walkable and bikable trip making for basic needs. ULI businesses include grocery stores, dry cleaners, coffee shops, restaurants, convenience stores, etc.

In coordination with its Transit Oriented Development group, Metro's Land Use and Corridors divisions have developed a regional model to measure readiness of transit investments based on these objectives. The model measures land use and market factors at a spatial level equivalent to a one-minute walk. Jurisdictions that are not currently among the region's top priorities for transit investments can work with partner jurisdictions in a corridor to improve their standing. Progress is measured using this model and comparison to a baseline (2008) evaluation. The table on the previous page lists key quantitative areas of measurement. Other qualitative measures such as local funding availability, affordable housing potential, and political readiness are also considered.

### **Regional Coordination of Local Transit Services: Germany and Switzerland**

A *verkehrsverbund*, or VV, is a governance model common in Germany and Switzerland. In some ways, VVs are similar to U.S. Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs): they are regional planning bodies that provide capital and some operating funding to local transit operators. However, VVs are stronger in other, key ways: they are able to coordinate and integrate fares and schedules, so that transfers between different operators are as seamless as possible. Transit vehicles operated by local providers may also carry the VV's branding, so that service provided by dozens of different operators appears, from the customer perspective, as though it were provided by a single entity.

In his book *The Transit Metropolis*, University of California, Berkeley professor Robert Cervero summarized the role of VVs in this way: "These umbrella organizations ensure that problems that

commonly plague regional transit services—such as fare penalties for transferring, conflicting timetables, and interagency rivalries—are eliminated."

Munich's *Munchener Verkehrs-und Tarif-Verbund*, or MVV, is governed by an executive board including state and local representatives. The board sets service and fare policies (such as maximum headways), and it approves budgets. Day-to-day administration, however, is left to a management board consisting of staff from individual operators. This board sets actual timetables, fare zone boundaries, work rules and contract terms, and is responsible for marketing. Individual operators effectively function as contract operators, responsible for actual delivery of service.

Zurich's *Zürcher Verkehrsverbund*, or ZVV, coordinates service provided by more than 40 individual operators, including public agencies and private companies. Its governing Cantonal Transport Board sets minimum service standards, such as connectivity requirements, and it sets maximum budgets. It collects revenues, then distributes them to operators based on a reimbursement system that takes into account the amount of service provided as well as performance criteria. The ZVV is said to have a "watchdog role"—it manages a competitive bidding process for provision of some services. Within two years of the ZVV's establishment and introduction of a single regional fare structure in 1990, ridership on feeder buses had increased by 53%.

The potential for application of the VV model to American cities would depend to a great extent on the degree to which localities were willing to surrender control over service planning. While a board including local representatives could set policy, and while managers of local agencies could jointly

maintain control over details of the implementation of those policies, ultimately, routes, schedules and fares would be set at the regional level. The VV model can be considered a structure that combines important efficiencies of a single regional transit provider with elements of local control.

### **Local/Regional Collaboration: Boulder, Colorado**

The City of Boulder, Colorado has implemented a number of measures to increase the level and quality of transit service available to its residents above and beyond what the area's Regional Transportation District, or RTD, is able to provide, and the partnership between Boulder and RTD might serve as a model for such regional/local cooperation.

The partnership between Boulder and RTD is based on two primary components: the Community Transit Network (CTN) and the Eco Pass program.



**The HOP service is one of 7 branded bus routes operating at high frequencies in Boulder.**

Source: Nelson\Nygaard

The CTN is a network of seven local bus routes that is operated primarily by RTD, but that is subsidized by the City. RTD provides a baseline level of service to each city and county in its service area based on existing ridership levels; in Boulder it provides both regional and local service. Starting in the early 1990s, however, the City made a decision to pay for additional service on select local routes to offer its residents a citywide network serving major destinations with “walk-up” headways of 10 minutes or less. The intent was to attract more “choice” riders and mitigate negative impacts of parking development. Or, as GO Boulder planner Cris Jones explains: “The City gives money for a more marketable service model. It’s not based on current use, but on our ability to sell to people who aren’t using transit.” Since the early 1990s, the average number of daily transit boardings in Boulder has increased from less than 20,000 to nearly 35,000 in 2009. Drive-alone mode share has decreased by 15%, and the number of vehicle miles traveled has remained relatively constant.

Boulder provides its share of CTN funding from a local sales tax measure. Several of the CTN routes were launched using federal grants supplemented with local matches. Boulder County and the University of Colorado-Boulder (CU-Boulder), both through its administrative budget and through student fees, also contribute funding. One of the CTN routes, the HOP (other branded routes include the SKIP, JUMP, and LEAP), is managed by the City, which “pays a premium,” as Jones put it, for a dedicated fleet of vehicles with amenities including automated stop announcements.

The Eco Pass program is a regional universal pass initiative. Boulder, however, provides significant subsidies—up to 50% in the first year for a neighborhood

or company that has just joined, and permanent subsidies of 25 to 30% for participating neighborhoods. (Eco Passes for downtown employees are funded by an improvement district using parking revenues, further incentivizing transit use.) The success of the program has been remarkable. More than 67,000 of those who live, work or go to school in Boulder—a city of just 100,000 people—are now Eco Pass holders, and since CU students joined the predecessor to the Eco Pass program in 1991, the number of annual transit trips taken by students has increased nearly tenfold.

Finally, the city’s transportation sales tax also pays for capital improvements, including shelters, and for marketing of the city’s transit services.



**In Boulder, the City and local business groups have worked together to ensure that public parking and transit are well integrated, helping to promote a “park once” environment and creating one of the most pedestrian friendly downtowns in the country.**

Source: Nelson\Nygaard



**Local bus services in Boulder are operated by the Regional Transit District (RTD), but have a distinct look and feel from RTD buses such as this one show in Denver,**

Source: Nelson\Nygaard



**The DASH is another of the branded route services in Boulder.**

Source: Nelson\Nygaard

