

Connecting the Dots for Regional Transportation

*Qualitative Insights from
Snohomish 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 took the bus very few times because it was pretty arduous. It was a pretty long process to get down [to Seattle]. And so I feel like I’ve run into a lot of things that don’t work.”

- Snohomish 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.

“One challenge they have is they spread out the crosswalks so that it’s two or three gigantic mega blocks... like three quarters of a mile in between two different crosswalks. And so your options are walk way out of your way to get to a crosswalk, cross, and then walk back, or what most people do, which is dart across seven lanes of traffic”

- Snohomish 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.

“I wish I could drive because it’s so much faster to get from point A to point B.”

- Snohomish County Resident

“I end up just choosing to drive because it’s more convenient and it’s just easier for me to navigate.”

- Snohomish 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.

“My best case scenario would be having more walkable communities. I live in North Everett, and it’s nice because I can walk a lot of places, but it is somewhat challenging to walk very far because you get to a point where there aren’t going to be sidewalks or you’re on a really busy street. And so finding ways to incorporate walking options and biking options and in just a safer way, that’s mainly the reason why I don’t walk as many places as I could.”

- Snohomish County Resident

“They spread out the crosswalks so that it’s two or three gigantic mega-blocks... So your options are to walk way out of your way to get to a crosswalk and then walk back, or what most people do, which is to dart across seven lanes of traffic at a corner.”

- Snohomish 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 encountered a lot of dark bus stops where I didn't quite feel safe or buses that didn't quite run on the schedule that they were supposed to run on. I definitely noticed it a lot."

- Snohomish 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.

“There’s some kind of security guard that is on the trains all the time [in Portland]. I don’t know if that’s feasible for our area or not, but that’s my main concern about riding on bus and light rail. If there’s an issue, how do you get emergency services right away?”

- Snohomish County Resident

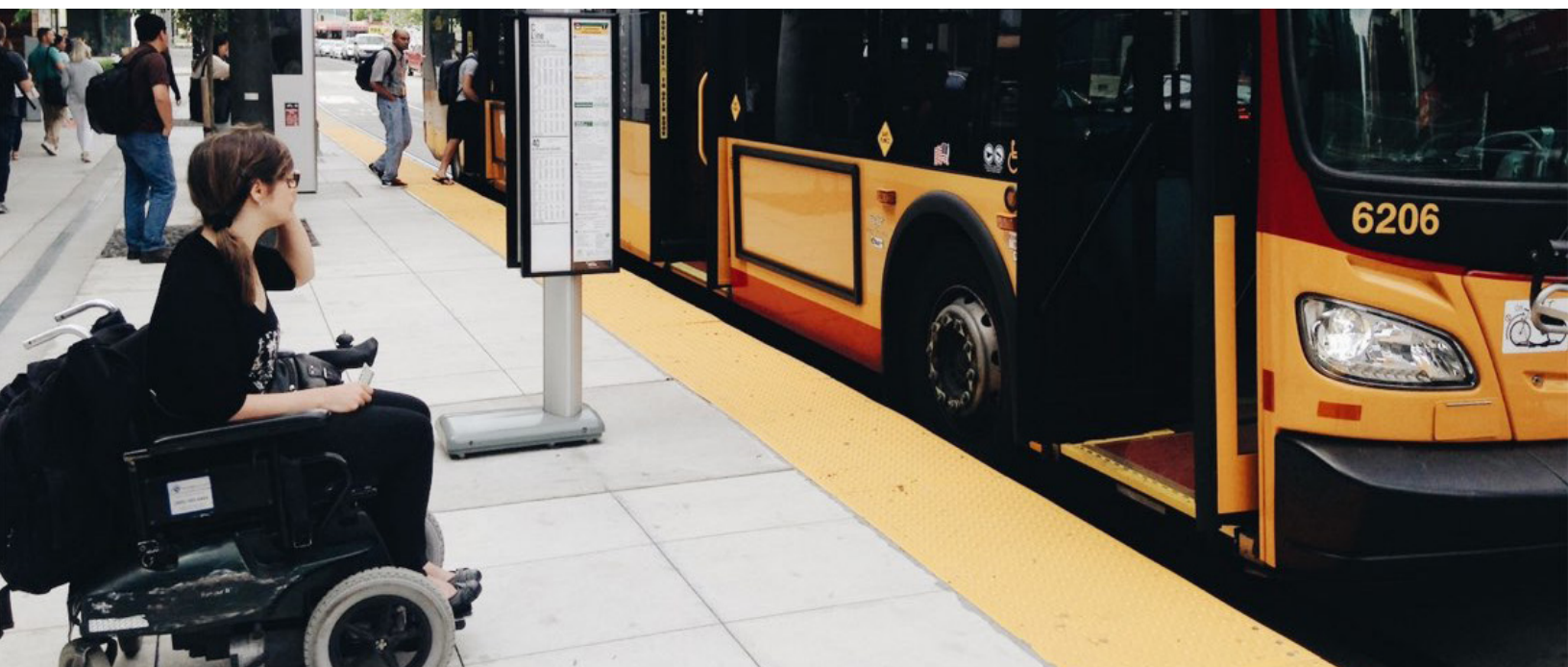
Region-Wide Coordination

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.

“When you have one schedule for one agency and that agency needs, you’re required to mesh with other routes and then the other agencies... we also have all this dwell time, and it isn’t five minutes or 10 minutes to go to the bathroom, get a coffee, get back on. It’s more like half an hour. Forty-five minutes.”

- Snohomish County Resident



Snohomish 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 Snohomish County focus group, we heard from participants who live in suburban and rural environments. The Snohomish County session had the most comments regarding safety concerns (21 comments). While most participants said they feel safe getting to and from transit in their community, a few (2) did not feel safe while using transit.

Other popular topics included bus route improvements (16 comments), light rail improvements (10 comments), and cross-county travel (13 comments). Snohomish County participants were particularly interested in exploring workplace implications to their commute, and shared a number of recommendations for employer and employee considerations related to commuting, including hybrid- or work-from-home options, satellite offices, and relocating organizations outside the urban core.

"I think companies can help with traffic... If they analyze where their workers really are located and if they're located outside an area, perhaps they can have workspaces available for their staff to go to that's near those areas."

- Snohomish County Resident

"Encouraging some business development in these areas... looking at where more people live and supporting businesses that are opening there, especially businesses that are going to be creating family wage jobs."

- Snohomish County Resident

When looking for information on transit, registrants in Snohomish County said they go to the official transit app or website (5), Google/Apple maps (4), paper copies of schedules (2), information posted in transit centers/bus stops (1), and community organizations (1).

Who did we hear from?

5 individuals participated in the Snohomish County focus group.

- 3 were Black, 1 was Hispanic/Latino, and 1 described another race or ethnicity
- 3 were women and 2 were men



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