

PSRC Transit Access Assessment

Summary of Interviews with Local Elected Officials

12/11/2014

Overview

The Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) is conducting a transit access assessment to identify transit access needs throughout the region and identify potential recommendations to incorporate into the next update of Transportation 2040. This assessment is meant to build off a variety of ongoing and overlapping transit access studies occurring in the region, and the work is guided by a working group composed of transit agency and local jurisdiction staff from the four-county region.

To better understand local needs, perceptions, and challenges related to transit access, and to ground ourselves in what policy- and decision-makers actually think about the topic, PSRC conducted 14 interviews with local elected officials from across the region. Interviewees were encouraged to invite their jurisdictions' public works, economic development, and planning staff to provide additional context and perspective on transit access. Please see Attachment 1 and Attachment 2 for the list of local elected officials interviewed and the protocol used to conduct these interviews.

This document summarizes the key findings and themes from these interviews and does so by the headings under which questions were asked. These interviews, in conjunction with a literature/best practices reviews and input from the transit access working group, will help to define the key characteristics related to transit access (and particularly transit access to major sites of transit service, i.e. transit centers, park and rides, ferry terminals, etc.) and will inform PSRC's ongoing transit access assessment.

A note about context

These interviews were conducted between August and October of 2014 and were influenced by events occurring during this time period. Most notably, there was a fair amount of activity regarding reductions in King County Metro service, which influenced the interviews that occurred with every elected official from King County. In addition, King County Executive and Sound Transit Board Chair Dow Constantine released *Getting there together*, a transit integration report to identify "opportunities to realize efficiencies, achieve savings and ultimately deliver better transit service." Finally, because five of those interviewed are Sound Transit Board members, the activity associated with the update of the Sound Transit Long-Range Plan had an effect on several of these conversations.

The role of transit in your community

Interviewees were asked to describe the role or function of transit in their community and how they see it changing over the next several years. Key findings from these questions include the following:

- Beyond the crucial function of getting people where they need to go, respondents indicated the importance of transit for those who rely on it to get around the region as well as a primary commuting option for many in the region.

- Several respondents also noted that transit will have to do more to meet the needs of a growing region, particularly because expanding freeway and arterial capacity is limited for geographic, financial, and environmental reasons.
- The positive relationship between access to transit service and economic development was mentioned by multiple respondents as well.

Transit access in your community

Characteristics of transit access

Interviewees were asked to reflect on what good access to transit means to them and to describe what they consider the key characteristics that define good access to transit. Key findings from these questions include the following:

- **Proximity:** being close to transit, with one respondent defining proximity as a 5-7 minute trip no matter the mode used to arrive to a transit stop or station.
- **Frequency:** that transit comes often enough such that riders do not have to wait long to begin their trip.
- **Reliability:** that transit consistently gets riders where they need to go, in a timely manner, and does not get stuck in traffic.
- **Convenience:** that the routes available serve destinations where people want to go.
- **The transit environment:** that where people wait for transit is sheltered from the weather, safe, clean, well-lit, and dignified.
- **Technology:** information (such as OneBusAway and digital reader boards) is publicized so that riders know about the trip they are trying to take.
- **Certainty:** specific to Metro's service reductions in that there was some concern whether routes would continue to exist.

Places with good transit access

Interviewees were asked to name places in their communities that have particularly good access to transit. Key findings from this question include the following:

- **Older urban form.** Neighborhoods with an older urban form (e.g. smaller blocks, grid streets, etc.) were cited as places with good access. Those mentioned were often downtown areas with existing transit hubs.
- **Proximity to high-quality transit.** Not surprisingly, places near major sites of transit service or high-frequency corridors were noted as having good access to transit.

- **Existence of supportive infrastructure.** Sidewalks seem to be a necessary, but not sufficient, feature of good transit access. The existence of other supportive infrastructure (bike lanes and off-street trails, feeder bus service) was also noted.

Places with poor transit access

Interviewees were asked to name places in their communities that have poorer access to transit. Key findings from this question include the following:

- **Suburban development patterns.** As one respondent noted, “We’re continuing to deal with 50 years of development policies that let sprawl occur.” Respondents typically mentioned some combination of low densities, single use areas, limited internal access and circulation, and a road network connected by high-volume, high-speed arterials as contributing to poor transit access.
- **Chokepoints.** Places that restrict the easy flow of traffic reduce transit access, particularly as it relates to travel time reliability.

Improvements that would increase transit access

Interviewees were asked to name the types of improvements that they believe would increase transit access in their communities. Key findings from this question include the following:

- **Transit service.** Additional routes or existing routes that ran at a greater frequency were often cited.
- **Nonmotorized connections.** The absence of sidewalks and/or bike facilities connecting to major sites of transit service was frequently mentioned.
- **Parking capacity.** Additional parking supply, particularly in places with lower intensity land use, poorer nonmotorized connections, and places with oversubscribed park and rides, was cited as an improvement for transit access.
- **The transit environment.** Creating places that are sheltered, well-lit, safe, and dignified was seen as a way of improving transit access.
- **Improved internal circulation.** Creating additional connections within communities—both new streets and new nonmotorized connections—is perceived as making it easier for people to get to transit.
- **The land use-transportation connection.** Several respondents noted that implementing local land use plans that create greater compatibility between transit and land use will improve transit access.

Barriers to improving transit access

Interviewees were asked to identify the major barriers to transit access and what local jurisdictions could do to improve access. Key findings from this question include the following:

- **Resources.** Fundamentally, an overall lack of time and money makes it incredibly difficult to remove existing barriers.

- **Land use.** Many interviewees stated that their jurisdictions are creating comprehensive and land use plans that will lead to more transit accessible places, but that implementing these plans will take time.
- **Education, culture, and credibility.** Many noted that some amount of culture change would have to occur for some of the region’s residents to want to ride transit, and that the credibility of some of the region’s agencies can make the education of transit’s value proposition difficult.
- **Lack of certainty.** Considering that these interviews were conducted when many King County jurisdictions were anticipating significant transit service reductions, interviewees noted that the lack of certainty around even current levels of service resulted in barriers for the timing of capital improvements and uncertainty regarding the viability of land use plans that depended on certain assumptions of transit service.

Resolving transit access challenges

Who pays for transit access investments

Respondents were asked to identify who is primarily responsible—local jurisdictions or transit agencies, specifically—for funding investments that improve transit access as well as the investments that required partnerships.

The following were identified as primarily the role of local jurisdictions:

- Land use planning
- Sidewalks

The following were identified as primarily the role of transit agencies:

- Transit service
- Operations and maintenance related to the deployment of transit service

The following were identified as requiring active partnerships between local jurisdictions and transit agencies:

- Service changes and the impacts of new developments on transit service and operation
- Improvements that will explicitly benefit transit operation (e.g. transit-only lanes)
- Externalities resulting from transit improvements (e.g. expansion of a park and ride that brings riders from a wider catchment area than the jurisdiction it is located within)

Additionally, several respondents noted the challenges associated with funding siloes and that “the color of money” can exacerbate existing challenges, specifically where funding might exist but is not allowed to cover the types of improvements that may increase transit access.

Working together

Interviewees were asked to describe how they worked with the transit agencies serving their jurisdictions. For the most part and particularly at the staff level, good working relationships were described. Additional takeaways include:

- **Scale matters.** The relative size of the transit agency and the number of jurisdictions served seems to influence the extent to which the perception of active and engaged coordination that takes place.
- **King County Metro.** Though acknowledging that staff-to-staff coordination does occur, several King County interviewees indicated that improvements could be made in how King County Metro interfaces with local jurisdictions. One respondent indicated that their jurisdiction would appreciate greater transparency with respect to Metro’s service planning decisions, while another indicated that Metro could work more closely with local jurisdiction staff.

The priority of transit access

Considering the existing environment facing transit in the region—the recent history of service reductions, the inherent volatility of sales tax as a revenue source, the possibility of Sound Transit system expansion—the transit access working group wanted to know the priority that local elected officials assigned to transit access specifically. Respondents were asked to consider the importance of transit access in the midst of the other issues currently facing transit in the region. Key findings from this question include:

- **Access as a secondary concern.** Most respondents noted that access issues are secondary to the overarching funding and planning issues facing transit and that until those are resolved, transit access would be a subordinate concern.
- **Access as a primary concern.** That said, it was also noted that if people cannot access existing transit systems and networks then people will not use transit and that, therefore, improving access is as important as these other issues.
- **Context matters.** In a region with multiple transit agencies serving multiple markets, the context in which transit operates is important. For certain parts of the region, there is less uncertainty and therefore greater willingness and ability to address access head on whereas in other parts of the region, other issues predominate before access.

Attachment 1

List of Persons Interviewed

City of Mountlake Terrace. Councilmember Kyoko Matsumoto Wright, with Arlene Fisher, City Manager and Steve Osguthorpe, Community and Economic Development Manager. Interview conducted on August 14, 2014.

City of Kirkland. Mayor Amy Walen, with Councilmember Jay Arnold, Kurt Triplett, City Manager, David Godfrey, Transportation Engineering Manager, and Eric Shields, Director of Planning. Interview conducted on August 18, 2014.

City of Seattle. Councilmember Mike O'Brien. Interview conducted on August 20, 2014.

City of Issaquah. Mayor Fred Butler, with Andrea Lehner, Economic Development Manager. Interview conducted on August 21, 2014.

City of Sumner. Mayor Dave Enslow, with John Galle, City Manager and Paul Rogerson, Community Development Director. Interview conducted on August 25, 2014.

City of Auburn. Mayor Nancy Backus, with Michael Hursh, Director of Administration and Kevin Snyder, Community Development and Public Works Director. Interview conducted on August 26, 2014.

City of Marysville. Mayor John Nehring, with Gloria Hirashima, Chief Administrative Officer and Kevin Nielsen, Public Works Director. Interview conducted on August 26, 2014.

Kitsap County. Commissioner Rob Gelder, with Jonathan Brand, Assistant Public Works Director/County Engineer, John Clauson, Executive Director of Kitsap Transit, Larry Keeton, Community Development Director, and John Powers, Executive Director of the Kitsap Economic Development Alliance. Interview conducted on September 4, 2014.

Pierce County. Executive Pat McCarthy, with Brian Ziegler, Director of Public Works and Utilities, Ryan Dicks, Sustainability Manager, and Keri Rooney, Executive Director External Affairs. Interview conducted on September 5, 2014.

City of Tacoma. Councilmember Lauren Walker, with Alisa O'Hanlon, Government Relations Coordinator. Interview conducted on September 9, 2014.

City of Everett. Councilmember Paul Roberts. Interview conducted on September 17, 2014.

Snohomish County. Councilmember Terry Ryan, with June DeVoll, Manager of Strategic Planning and Grants at Community Transit. Interview conducted on September 17, 2014.

King County. Councilmember Rod Dembowski, with Elizabeth Evans, Legislative Aide. Interview conducted on September 18, 2014.

City of Poulsbo. Mayor Becky Erickson. Interview conducted on October 10, 2014.

Attachment 2 Interview Protocol

Interview Purpose. The purpose of this interview is to help PSRC staff and the Transit Access Working Group better understand local perceptions, challenges, and opportunities relating to transit access in the region. Interview findings will help inform the Working Group's understanding of key characteristics of transit access within and across the region and influence an assessment of transit access needs across the region.

Role of transit in your community

- What do you see as the function or role of transit in your community?
- How do you see this changing over the next several years?

Transit access in your community

- What does access to transit mean to you?
- What would you say are the key characteristics that make someone have good access to transit?
- Can you think of specific places or neighborhoods in your jurisdiction that have really good access to transit? What about some places with poorer access to transit?
- Thinking about your jurisdiction, what types of improvements do you think would increase access to transit?
- What do you see as the major barriers for access to transit in your community, and what can local jurisdictions do to improve transit access?

How to resolve access challenges in your community

- In thinking about what might increase access to transit, what investments should be the responsibility of transit agencies to provide and what investments should be the responsibility of local jurisdictions to provide?
- When thinking about the role of transit in your community and the ways in which transit service could be improved, how important is transit access and investments that improve transit access within this larger context?
- Describe how you currently work with your transit agency, specifically around coordination for service delivery, transit agency needs, and impending developments that may affect the need for/access to transit in your community.