

Seattle Department of Transportation

2022 RECOVERY CARD ANALYSIS & REPORT



Seattle
Department of
Transportation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our community is healthier and happier when people are able to get to where they need to go, no matter their life circumstances. Responses from the participants of the Recovery Card Program, a transit subsidy program targeting workers in priority equity neighborhoods, have shown how transit permeates decision-making and travel patterns on a daily basis.

Recovery Card Program participants have made it abundantly clear that the program and decreased cost to public transit have positive effects on their livelihoods beyond work commutes. While the level of impact varies by participant, it seems that regardless of location, car ownership status, and income, the Recovery Card Program has helped program participants connect with their communities. The following report details the impact of the Recovery Card Program in 2022 as detailed by a user survey and ridership information. We conclude the report with ideas for further exploration.

BACKGROUND

Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) launched the Recovery Card Program in June 2021 to support essential workers and small businesses as they recovered from the pandemic. The program is led by the Transportation Access Programs (TAP) team and fully funded by the Seattle Transit Measure (STM), a voter-approved sales tax that funds transit service and access for low-income and under-resourced communities. Food service and grocery workers of small businesses in Pioneer Square and the Chinatown-International District (CID) were offered temporary, fully-subsidized ORCA cards, and eligibility was extended to Othello and Rainier Beach businesses in May 2022 on a rolling basis. These neighborhoods were selected based on SDOT's original COVID prioritization exercise (known as Recovery with Sustainable and Equitable Transportation, or ReSET).

The Recovery Card Program currently hosts **2,289 participants working for 215 unique businesses** and continues to be extremely popular with participants; **monthly ridership has soared to a staggering 56,745 rides since the expansion in May 2022, saving cardholders a total of \$138,743 per month**, or \$60.61 per person per month, to be used on other life expenses.

We surveyed 281 Recovery Card Program participants in December 2022 about the vital role the program plays in their daily lives. Four key themes emerged from these responses. Participants reported that the program has been key for:

1. Keeping and finding job opportunities
2. Increasing access to transit and community
3. Encouraging modeshift to transit among participants with access to a vehicle
4. Helping participants afford living in the region

Participants have also provided dozens of anonymous quotes and stories about the impact the Recovery Card Program has had on their lives. Some of these quotes appear in the sections below in green and underscore the emergent themes of the survey.

SURVEY METHODS

All Recovery Card Program participants are asked to provide their phone number and email address at the point of registration so SDOT could contact participants for future surveys. Participants were notified of the program extension (through August 31, 2023) and invited to fill out our survey through text and email. Messages and the survey were sent out in one of the nine available languages that the participant indicated they preferred at the point of registration (English, Spanish, simplified Chinese, traditional Chinese, Vietnamese, Oromo, Amharic, Tigrinya, or Somali); if no language was selected, or if their preferred language was not offered, the message and survey link was sent in English. The survey was administered online through SurveyMonkey.

All survey respondents work at least one job in CID, Pioneer Square, Othello, or Rainier Beach. In order to better determine where these workers live and how far they may need to travel for work, we asked respondents to provide the zipcode of their home address. Of the 239 respondents who opted to provide that information, the most common zipcodes, listed below, were clustered around central and south Seattle. Other zipcodes provided tended to represent neighborhoods south of Seattle like Kent, White Center, and Bryn Mawr-Skyway.

- 98118 (Columbia City, Rainier Valley, South Beacon Hill)
 - 48 responses/ 20% of total
- 98108 (South Seattle, Beacon Hill, Georgetown, South Park)
 - 35 responses/ 15% of total
- 98104 (Downtown, First Hill, Chinatown International District, Pioneer Square)
 - 31 responses/ 13% of total
- 98144 (Atlantic, Judkins Park, North Beacon Hill, Mount Baker)
 - 23 responses/ 10% of total

Most respondents identified as people of color, with 75% of survey respondents identifying as Asian or Pacific Islander, a figure in line with the voluntarily provided demographics of Recovery Card Program participants upon registration.

What race or ethnicity do you identify as? Select all that apply.

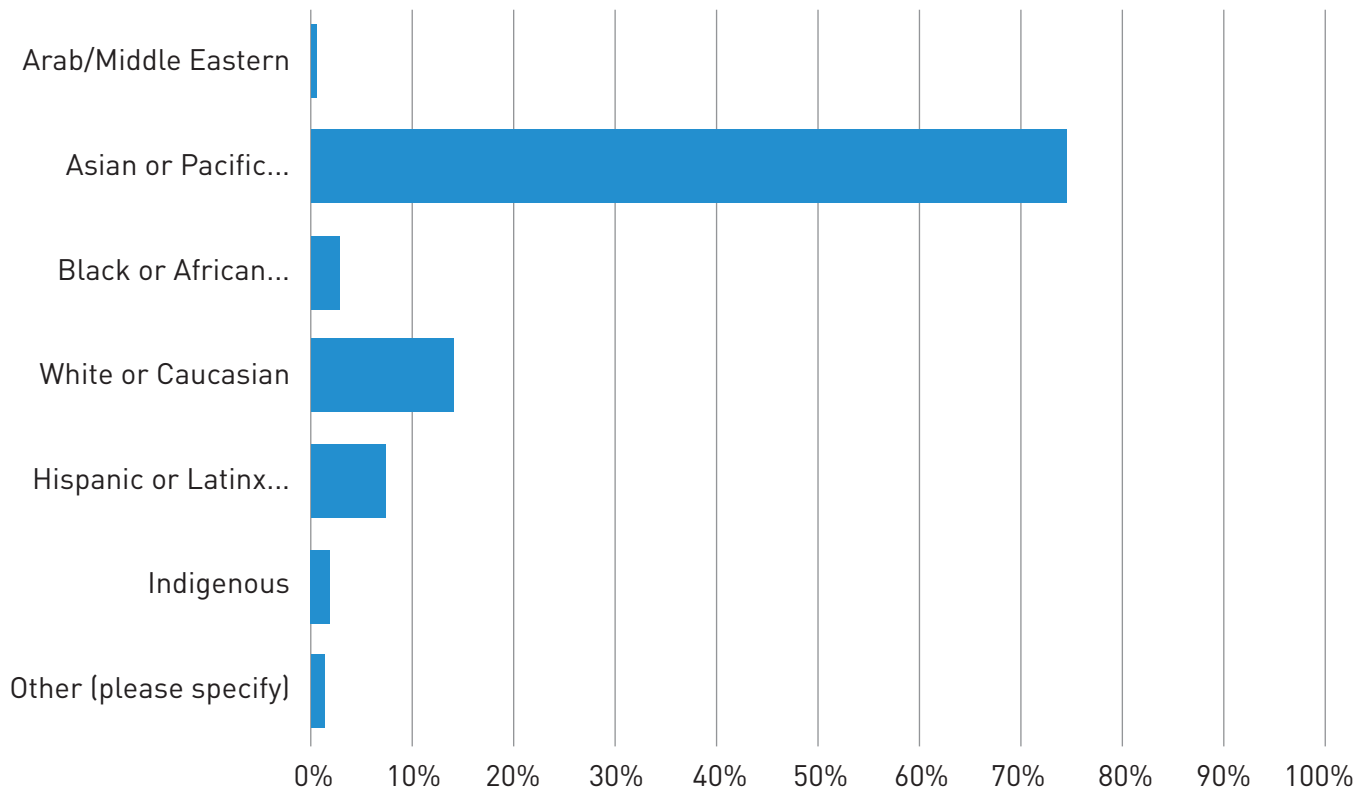


Figure 1. Racial demographics of survey respondents

Survey respondents also tended to be low income, with 37.3% with household incomes of \$25,000 or less and 45.9% with household incomes between \$25,001 and \$50,000. These figures align with the voluntarily provided demographics of Recovery Card Program participants upon registration.

What is your household income?

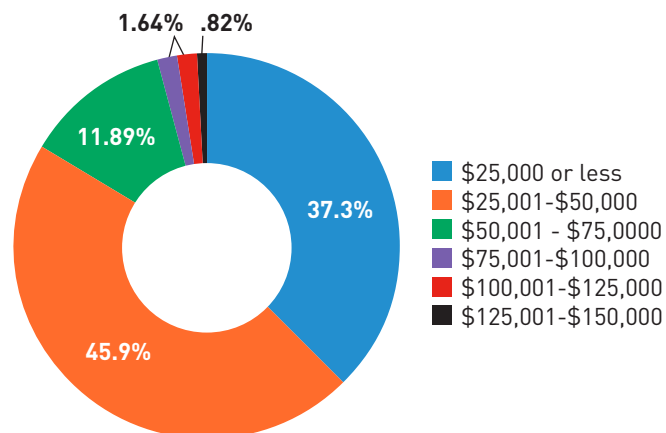


Figure 2. Household income of survey respondents

KEY THEMES

THEME ONE

THE RECOVERY CARD PROGRAM HAS HELPED WORKERS GET TO THEIR JOBS

“The Recovery card has allowed me to continue front line work in an incredibly volatile economy. Transit costs can be burdensome, so I am very thankful to SDOT for removing this barrier!”

—Recovery Card Participant

“The Recovery Card Program is a great program that benefits people. It facilitates my daily commute to a great extent. Also met my other life needs like doctor visits and other welfare offices. This program saves me a lot of transportation expenses and helps me get more job opportunities.”

—Recovery Card Participant

The Recovery Card Program is meeting its original intention of supporting essential workers and small businesses as they recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only did survey respondents report that the Recovery card made it easier for them to commute to work, they also reported relying on public transit for their commutes. In fact, **88.4% of survey respondents reported using their Recovery cards for their commutes to work (Table 1)**, and **89.1% strongly agreed or agreed that they relied on taking public transit to work (Table 2)**.

Where did you use your ORCA Recovery Card to travel to during the last two weeks? Select all that apply.

Destination	Respondent type		
	All respondents	Car-free respondents (44.6% of all respondents)	Respondents with access to a car (55.4% of all respondents)
Work	88.4%	93.3%	85.1%
Home	77.8%	76.7%	82.4%
Grocery stores	52.1%	61.7%	44.6%
Shopping centers and businesses	41.9%	47.5%	39.9%
Restaurants	35.6%	40.1%	31.8%
Medical appointments	37%	44.2%	31.1%
Homes of friends and family	34.2%	40%	31%
Parks and museums	23.6%	29.2%	21%
Schools and classes	17.3%	15.8%	19.6%
Social services	14.8%	20%	12.2%
Airport	13.4%	13.3%	13.5%
Religious centers	3.9%	5%	3.4%

Table 1. Recovery card use by destination, with breakdown by car access status

How did Recovery Card Participants use their ORCA cards?			
Respondents said they...	Respondent type		
	All respondents	Car-free respondents (44.6% of all respondents)	Respondents with access to a car (55.4% of all respondents)
Used their Recovery cards 3x or more a week	84.7%	88.7%	81.6%
Used their cards to commute to work	88.4%	93.3%	85.1%
Strongly agree or agree that they take transit more often now that they have a Recovery card	95%	97.5%	92.6%
Strongly agree or agree that they rely on public transit to get to work	89.1%	93.3%	86.6%
Strongly agree or agree that they rely on public transit to get to non-work related areas of daily life (i.e. grocery stores, medical appointments, etc.)	85.9%	90.8%	83.1%
Strongly agree or agree that they rely on public transit to get to places of leisure (i.e. parks, homes of friends and family)	81.1%	88.1%	75%

Table 2. General Recovery card use, with breakdown by car access status

When asked what types of employer-provided transportation benefits they'd be interested in, survey respondents expressed enthusiasm for continued support accessing transit. Among public transit benefits, respondents were most interested in a fully subsidized transit card (as opposed to a partial subsidy or fixed monthly amount), with 81.8% being extremely or very interested in a fully subsidized option. What was surprising, however, was that **respondents favored a full transit subsidy over other types of benefits**, such as subsidized parking (50.0%), additional pay (63.7%), or a micromobility subsidy (33.3%). This was true even for survey respondents with access to a vehicle, where 72.3% of respondents with vehicle access were extremely or very interested in fully subsidized transit while only 57.3% were extremely or very interested in subsidized parking.

Most importantly, cardholders and business managers have shared stories and quotes with us about how the cards have been helpful in getting to work and keeping jobs. Employees told us that the cards have made commutes less stressful and have supplemented wages to help folks keep jobs. Meanwhile, managers and business owners said it has helped hire and retain staff by making commutes easier, cheaper, and more reliable.

“The use of the Recovery card was so beneficial to me and my cafe staff during a time of financial uncertainty and provided stability for my staff.”

—Recovery Card Participant

“This program helped me when I couldn't ride my bike to work. It also helps us hire downtown. Driving is not really possible when working downtown in jobs that don't provide [parking], so it makes commuting a real option.”

—Recovery Card Participant

THEME TWO

THE RECOVERY CARD PROGRAM CONTINUES TO SEE ROBUST USE AND POPULARITY BEYOND THE WORKPLACE, EXPANDING ACCESS TO TRANSIT AND COMMUNITY

“You don’t know how much this program has helped me out. When I first got the Recovery card, I was close to having to shut off my phone (which I needed for work). Covering my transit costs has allowed me to keep my job and pay my bills. Having a card that is cross agency has also allowed me to see more of my friends and family that live in neighboring counties. Thank you so much!”

—Recovery Card Participant

With fully subsidized, unlimited rides on transit, participants found increased access to transit and ways to connect with community. The Recovery Card Program sees the highest ridership of all STM-funded TAP programs, even when compared to pre-COVID ridership rates. A staggering **93% of survey respondents say they take transit more often now they have the Recovery card, with 85% saying they take transit 3 times or more a week.** Program participants are using their cards to take transit a lot, and this access to transit has influenced how much participants are able to connect with their communities.



Table 1 in the section above overviews how program participants use their Recovery cards. Notably, even respondents with access to a car heavily relied on transit to access activities in their daily life. The Recovery Card Program primarily supports low-income workers, with 88.4% reporting they use the card in their work commute. However, program participants use their cards for far more than just work commutes. 85.9% of respondents said they also relied on public transit to get to non-work areas of daily life and 81.1% relied on it to get to places of leisure. More specifically, respondents used their cards to go home (77.8%), grocery stores (52.1%), shopping centers and businesses (41.9%), medical appointments (37%), restaurants (35.6%), homes of friends and family (34.2%), parks and museums (23.6%), school or classes (17.3%), and social services (14.8%). **By removing the cost-barrier of transit, the growth of the Recovery Card Program has helped more people explore and participate in their communities.**

The effect of the Recovery card on transit access and community participation is illuminated further when comparing participant responses about their transit behavior at registration, before they received their Recovery cards, and at the time of the survey, several months or years after they've had access to a Recovery card (depending on when they received their card). Seeing as participants volunteered to complete the mid-year survey, and all participants were required to complete the registration, the groups are not wholly comparable. Nonetheless, the shift in responses, as detailed below, still illuminates an increase in ridership and perception of transit even among a population that already can be considered frequent transit riders.

Thinking about your current travel habits, please mark how much you agree with the following statements.		
	<i>At time of registration (% strongly agree or agree)</i>	<i>December 2022 survey (% strongly agree or agree)</i>
Public transit is affordable for me	40.2%	N/A*
It is easy to travel to and from work	64.5%	91.3%
I use public transit to get to work	80.2%	86.6%
I use public transit to get to non-work-related areas of daily life	75.6%	83.1%
I use public transit to get to places of leisure	72.6%	75%
Public transit is my preferred transportation option	72.3%	81.1%
I take transit more often now that I have a Recovery card	N/A	92.6%

*We did not ask about transit affordability in the December 2022 as all respondents were receiving fully subsidized transit and not paying for public transit use.

Table 3. Perception of public transit before and after receiving the Recovery card

Agency	Boardings	Percent of boardings	Dollars saved by participants
Community Transit	10,757	1.76%	\$32,924.25
Everett Transit	652	0.11%	\$1,296.00
King County Metro	449,575	73.58%	\$1,118,763.25
Kitsap Transit	88	0.01%	\$256.00
Pierce Transit	1,702	0.28%	\$3,202.00
Sound Transit	148,250	24.26%	\$392,532.75

*Agency breakdown of rides not available for January 2022

Table 4. Breakdown of rides by service agency from February 2022 to December 2022*

The Recovery Card Program has also facilitated travel beyond the boundaries of Seattle. Unsurprisingly, use of King County Metro services eclipses that of other transit agencies, but transit services in other counties still play a large role in program participants' lives. This matches with anecdotes we heard from some participants where they us that they enjoyed exploring other places, visiting friends and families, or simply live outside of King County. The table below accounts for the ridership behavior of all program participants from February 2022 through December 2022.

The Recovery Card Program and transit itself are clearly popular among program participants. The Recovery Card Program has met its original business-oriented goal in supporting essential workers and small businesses, and it is evident that the impact of the program on its participants touches almost every aspect of their lives. Improving access to transit and community are key outcomes of this successful program.

“My first use of my card was to attend a Mariners game—that we won! We were on a path to the playoffs for the first time in decades! And I got a cool transit pin and T-shirt!”

—Recovery Card Participant

THEME THREE

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE DRIVERS HAVE TURNED TO TRANSIT MORE OFTEN

“Having this card has drastically cut down on how much I’m driving and spending on the bus fare out of pocket. It’s transformed the way I navigate the city!” -Recovery Card Participant
“Reducing costs have encouraged me to explore commuting options without hesitation.”

—Recovery Card Participant

An exciting pattern we’re seeing with the Recovery Card Program is that it is directly contributing to the City’s climate justice goals to curb greenhouse gas emissions in transportation by encouraging mode shift, specifically the City’s efforts to make nine out of ten trips carbon-neutral by 2030. Not all Recovery Card Program participants have access to a car, but the ones that do use public transit more after receiving a Recovery card. 55.4% of survey respondents have access to a vehicle, with 34.5% of those respondents owning their own vehicle and 65.2% sharing one with a household member.

Despite having access to a car, cardholders with access to vehicles still often chose to take transit to areas of daily life. Table 1 in the section above describes how **86.1% drivers used their Recovery cards at least 3 times per week**, and Table 3 shows that **92.6% strongly agreed or agreed that they take transit more often now that they have a Recovery card**. These percentages rival those of car-free survey respondents. Table 2 (see above) lays out how important transit and Recovery cards were for drivers in getting around. Drivers still took transit to work (85.1%), home (82.4%), grocery stores (44.6%), and more. While car-free cardholders use their cards more than drivers, SDOT was excited to see that drivers still chose transit to access all parts of their daily lives when it was made easier for them.

Do you own or have access to a car?

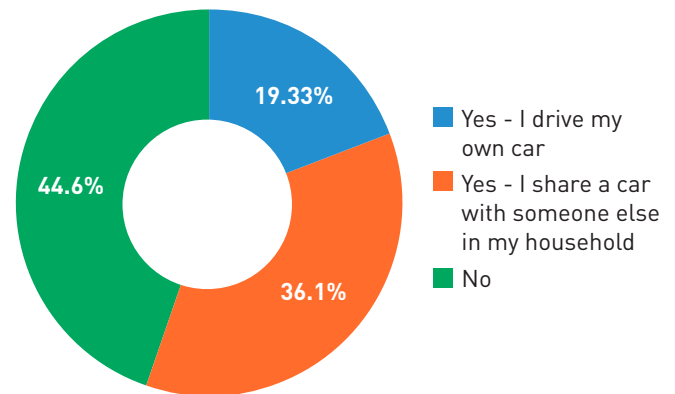


Figure 3. Breakdown of respondents’ level of access to a vehicle



If you do not or rarely use your ORCA Recovery card, why? Select all that apply.			
Reason for transit avoidance	Respondent type		
	All respondents	Car-free respondents (44.6% of all respondents)	Respondents with access to a car (55.4% of all respondents)
I do not live near a transit line	22.7%	13.3%	27.7%
Transit does not take me to where I need to go	31.8%	26.7%	35.7%
Transit is too slow	10.1%	9.3%	11.6%
Transit unreliable	4%	4%	4.5%
I feel unsafe at transit stops	22.2%	20%	23.2%
I feel unsafe riding transit	12.6%	13.3%	13.4%
I am worried about getting sick on transit	11.1%	12%	11.6%
I don't know which transit line to take	4.6%	4%	5.4%
I have to make too many transfers	20.7%	24%	18.8%
I do not enjoy taking transit	2.5%	2.7%	2.7%
It is easier to drive	8.6%	1.3%	14.3%
It is easier to bike or walk	6.6%	6.7%	6.3%
I am physically unable to ride or comfortably ride transit	5.6%	9.3%	3.6%

Table 5. Reasons for transit avoidance, with breakdown by car access status

Even more surprisingly, driver respondents were more likely to have an ORCA card prior to enrolling in the Recovery Card Program (77.1%) than those who do not have access to a car (62.4%). In fact, when asked why they would not choose transit, it did not appear that drivers preferred driving. In fact, **only 14.3% of these respondents said that they preferred driving.** Folks with vehicles tended not to take transit because of connectivity and safety issues, with 35.7% saying that transit doesn't take them to where they need to go, 27.7% saying they don't live near a transit line, and 23.2% saying they feel unsafe at transit stops.

“Having convenient and reliable public transit is how we can make an impact now on connecting neighborhoods, making a positive impact on climate change, and giving a better quality of life for anyone with access. Better infrastructure makes a better city.”

—Recovery Card Participant

“The ORCA Recovery card is a great way to fight traffic and unnecessary insurance troubles and be environment-friendly at the same time.”

—Recovery Card Participant

THEME FOUR

MONEY SAVED FROM THE PROGRAM HAS SUPPLEMENTED ESSENTIAL WORKER WAGES

“The daily cost of transit can seem small and unremarkable until that cost is taken care of for a period of time and the financial benefits start becoming increasingly apparent. This has been an amazing program that I feel very fortunate to be able to take advantage of.”

—Recovery Card Participant

“I’m extremely grateful about this program and it has saved me a ton of money in transportation to get to and from work which really helped offset the costs of living in Seattle.”

—Recovery Card Participant

83.2% of all survey respondents reported an annual household income of \$50,000 or less. Respondents without access to vehicle tended to have lower incomes than their car owning counterparts. This is detailed in the table below.

Respondents have indicated that the financial savings from the Recovery Card Program have made tangible differences in their livelihoods. While other discounted ORCA programs may be available for Seattleites, the savings benefit of the Recovery card is unmatched by almost all other fare subsidy programs. Many program participants may also not qualify for these programs; for example, the ORCA LIFT reduced fare program asks that applicants make under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level – individuals who work full time, like many of the Recovery Card Program participants, earn too much to qualify, even if they are paid minimum wage.

Between May 2022 when the extension was launched and December 2022, Recovery cardholders saved a combined total of \$1,109,945 to use on other areas of their daily lives. Many survey respondents also voluntarily provided comment that the card has alleviated a significant burden for them as cost of living has risen and that the certainty of transit has relieved stress.

Household income	Car access status		
	<i>Do not have access to a car</i>	<i>Share a car with a household member</i>	<i>Drive their own car</i>
\$25,000 or less	50%	27.6%	23.4%
\$25,001 - \$50,000	38%	54%	51.1%
\$50,001 or more	12%	18.4%	25.5%

Table 6. Survey respondent household income by car access status



“It is a big help. My income isn’t low enough to get some help from the government, [but I’m] still low income. I’m in my 50s [and am] working to support myself. This ORCA Recovery card gives me peace of mind. Thank you.”

—Recovery Card Participant

“Before the Recovery Card Program I was paying full price for transit and it was a struggle to budget for on a food service salary. Unexpectedly, I got into this program through my employer during COVID and it’s made my life financially stress free and traveling around the city so much easier, all thanks to this program. I’m very grateful to have been a participant in it.”

—Recovery Card Participant

CONCLUSION

Benefits of the Recovery Card Program extend beyond commuting to and from work. In part due to its overwhelmingly positive impact, this program has been extended till May 31, 2024.

The results of this survey also highlight several points worth further exploration by SDOT.

- **Helping small businesses create employee transit benefits**

- The results from ridership data and surveying align with research that employee transit subsidies are a powerful tool in helping employees get to work. Employee transit benefits

tend to be offered to highly paid office workers, but the Recovery Card Program demonstrates the need and desire of transit benefits for lower-income workers who must, by nature of their work, be present onsite. Unsurprisingly, Recovery Card Program participants that had lower household incomes were also less likely to have access to a vehicle, suggesting that they are also more likely to be transit-reliant. We hope to explore additional ways to increase access to subsidized transit for more low-income essential workers in the future.



- **Transit service for more than office commutes and “peak” hours**

- Transit agencies have historically ramped up service frequencies at peak commute hours, generally 3 hours in the morning and 3 hours in the afternoon. Peak hour transit is focused on the needs of workers that work traditional office hours and demand is helped by the fact that congestion and parking during these times incentives transit ridership.
- Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, transit planners had begun to focus on improving all-day service in recognition of a variety of travel needs that diverse groups have throughout the week and that lasting mode shift away from single-occupancy vehicles requires consistent and high frequency transit. Seattle’s Transit Master Plan called for an all-day frequent transit network as early as 2012.
- Since the COVID -19 pandemic, demand for peak hour service dropped off substantially while transit use midday, evenings, and weekends remained strong. This underlines the importance of all-day frequent transit service.

- Recovery Card Program participants’ riding habits provides further evidence that transit is essential for community connections that occur at all hours of the day, every day. Furthermore, due to the nature of their jobs, it is highly likely that many program participants do not commute during the standard, 9-5, Monday through Friday “peak” hours that transit planning tends to favor. As local transit agencies recovery from the COVID pandemic, there is an opportunity to rebuilt transit networks so as to prioritize all-day frequent service. This reflects the varied needs of people in Seattle and aligns with SDOT’s equity goals. In general, a high- frequency, all-day transit network could reduce the burden of transfers and feeling that transit is unable to take people where they need to go when they need or want it.

- **Shifting unhappy car drivers to transit**

- Results from this survey also highlight the potential to shift single-occupancy vehicle (SOV) users to transit. Recovery Card Program survey takers who had access to cars were still heavy transit users and indicated it is the lack of efficient transit options that push them to vehicle use, not an inherent preference for driving. Drivers who drive out of necessity rather than choice are an undertapped transit rider population that SDOT should explore in the future. Further exploring and addressing this issue may contribute to the City’s climate and equity goals.

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