

Connecting the Dots for Regional Transportation

*Qualitative Insights from
King County Residents*

Winter 2021/2022



Introduction

In December 2021, The Vida Agency hosted five (5) virtual focus groups, one in each county served by the Puget Sound Regional Council (Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, and King), and one focused on young adults (ages 18-25). We aimed to explore the needs of individuals using our regional transportation system, particularly related to how residents would prefer to get around if improvements were made in the right places.

Participants represented a variety of backgrounds, experiences, access needs, and socio-economics:

- They live in suburban environments (50%), urban environments (33%), and rural environments (4%).
- Most (80%) have lived in Washington state for more than five years.
- Five (5) people noted that they, or someone living in their household, has impaired vision, hearing, or mobility.
- Nearly a third (30%) live in a household with children under the age of 18 years old.
- A third (33%) have a current household income of less than \$40,000 a year, and most (73%) have a household income under \$80,000.
- Many participants indicated they are mixed-race, with 46% indicating White, 40% indicating Black, and several indicating Hispanic/Latino (3), Indigenous/First People of the Americas (2), East Asian (1), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (1).
- Over half were women/transgender women (60%), 36% were men, and one was non-binary.
- Most (83%) were under 45 years of age, with 23% between 18-25.
- Almost all (90%) speak English as their primary language at home, with a few indicating they speak Spanish or Ethiopian (1 each).

Key Findings

The draft 2022 Regional Transportation Plan aims to ensure that our region has “a sustainable, equitable, affordable, safe, and efficient multimodal transportation system, with specific emphasis on an integrated regional transit network that supports the Regional Growth Strategy and promotes vitality of the economy, environment, and health” (10). Focus group participants reflected on key barriers to access, equity, safety, and mobility, and they made recommendations about how to address gaps in the transportation system to achieve the above stated goals. These key findings reflect regional findings across all focus groups. County-specific insights can be found on page 5.

Reducing Commute Times

For many participants, coordinating multi-mode trips across multiple counties on public transit can be difficult to navigate and coordinate and can add hours to a commute. Participants cited this as a primary reason for driving a single-occupancy vehicle rather than taking transit. They say that better route and timing coordination across jurisdictions, more accessible infrastructure, and extended service hours would help them commute long distances.

“When I first moved here, I lived in Gig Harbor and I worked in Tacoma... Going down, I had to leave three hours earlier because there were not a lot of buses that go out there... I spent basically my entire day to and from work, at work, and sleeping. It was like all I did and it made it difficult, which is why after that, I always made sure I had a car.”

- King County Resident



Credit: Zack Heistand via Flickr

Reducing Use of Single Occupancy Vehicles

The draft 2022 Regional Transportation Plan states that by 2050, “59% of households will be within ½ mile of an integrated high-capacity transit system, and transit ridership is expected to more than triple. The region’s light rail, commuter rail, fast ferry, and bus rapid transit lines will expand into one of the country’s largest high-capacity transit networks, with an emphasis on connecting centers and high-capacity transit station areas” (12).

Generally, focus group participants said they would prefer not to drive in Puget Sound because it can be frustrating, unpredictable, expensive, and time-consuming. However, they still drive because of the unpredictability of public transit options, and because hyper-local pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure is incomplete or unsafe to use for travel to transit.

“I wish I could get along without a car.”

- Kitsap County Resident

Many participants felt that when they walk, bike, or roll, they are competing against cars on the roadway. They noted that our current transportation system is designed for ease of driving, and that other modes are forced to maneuver around drivers, posing numerous safety risks. Even where infrastructure exists to support other modes, many commented that drivers simply ignore signage, sidewalks, barriers, or crosswalks.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve almost gotten hit when I’m in the crosswalk. And I’m going because they’re telling me it’s now time for me to be able to cross. And people are just not aware.”

- Kitsap County Participant

“I just wish it was more accessible for more folks that aren’t just in a car.”

- Kitsap County Participant

“As a pedestrian, it’s still sometimes difficult to compete with cars and other vehicles for space.”

- Young Adult Participant

Participants noted that to enable a mode shift away from single-occupancy vehicles, the region must think beyond expanding transit stations and stops, and prioritize the half mile between stations and nearby residences. If there’s a transit station within a half mile of their home, but they have no sidewalks, crosswalks, or well-lit pathways between their home and that station, or no covered area to stay dry while they wait for their bus, participants say they would still drive a car to their final destination.

“If I want to go down to Auburn, it’s like two-and-a-half hours [via transit], [whereas] you get in the car and it’s like 30 minutes, maybe.”

- King County Resident

“I would like to walk more. I currently bus to get to work and as many places as I can, but I also own a car and drive to more far-flung locales... but I’d love to walk more as possible.”

- King County Resident

Connecting Pedestrian Pathways

Generally, participants agreed on the importance of pedestrian infrastructure, including maintenance and connections within and across neighborhoods, lighting, signage, seating, and separation between different modes of traffic. They noted that sidewalks often have cracks, roots breaking through the concrete, slippery leaf coverage, missing curb ramps, and gaps in connectivity. If the region developed and maintained a network of trails and sidewalks, participants say they would walk more to local destinations and transit.

“I walk an average of six to nine miles a day, there needs to be more sidewalks on streets there, [there are] not very many sidewalks unless you’re strolling the main street in town. I enjoy walking in a safe place.”

- King County Resident

“In some parts of the city here, there’s trees that are growing, the root systems of the trees have to move out themselves, and it creates these big juts where if you’re walking, you’re likely to trip... there’s some spots where [the shifting of the sidewalks is] pretty pronounced.”

- King County Resident

Creating Safety

A fifth of registrants (18%) said they don't feel safe **getting to and from transit** options in their community, and 16% said they don't feel safe while **using** transit options. Primary safety concerns included:

- **Lack of lighting:** Participants from every county noted a lack of lighting between their home and nearby transit options, as well as around bus stops.
- **Missing pedestrian infrastructure:** Participants noted the need for connected sidewalks (between homes and destinations), crosswalks, and curb ramps so that they can walk safely from their homes to transit stops and other locations within their community.
- **Limited signage:** Signage was mentioned as a safety infrastructure improvement in every discussion except for Pierce County. Participants noted that it can be difficult to find transit stops when signs are absent, overgrown, outdated, or don't include current transit schedules.
- **Lack of options when things go wrong:** Sometimes, a bus is delayed, canceled, or arrived after the connecting bus/transit has already departed. Some work shifts end after the last scheduled bus. As a result, participants say they've been stranded at night in a different county than where they live, without reasonably-priced or viable alternative options to get them safely home. They suggested that expanded hours (evening, nights, weekends), phone alerts, mobile apps, schedule coordination across jurisdictions, and work schedule coordination would help to improve safety in those moments.

- **Lack of human assistance or emergency response:** Passengers understood that bus drivers cannot both drive safely and respond to emergency passenger needs. However, several participants had experienced a safety threat or witnessed illegal activity while riding transit, and help was not provided. They say an easily accessible panic button and the presence of public safety liaisons or officers would help to ensure safety for riders.
- **Spread of COVID-19:** Participants felt unsafe when crowded under small bus stop shelters with other riders waiting for the bus, or when transit isn't clean. They suggested installing larger bus shelter roofs, and providing hand and seat sanitizer on transit.

"I live way back in a residential part and the buses rarely come back here, so I literally have to go to a main road to catch my bus. I think that would probably be something that I would prefer instead of having to like, literally run or haul my kids to the main street and then catch a bus... It's like two to four blocks over just to catch a metro bus to get to where I need to go. And it's like super dark. There's like no lights over here, which is also inconvenient."

- King County Participant

"I've had an incident where I didn't feel safe on a bus and the bus driver just kept driving because he had to wait to get to the next stop... It would be nice if there's an incident, if the passengers can push a back panic button of some sort to get some help on the bus."

- Snohomish County Resident



Human Infrastructure

The draft 2022 Regional Transportation Plan states that “equity and safety are primary lenses through which transit access improvements should be considered” (31). The Plan primarily considers safety through physical improvements; however, we heard in focus groups that participants also value human infrastructure, an element that does not appear to be addressed in the current draft of the plan.

In every session, participants noted the need for personalized support to help them plan their trips or adapt mid-journey when something goes wrong (31 comments), or to help them respond to an emergency or access need. Primary needs included:

- Real-time support for missed connections between modes or legs of a journey.
- Mental health crisis support.
- Conflict de-escalation.
- Homeless services and support.
- Safety enforcement.

“Having transit ambassadors at the transit stations to help, you know, facilitate things. Ambassadors are huge. I think that could help with customer service.”

- Kitsap County Resident

Region-Wide Coordination

Participants across all focus groups perceived that coordination between transit agencies and jurisdictions was limited, posing barriers to long-term solutions. Several participants shared that commuting across counties raised concerns of coordinating multiple agency’s schedules to align transfers and increased “commuter” fares for bus lines into Seattle. Many participants shared that in more rural areas it can be challenging to plan a time-sensitive commute due to the amount of transfers and waiting between different transit modes.

Some participants also expressed that they didn’t know about programs like ORCA that attempt to connect agencies and transit through the region and have reduced fare options. Additional messaging about programs and services available may help reduce the cost burden that some participants feel.

“I think people are always asking, like, what bus do I take here? What do I take there?... That’s one of the things that make it hard for me to get around... more awareness would probably help people get around better as I see other people have a lot of trouble. What are they supposed to do?”

- King County Resident

“I would say frequent, more frequent buses, because sometimes people miss the bus and then they have to wait a while for the next one, which basically makes them even later to where they’re supposed to go.”

- King County Resident



King County Insights

While many of the above themes were consistent across focus groups, participants also reflected on the unique needs within their county or city. Below, we highlight these key geographic insights, including the topics of most interest to participants in your county. Within parenthesis, you'll see the number of times participants from your county mentioned a given topic. For reference, the total number of comments per topic ranged from 0-40.

In the King County focus group, we heard from participants who live in urban, suburban, and rural environments. Participants from King County had the most comments related to human accessibility features (17 comments). Other priority topics included bus reliability (11 comments), access to bus service (15 mentions), as well as safety concerns (15 comments).

Over half of registrants from King County say they feel safe while using transit options in their community (58%), and that they feel safe getting to and from those transit options (57%). However, 17% indicated they don't feel safe while using transit in King County, and 24% said they don't feel safe getting to transit.

When looking for information on transit, registrants in King County were more likely to turn to Google/Apple maps, information posted in transit centers/bus stops, or paper copies of schedules than those from other counties. They said they go to Google/Apple maps (77%), the official transit app or website (56%), information posted in transit centers/bus stops (21%), paper copies of schedules (14%), or community organizations (3%) when they need information.

Who did we hear from?

9 individuals participated in the King County focus group.

- 6 were Black, 1 was Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 1 was White, and 4 described another race or ethnicity (*people of two or more races or ethnicities are counted multiple times*)
- 5 were women and 4 were men



Credit: Washinton State Department of Transportation via Flickr