Travel Mode: Trend of Reduced Driving Continues

Across the Puget Sound region, more people are taking transit and walking, while driving and riding in personal vehicles is decreasing. This trend is amplified in the densest urban areas and most regional growth centers, and strongest among younger residents.

Since 1999, the share of people using personal vehicles to travel has been decreasing steadily, while walking and transit use have been rising. For all trip purposes, single-occupant vehicle (SOV) shares decreased from 48% of trips in 1999, to 44% by 2006, and continued downward to around 42% by 2014, as shown in Figure 1. Meanwhile, the number of shared personal vehicle (HOV) trips also decreased slightly from 2006 to 2014, indicating that personal vehicle trips continued a downward trend since at least 1999. This is a significant change in behavior, especially since the region added 645,000 new residents between 1999 and 2014.

The shift away from personal vehicles has largely been to transit and walking. Transit share jumped from about 2.5% to 4% between 1999 and 2006, and has continued to grow just past 4% in 2014. Increased walking shares could be a result of more concentrated urban growth in the past 15 years, which allows access to more activities and destinations by foot. Some of this change might be caused by new surveying methods,* though, so it’s challenging to parse out all the reasons behind this reported increase.

Mode Shares to Regional Growth Centers

While travel modes have changed noticeably across the region in the past 15 years, the most dramatic changes are seen for trips to designated Regional Growth Centers. Figure 2 compares mode shares in 2006 to 2014 for trips ending in some selected centers (those with enough survey samples for a statistically significant comparison).

* The 2014 Household Travel Survey was the first web-based survey conducted by PSRC, which provided much more guidance on logging short, often overlooked walk trips. The online form was careful to remind respondents to log all their walk trips, and likely captured more of these short trips than would have been recorded from past survey methods.

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Figure 2 suggests that nearly all of these large centers have seen substantial shifts from personal vehicles to transit, walking, and other modes (which includes bicycling). The largest drops in SOV and HOV shares occurred in Seattle’s South Lake Union, Capitol Hill/First Hill, Downtown, and in Redmond’s Overlake and Downtown neighborhoods. These results indicate personal vehicle shares to South Lake Union were cut in half between 2006 and 2014, while transit share increased by 50% and walking shares more than tripled. This change seems to reflect the boom of office, retail, and housing in the area within the past decade.

Mode Shares by Age

The most significant decreases in auto use (SOV and HOV combined) between 2006 and 2014 were among younger travelers. As seen in Figure 3, ages 18-24 saw the largest drop from over 85% auto trip share in 2006 to around 70% auto in 2014 (for all trip purposes). Those aged 25-34 saw auto modes decrease to around 74% over the same time as well. The trend is less pronounced for other age groups, but no age group experienced increases in auto shares between 2006 and 2014. The mode share changes for those 35 and older trend toward reduced auto shares, but the differences are slight and may be explained by a greater number of surveyed walk trips skewing comparisons across survey years rather than a significant reduction in driving for these age groups.

Summary

Results from the latest travel survey indicate that trends started in or before 1999 are continuing at a similar pace. Across the Puget Sound region, more trips are being taken by transit, on foot, and other sources, while driving and riding in personal vehicles is decreasing. This trend is amplified in the densest urban areas and most regional growth centers. Since 1999, the region has seen a substantial shift away from SOV shares to transit, though driving and riding in passenger vehicles is still the primary way that people get around the region.

As cities and counties in the region expect continued population and employment growth, they face limited options to increase roadway capacity, and many are looking to local and regional transit improvements and active transportation opportunities (walking and biking) to serve new travel demand. The trends shown here clearly reflect a shift away from an auto-oriented transportation system, though the change has been and will likely continue to be gradual over the years as land-use patterns mature and new transportation infrastructure is developed.

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