



Puget Sound Regional Council



2022 TRANSIT INTEGRATION REPORT

2022 Transit Integration Report | November 2022

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Introduction

The 2022 Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) Transit Integration Report documents transit coordination activities over the last year in the central Puget Sound region.

The goal of this report is to share information with elected officials and the public, highlighting coordination successes, ongoing work and challenges, and emerging opportunities for future coordination. Successful transit integration requires coordination not only among public transportation providers, but also with local jurisdictions, state and county governments, and other partners in the region.

The Transit Integration Report also fulfills the reporting requirements of RCW 25.58.2796(2) (a), which requires the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) to develop an annual report summarizing the status of public transportation system coordination in and between counties with a population of 700,000 or more that border Puget Sound (King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties).

There are six policy areas the state law requires the report to address. Icons will be used to indicate where these topics are addressed throughout the report:



Integrating marketing efforts



Aligning fare structures



Integrating service planning



Coordinating long-range planning, including capital projects planning and implementation



Integrating other administrative functions and internal business processes as appropriate



Integrating certain customer-focused tools and initiatives

The report also provides updates on projects the state funds through the Transit Coordination grant program. Funding levels for the competitive grant program vary from one budget cycle to the next. With the passage of Move Ahead Washington, \$1 million was allocated to fund projects for the 2022–2023 fiscal year.

The 2022 Transit Integration Report focuses on themes of transit agencies working together to leverage new financial resources, continuing to improve the customer experience through new fare options and free rides for youth, and rebuilding ridership from pandemic levels by tackling shared planning and operations challenges.

Leveraging New Resources and Continuing Ongoing Coordination

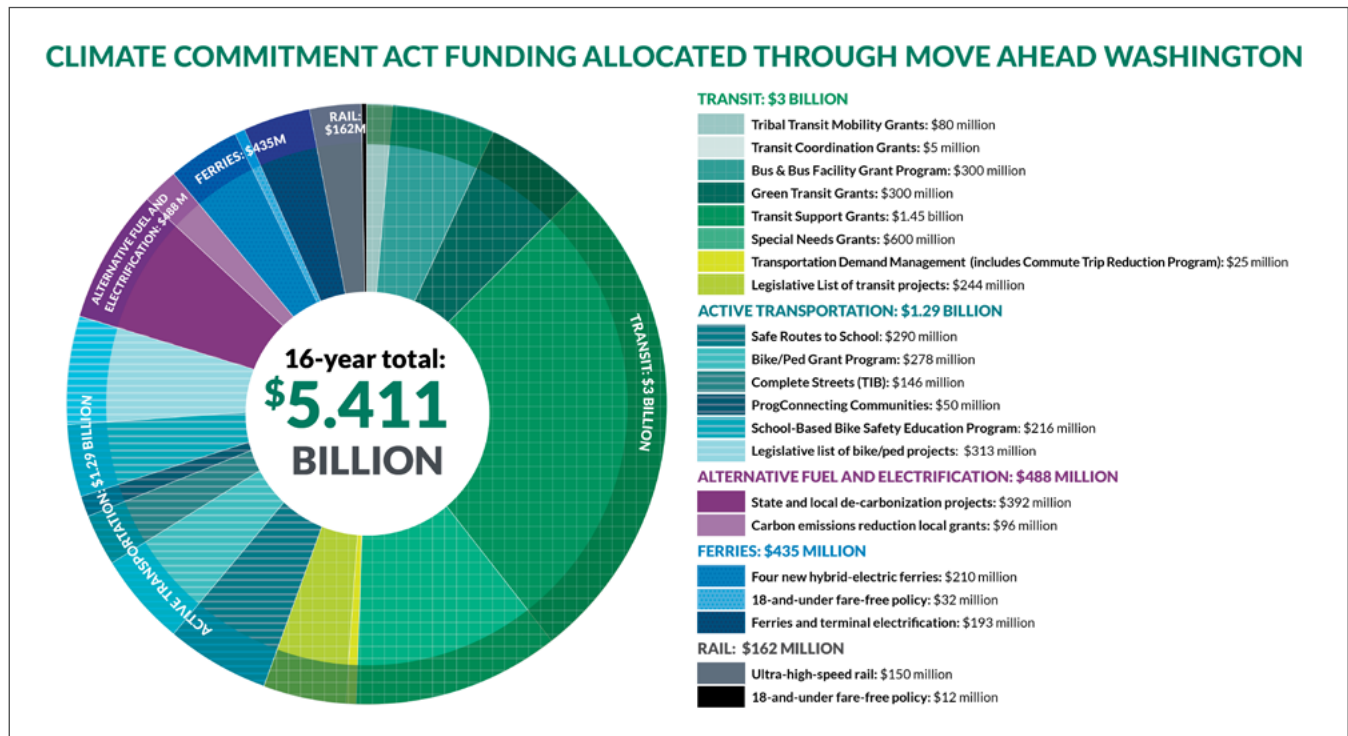
The passage of major infrastructure and transportation funding packages over the last year has created opportunities for further investment in transit projects and services in the central Puget Sound region. Transit agencies are coordinating on how to leverage newly available resources and continuing their ongoing coordination efforts to ensure both system and administrative efficiency.



Move Ahead Washington Creates Opportunities to Advance Transit in the Region

The last year has marked some major investments in infrastructure and transportation, creating new funding opportunities for transit. At the federal level, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law was signed into law in November 2021, providing a five-year reauthorization of Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration formula funding as well as increases to several competitive grant programs and the introduction of some new grant programs. As details of these new programs continue to emerge the region is exploring how to take advantage of these opportunities to further support transit in our communities.

At the end of its 2022 session, the Washington State Legislature passed the first state transportation funding package since Connecting Washington (2015). Move Ahead Washington (Move Ahead WA) provides nearly \$17 billion in total transportation funding over the next 16 years, with some funds becoming available as early as the 2022–2023 Fiscal Year. Included in that \$17 billion is \$3 billion for public transportation as well as historic investments in climate change mitigation, preservation and maintenance, and safety.



Move Ahead WA revived the Transit Coordination grant program, which had previously expired at the end of the 2020–2021 Fiscal Year. Five million dollars was allocated to the competitive grant program over the next 16 years. In June, WSDOT awarded \$1 million total to two projects for the 2022–2023 Fiscal Year.

\$500,000 to Community Transit, with Everett Transit as a partner, to explore merging service delivery across the two agencies in the Everett area. (See next story for more details.)

\$500,000 to King County Metro, along with six partner agencies (City of Seattle, Community Transit, Everett Transit, Kitsap Transit, Pierce Transit, and Sound Transit), to integrate marketing efforts around the new Free Youth Transit Pass and other ORCA fare products. The agencies worked together over the last several months to ensure consistent messaging in outreach and education strategies. Outreach targeted youth and families to build awareness of the Free Youth Transit Pass and provide education on how to access and use the region's transit services. (More information on the Free Youth Transit Pass is provided later in this report.) These grant funds will also be used to coordinate access to ORCA products to facilitate regional access across partner agencies.

The \$1 million allocated to these two projects needs to be spent by June 30, 2023. Updates on these projects will be included in the 2023 Transit Integration Report.



Community Transit and Everett Transit Studying Opportunities to Merge Services

Sound Transit will be extending Link light rail to Snohomish County in phases beginning in a few years, with the ST3 system plan completing a fully connected north-south light rail spine from Everett to Tacoma by the late 2030s. Community Transit and Everett Transit are partnering to design robust local networks that will create more access to light rail and other high-capacity transit for more residents, maximizing the impact of these investments. Long-range planning for these future networks led to discussion of how to provide the best service to Snohomish County residents and maximize efficiency.



In 2019 the Everett City Council initiated an evaluation of transit services provided by Everett Transit. As part of this evaluation, the city held a series of workshops (ReThink Transit) from 2019 to 2021 to explore three options for the future of transit service delivery in Everett: 1) Status Quo/No Change, 2) Growth, and 3) Growth Through Consolidation. Community Transit provided technical support for this work, including conceptual development of the Growth Through Consolidation option, which proposed consolidation of Community Transit and Everett Transit.

Public input from the ReThink Transit engagement indicated strong support for improved transit service, with a preference for growth through either Scenario 2 or Scenario 3. However, there were many questions about the details of consolidating the two agencies and what that would look like for customers. In June 2021 the Everett City Council called for a study to further develop the Growth through Consolidation option to answer those questions. Everett Transit and Community Transit are working together to design and conduct the study of a fully integrated public transit network for Snohomish County. As part of this process Community Transit and Everett Transit applied for and received a FY 2022–2023 Transit Coordination Grant from the state to support the study.

The Transit Consolidation Study aims to define a mutually agreeable integration plan for Everett Transit to join Community Transit's Public Transportation Benefit Area (PTBA) with enough detail for the Everett City Council to make an informed decision on how to proceed. The study will include research, service planning scenarios, performance analysis and ridership forecasting, and public outreach.

The study team plans to present the findings to Everett City Council and the Community Transit Board in the 2nd quarter of 2023. These findings will inform Everett City Council's consideration of a potential ballot measure, which would ask Everett voters to decide whether Everett should join the Community Transit PTBA. Joining the PTBA would effectively consolidate the two agencies, creating one Snohomish County transit agency with a consistent sales tax rate to fund transit operations.

An update on the study outcomes will be included in the 2023 Transit Integration Report.





Agencies Continue Coordinating on Service Planning for System Expansion

Transit agencies in the region regularly coordinate on service planning, operations, and shared facilities. As the region continues to expand its transit infrastructure and services, this coordination is increasingly important, with more customers transferring between high-capacity transit and local service to complete a single trip.

“Link Connections” Engagement Efforts

The 2021 Transit Integration Report described the North Link Connections coordination effort between King County Metro, Sound Transit, the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), and Community Transit. One of several “Link Connections” mobility projects, North Link Connections reconfigured bus networks around the October 2021 opening of the U District, Roosevelt, and Northgate Link light rail stations in Seattle.

Several of the three transit agencies’ bus routes that had some overlap with new and existing Link service were evaluated and altered to end at a new light rail station, minimizing duplicative service and freeing up resources to improve or expand other local bus service. Truncating bus routes at Link stations may require customers to transfer, but it also provides customers with faster, more reliable service in a dedicated right-of-way for at least part of their trip.

This planning model of reevaluating and redesigning service around new high-capacity transit station openings continued this year. Currently Sound Transit and King County Metro are co-leading East Link Connections to design an efficient and integrated bus-rail network on the Eastside in conjunction with the opening of 12 new Link stations between Seattle and Redmond in the next few years. Lynnwood Link Connections, a collaboration between King County Metro, Sound Transit, and Community Transit, is also underway to address changing mobility in northwest King County and southwest Snohomish County as Link extends to Lynnwood and new stations open. SDOT and the City of Shoreline are also partners on the Lynnwood Link Connections project.

The “Link Connections” mobility projects are multi-phase and begin at least a few years in advance of planned station openings, starting with a needs assessment and then utilizing extensive community engagement and direction from sub-area mobility boards to inform the development of service concepts and a draft service proposal.

The proposal is then refined through further engagement before it is considered by the local transit governing board(s) and Sound Transit Board. King County Metro and their partners are also taking this opportunity to improve mobility for priority populations, including un(der) served populations, and to engage current and potential customers proactively and equitably in the planning process.

2024 Service Network for Snohomish County

In addition to partnering on the Lynnwood Link Connections project, Community Transit undertook a more comprehensive network update in preparation for the first Link stations in Snohomish County. After extensive surveying of people who live and work within the Community Transit service area, the agency designed a draft 2024 service network, which was released for public comment in May 2022.

Community Transit received over 750 responses on the network and individual routes. Staff refined the network based on this feedback and performed a service equity analysis to evaluate the impacts of potential service changes on minority and low-income populations. The proposed network includes existing service tiers, like Swift Bus Rapid Transit and local bus, and replaces the agency's existing commuter service with new Express service to light rail stations in Snohomish County.

Community Transit is also coordinating with King County Metro to explore new Express service markets from east Snohomish County to east King County destinations like Kirkland and Bellevue. The 2024 service network will be considered for approval by the Community Transit Board in early 2023.

Evaluating and Improving the User Experience

One measure of successful coordination is how seamless or easy the user experience is—especially for trips that require transfers between modes and/or providers. Coordination is critical to ensuring the full trip—from planning to fare payment to first- and last-mile connections—is convenient, time efficient, and affordable to serve existing customers and attract new riders.



New ORCA Cards, Card Readers, and Retail Locations Continue Improvements to Regional Fare System

Since the introduction of One Regional Card for All (ORCA) in 2009, the region's transit agencies have worked together to continually improve the integrated fare card, providing customers a contactless cash-free fare payment option with free transfers between agencies and multiple pass options. ORCA can be used to pay for trips on Community Transit, Everett Transit, King County Metro, Kitsap Transit, Pierce Transit, Sound Transit, Washington State Ferries, and the Seattle Streetcar and Monorail. Sound Transit reports there are over a million ORCA cards in circulation and 68% of trips in the region were paid for with an ORCA card in 2019.



2022 marked several major milestones in the implementation of the phased suite of improvements formerly known as “next generation ORCA.” (See pages 12–13 of the [2021 Transit Integration Report](#) for more details on the origins of next gen ORCA.) In the spring the new website (myorca.com) was launched as well as the first mobile app for managing customer accounts. These new interfaces allow customers to add funds more easily to their cards, and the new technology makes those funds immediately available without the lag time of the previous system.

Transition to the new system required a brief outage for the update, which occurred May 14–15. The changeover weekend was fare-free across all transit agencies in the region to accommodate the system updates and mitigate the inconvenience to riders. Customers were also required to re-register their ORCA cards and create a new account to manage their balance and passes on the website or app.

Transit agencies also began the process of replacing the 6,000+ card readers on vehicles and at high-capacity transit stations (bus rapid transit, light rail), including the ticket/card vending machines at light rail stations. After a few months of transition, the new card readers display the expiration time for making a free transfer as well as either the remaining card balance or pass expiration date, depending on the product.

In the fall, the new ORCA rollout moved to the next phase—the number of retail stores where ORCA cards can be purchased and reloaded began expanding, more than doubling the 135 existing locations throughout the region. New pharmacies, grocery stores, convenience stores, and local markets are joining the network so more people can purchase or reload ORCA closer to where they live, work, or travel. The myORCA app and website feature an interactive map for locating participating retailers.

Transit agencies worked together extensively to ensure coordinated messaging and marketing efforts around these major system transitions. Still ahead are plans to launch a “tap by phone” pay option in 2023. The new card readers installed this year are compatible with this technology, whereas the former card readers were not.

“Tap by phone” will allow a customer to create an account and purchase fare products on their phone through the myORCA app (rather than the current Ticket GO app), foregoing a physical ORCA card altogether, if they choose. By scanning rather than simply showing the operator or fare ambassador the Ticket GO virtual ticket, the accuracy of collected ridership data could also improve.



Regional ORCA Operations Team



Agencies Work Together to Implement Free Youth Transit Pass by State Deadline



One of the policy priorities advanced in the Move Ahead WA transportation funding package passed in March was eliminating transit fares for young people. A condition on about half of the almost \$3 billion of funds allocated to transit over 16 years was that transit agencies were only eligible if they adopted a zero-fare-for-youth policy by October 1, 2022. This left agencies with less than six months to develop and implement a strategy.

Transit agencies in the region responded quickly to meet this deadline by working on coordinated marketing and messaging, implementation timelines, and operational logistics (e.g., age verification and privacy protections, counting trips when no fare is collected without adding time to the passenger boarding process, ensuring equitable access and enforcement).

It was critical to create a simple and consistent policy across the region that would be easily understood by youth. The Mobility Partnership Marketing Committee worked together to develop shared terminology and messaging around the initiative, adopting the term Free Youth Transit Pass. The Mobility Partnership Fare Committee met weekly to explore the operational adjustments needed to implement a fare policy change on a short timeline. The general approach agreed to across agencies in the region was: Any person aged 18 or younger can ride transit for free beginning on a set date. Riders aged 13 and older are encouraged to either show the driver their current student ID (middle school or high school) or tap their Youth ORCA Card if they already have one. Cards issued during the 2021-2022 academic year will continue working through June 30, 2023. Agencies also discussed contingency policies in response to ORCA card backorders as well as transit operator education and communication strategies to ensure consistency.

The Free Youth Transit Pass initiative is designed to make transit more affordable for families with children, get young people familiar and comfortable with riding transit so they are more likely to use transit as adults, and expand access to education, extracurricular, and job opportunities for young people.

The new policy for young riders took effect at most of the region's transit agencies on September 1, though Everett Transit began even earlier on July 1 and Washington State Ferries and Amtrak launched their initiatives on October 1. Transit agencies are continuing to refine the logistics of the Free Youth Transit Pass to streamline boarding and simplify the program for customers. In 2023 agencies will continue distributing ORCA cards to students and exploring options like a "smart" sticker that can be tapped on transit card readers or creating a smartphone tap option.



One-Call/One-Click Customer Tool Development Continues

[The 2021 Transit Integration Report](#) (see pages 15-16) shared an exciting new collaboration to improve the transit customer experience by providing a centralized trip planning and ride requesting service that includes not only fixed-route transit services (bus, rail, or ferry), but also demand-response services provided by a transit agency, a human services provider, or a private nonprofit entity. This effort to develop a One-Call/One-Click system for the region is being led by Hopelink Mobility Management and King County Mobility Coalition with participation from providers in King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties.

The project has progressed since last year's report. In March 2022 the project team held a Rider Profiles Workshop that brought vendors from around the world to share how they do this work and how implementers coordinate on this work within our region. Over the summer the project team continued working with partners on data collection. Currently there are at least five GTFS-Flex feeds (a data format that captures service details for demand response services) ready for use in testing. The project team began testing the One-Click Trip Planner this fall ahead of a soft launch planned for December.

Addressing Shared Challenges Together to Rebuild Ridership

Rebuilding ridership from pandemic levels requires transit agencies to adapt to new and growing challenges, including growing the workforce to achieve pre-pandemic service levels, fulfilling expansion plans, and rebuilding customer confidence in transit (reliability, safety, and security). All agencies in the region are experiencing similar challenges and are working in new ways to collaborate and coordinate to overcome those challenges.



Mobility Partnership Launches Committee Structure to Improve Regional Coordination

The region's transit agency executives have been meeting on a regular basis for decades. In 2019, leaders representing eight transit agencies, WSDOT, and PSRC formalized their ongoing executive-level collaboration in a charter document for the Mobility Partnership. The charter identifies a leadership mission statement and objectives to provide a network of travel options that make it easier for people to get from where they are to where they want to go and provide mobility solutions that are easy to use and improve the customer experience across the region.



In the fall of 2021, the Mobility Partnership inventoried all the spaces where coordination was occurring between multiple transit agencies in the region. This inventory identified a robust network of interagency staff that meet regularly and coordinate between agencies. However, the Partnership recognized a need for formal communication between agency leaders as well as the interagency staff groups to ensure all agencies are included and streamline the process.

The Mobility Partnership adopted a new staff-level committee structure focused on key objectives to deliver and integrate transit across the region, support seamless customer service, improve equitable access to transit, and coordinate and communicate across agencies. The committee structure consists of five groups formed to address issues of regional importance:

- Diversity, Equity and Social Justice
- Regional Marketing
- Passenger Experience
- Service Planning/Integration
- Fare Policy

The Mobility Partnership authorized creation of these groups with relevant staff representatives from every agency invited to participate in their respective committees. Each committee was also assigned a staff lead to organize ongoing meetings and regularly report to the executive-level Mobility Partnership. Leads were assigned to distribute opportunity and ensure no single agency was intentionally or inadvertently dominating leadership roles.

Each committee worked to develop priorities for collaboration from among a diverse (and sometimes overlapping) set of topics. The Mobility Partnership provided input and approved a set of priorities, and then began work on some of the higher priority topics. 2022 has been focused on standing up these committees and getting them started on substantial issues of common interest like operator shortages and safety and security. As committees work with the Mobility Partnership to address these issues, they may be highlighted in future transit integration reports. Work to implement the Free Youth Transit Pass in accordance with Move Ahead WA was also a highlight of 2022, with extensive coordination work by the Regional Marketing and Fare Policy groups. See the story in Section 2 of this report for details.



Workforce Shortages Create Service Delivery Challenges Across Region

As the region's transit system continues rebounding from the initial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic there are still challenges to fully restoring service to 2019 levels and keeping up with planned system expansion. Perhaps the greatest challenge to service restoration is a shortage of transit operators across modes and agencies.

Even with enough vehicles and operating funds to run more frequent service and/or longer hours of service, if there are not enough operators to provide that service, it cannot be implemented. This has created challenges for agencies across the region, and the Mobility Partnership of transit agency leadership has identified this as a major priority for their coordination work, moving forward.

In response, agencies have been directing their marketing and human resources functions to develop robust recruitment plans in the hopes of building up the workforce. Though there are multiple agencies operating in the region, the transit network is regional and interdependent in nature, designed for local transit services to provide important connections to high-capacity transit, including light rail, commuter rail, ferries, and bus rapid transit. Additionally, local transit partners Community Transit, King County Metro, and Pierce Transit operate Sound Transit's ST Express bus service, and King County Rail operates Link light rail. Thus, it is of mutual interest for the agencies to work together to rebuild the operator workforce.

Most of the agencies have reported challenges in delivering their local scheduled service and contracted regional service, having to make difficult decisions daily to identify which scheduled trips can be cancelled to minimize customer impacts when there are operator absences or vehicle availability issues.

Several agencies "right-sized" their schedules for the Fall 2022 service change to match workforce availability more closely. Washington State Ferries has been operating on an off-season reduced scheduled indefinitely and has still had to cancel some trips. The reduced schedule strategy helps set customer expectations for reliably delivering scheduled service (even if it is fewer trips) rather than having to consistently cancel trips day-to-day and minimizes over-use of the on-call operator system, creating more predictable work schedules for operators.

To jointly address this challenge, several coordinated recruitment efforts were implemented this year. Pierce Transit and Sound Transit worked together to evaluate their contracted service agreement to set route and service level priorities as well as pool resources to launch a recruitment campaign over the summer.

King County Metro, King County Rail Division, and Sound Transit also worked together on refining operator recruitment strategies. Historically Link operators have been primarily recruited from King County Metro's bus operator workforce. Given the shortage of operators, a broader net has been cast to recruit Link operators from outside that existing workforce. (Extensive training on rail operations is standard for all new hires, whether they have previously operated bus service or not.)

The region is not alone in this challenge, with transit agencies across the country reporting workforce shortages. Continued coordination and collaboration are critical to addressing the need for more operators, particularly as the region continues working toward an expanded transit network.

Conclusion

This year's Transit Integration Report highlights ongoing successes and challenges that transit agencies in the region experience as they plan and implement a robust high-capacity transit system that covers the region and seamlessly connects passengers from local destinations to regional hubs.

As we look forward to 2023 and beyond, transit agencies in the region must continue working together to address ongoing issues of mutual interest and seek opportunities to coordinate, particularly public-facing functions, to create a seamless experience for transit customers. Themes that will continue to be monitored and addressed in future transit integration reports include:

- Ensuring a safe and secure environment for transit customers,
- Attracting and retaining sufficient transit workforce to ensure reliable service,
- Delivering timely expansion of an integrated high-capacity transit system,
- Building new markets for transit service,
- Incorporating equity into transit planning and service delivery, and
- Advancing electrification of transit infrastructure and fleet to support environmental and climate goals.

