

Connecting the Dots for Regional Transportation

*Qualitative Insights from
Pierce 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.

“I have to take four buses just to get to go to donate plasma. I don’t think it should take that long... More direct routes to major cities and major hubs would be helpful.”

- Pierce County Resident

“If buses were faster than single occupancy, that would improve commuting significantly because people would opt to use buses and less cars on the road.”

- Pierce County Resident



Credit: Shane in the City 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.

“There are some areas around where I live there, where there isn’t even any sidewalks at all. It’s kind of like a very narrow strip between you and the traffic you reach out your arm and probably get whacked off by a car on the way. That’s how close they are to the road where you have to walk to get some places, you know, especially along river roads and in the area. It’s really bad.”

- Pierce County Resident

“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.

“There’s a lot of these bus stops along the route that don’t have a shelter. So you’re standing out and pouring down rain, waiting for the bus to show up... if there’s more shelters available that would really help out a lot.”

- Pierce 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.

“The sidewalks in my neighborhood are great. Unfortunately, there are no sidewalks to connect us to other parts of the city.”

- Pierce County Resident

“There are some areas around where I live, where there aren’t even any sidewalks at all. It’s a very narrow strip between you and the traffic... you reach out your arm and probably get whacked off by a car on the way.”

- Pierce 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'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.

“What if they came out with some 24/7 person that could help you with your bus or trying to figure out the bus route because it’s very limited right now... After [5 pm], you can’t get a hold of anybody to find out what route you might need to take.”

- Pierce County Resident

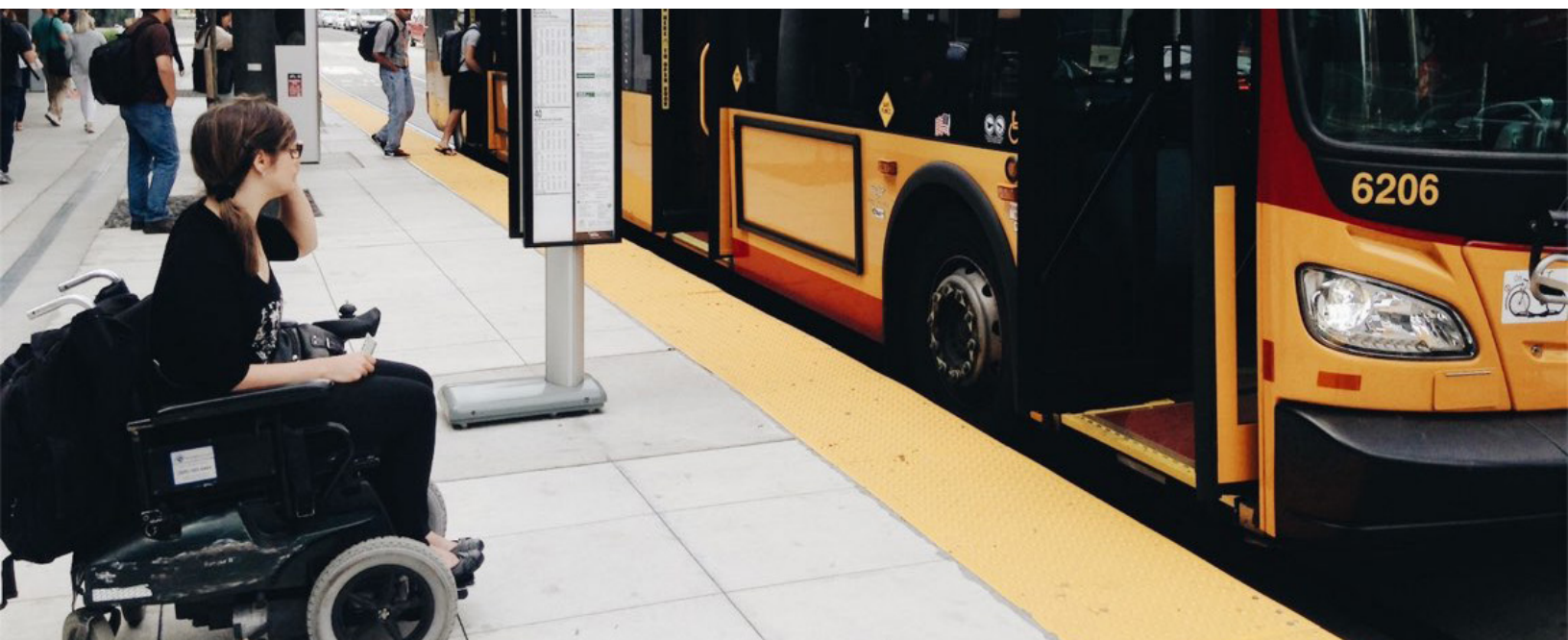
Region-Wide Coordination

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 would like to see them expand the hours running more later than what they do in Pierce County. I know in Seattle they run a lot later than they do over here, and it makes it harder for the people that do work at night to maintain their jobs because... They can’t get home, you know?”

- Pierce County Resident



Pierce 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 Pierce County focus group, we heard from participants who live in suburban, urban, and rural environments. Participants in Pierce County were particularly focused on challenges with commuting cross-county for work, and shared a need for additional rail and road infrastructure to handle commuting patterns. Other popular topics in the discussion included road improvements (7 comments), and safety concerns and infrastructure (16 comments).

Over half of registrants from Pierce County say they feel safe while using transit options in their community (52%), and that they feel safe getting to and from those transit options (54%). However, three (3) indicated they don't feel safe while using transit in Pierce County, and five (5) said they don't feel safe getting to transit.

When looking for information on transit, registrants in Pierce County said they go to Google/Apple maps (68%), the official transit app or website (64%), information posted in transit centers/bus stops (25%), paper copies of schedules (11%), and community organizations (7%).

"I currently don't really have alternative commute options other than driving."

- Pierce County Resident

"[Highway] 10 is a two-way highway, as well as [Highway] 167. There's just too many commuters for such a small route."

- Pierce County Resident

Who did we hear from?

6 individuals participated in the Pierce County focus group.

- 2 were Black, 1 was Indigenous/First People of the Americas, 4 was White, and 1 described another race or ethnicity (*people of two or more races or ethnicities are counted multiple times*)
- 4 were women, 1 was a man, and 1 was non-binary



Credit: Washinton State Department of Transportation via Flickr