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# Should you trust Sound Transit now?

By Mike Lindblom  
Seattle Times transportation reporter

The last time Sound Transit went to the voters for money, its leaders promised that within a decade, trains would run from the University District to the city of SeaTac.

They were wrong.

The full route will take twice as long to build and, at more than \$5 billion, is about twice as expensive as the 1996 Sound Move plan that voters approved. Officials insist they have learned from hard experience. With an initial line from downtown Seattle to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport set to open in late 2009, and construction mostly finished, Sound Transit is asking voters for more.

Proposition 1, the Nov. 6 ballot measure also known as "Roads & Transit," calls for a boost in sales and car-tab taxes to build 50 miles of new tracks to Lynnwood, Overlake and Tacoma by 2027, along with 186 miles of road lanes and partial funding for a new Highway 520 floating bridge.

Sound Transit tells a tale of resurrection: After a price shock nearly sank light rail in 2001, the agency transformed itself, led by a new chief executive, Joni Earl, whose competence put the project on solid ground.

While the agency's construction-management skills have "extensively improved," in the words of a state audit, skeptics say there shouldn't be a rush for more money, two years before anyone boards a Seattle light-rail train.

"Voters are going to ask, if they haven't delivered on phase one, how do we know they'll deliver on phase two?" said Michael Ennis, transportation analyst for the fiscally conservative Washington Policy Center, which considers light rail an ineffective response to congestion.

Elizabeth Warman, local-government-relations manager for Boeing, says a "no" vote creates its own risks, since each year of delay could add a half-billion dollars to regional road and transit project costs. Boeing is a contributor to the "yes" campaign.

"I think if you look at Sound Transit's record in the last two or three years, they've demonstrated their ability to complete projects or come in on schedule," Warman said.

Proposition 1 would boost sales and car-tab taxes to help fund \$18 billion worth of roads, tracks and trains (in 2006 dollars),



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

2007: An elevated section of the light-rail line runs above International Boulevard — Highway 99 — in Tukwila.

**WHAT YOU WOULD PAY**

<b>Sales taxes for transit and roads:</b> An increase of one penny per \$100 purchase to pay for roads projects and a nickel per \$100 purchase to pay for transit, mostly light rail. Total: about \$150 a year per household on average.	<b>Car tabs for roads:</b> A new tax of \$90 per \$10,000 of vehicle value annually.
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**Who pays?**  
Both taxes would be paid by most households in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties.

These funds do not include taxes paid by businesses or existing bonded. Districts use such and sales taxes that would continue. There is no expiration date on the name of Proposition 1, although officials estimate money would be needed in the 2030s.

## Extending the tracks

Voters in King, Snohomish and Pierce counties will decide in November whether to increase sales taxes to extend light rail to Overlake, Mill Creek and Tacoma by 2027. The ballot measure also includes regional highway projects. The Eastside rail line might reach Redmond if enough money becomes available.



Source: Sound Transit THE SEATTLE TIMES

or \$38 billion with inflation, overhead and operations through 2027.

## NO COST CAP

If voters pass the measure, they will be giving transit officials a free hand for more than two decades.

There is no cost cap or deadline for completion. The Legislature did not require those. And today's estimates are based on preliminary engineering only.

A dollar figure appeared in the 1996 transit measure, but state courts ruled it wasn't binding. Judges also affirmed Sound Transit's power to either shorten the lines or collect the tax indefinitely to build and operate the projects and pay off bonds.

"If you put the estimated cost of the project in the title, it is going to cause some people to believe there is a cap on the taxation," said Desmond Brown, Sound Transit's general counsel, in a court hearing last month. If Proposition 1 is approved, he said, the agency expects to run cash surpluses, and could roll back tax rates, by around 2035.

"We have forecasts, hopefully more accurate than Sound Move, but we have forecasts," he explained.

On the roads side of Proposition 1, if a project's cost increases 20 percent, there must be either a re-vote by the public, or a vote by members of county councils, to change that project or increase the budget. Changes to Sound Transit projects would be voted on by the agency's governing board.

## TRACK RECORD

Sound Transit's strongest campaign arguments are made in concrete and steel — the train parked outside a new Sodo maintenance base, the elevated trackways near the airport. Potential voters can see those and decide whether to feel confident.

With heavy construction more than three-quarters done, it also appears that the agency's revised cost estimate from 2001, of \$2.4 billion to reach Tukwila, will hold up.

A key segment, the transit tunnel in downtown Seattle, reopened for buses last month, after a two-year retrofit for light rail was finished on time. Chief Executive Earl called the tunnel work a major achievement.

Independent experts say light-rail director Ahmad Fazel and his team are learning from past troubles as they plan future lines.

"The resulting cost estimates provide a good sense, at this stage of system planning, of the likely costs of [Proposition 1] candidate projects," a state expert panel reported last month.

The figures include a 20 to 30 percent cushion, transit officials say — and the numbers are huge, at an average of \$200 million a mile.

On the other hand, Sound Transit in 1996 called its estimates "consciously conservative," and those figures were vetted by an earlier expert panel.

State Auditor Brian Sonntag, who has not taken a position on the measure, said he can't predict how well Sound Transit will deliver "until I see their record, more miles down the road."

"There's a lot of trust and faith that goes into this," he said.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Construction crews work in July inside the concrete forming machine nicknamed the "Traveler" in Sound Transit's Beacon Hill underground light-rail station.



SOUND TRANSIT

Sound Transit released this digitally altered photo of what a light-rail link to the Eastside might look like along the I-90 floating bridge.



ELLEN M. BANNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Sound Transit's light-rail line curves alongside Highway 518 near Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

The transportation industry has a reputation for over-promising.

An international study led by Danish scholar Bent Flyvbjerg, in 2002, found that nine out of 10 road and rail projects wound up exceeding original cost estimates, a pattern he attributed to "strategic misrepresentation" to win political approval. This year, a study of Federal Transit Administration projects shows them averaging 21 percent above original estimates. (One of those, the Seattle bus tunnel in 1990, was 60 percent over original estimates and carries fewer buses than projected.)

Ken Orski, a former federal transit official, said forecasts are improving, but still, "one should take these estimates with a grain of salt."

Even in recent years, Sound Transit has fallen short on some promises:

- A state audit released last week faults the agency for failing to conduct yearly performance audits, which might have caught pre-2001 budget problems earlier. Sound Transit chose not to investigate why its predictions were so far off in the 1990s.
- In early 2003 — a politically tense time while Sound Transit was trying to win a federal grant — then-Chairman Ron Sims said he was "very confident" light rail could still reach the U District with existing funds. Sound Transit fell about a mile short; there's only enough money to reach Husky Stadium by 2016, after dropping one station and raising the proposed federal aid.
- The canceled station, a \$350 million stop on First Hill, was suddenly abandoned in July 2005, nine years after voter approval, when engineers concluded there would be extreme risks of cost overruns in mining an underground station 215 feet deep. (A deep station at Beacon Hill, still under construction, ran into problems with unstable soil.)

Earl, the chief executive, said her staff's willingness to break the unpleasant news about First Hill showed accountability. "I think it's a great example of telling a hard lesson," she said.

- Construction in Seattle's Rainier Valley, now almost done, took a year longer than expected. Recent work has gone well, but earlier, neighborhood businesses struggled with utility outages and blocked roads. This happened even though the winning contractor, RCI-Herzog, proposed a fast pace and sensitivity in the ethnically mixed neighborhood.

Federal oversight consultants say the line to Tukwila is now at risk of missing its scheduled July 3, 2009, opening, because of slower-than-expected construction progress. Extra days known as "float" are nearly used up, and relations with Beacon Hill tunnel contractor Obayashi are strained, an update says.

Earl said there are still more than 18 months to solve schedule problems, so "I don't think there will be slippage."

Overall performance, she said, has been good. "You can't build in an urban environment like this and not have a lot of complexities in building projects."

## A NEW CROSSING

Proposition 1 presents the agency with an unprecedented challenge: to operate light-rail trains on one of the dual Interstate 90 floating bridges.

Concrete would need to be scraped off the bridge and replaced with lighter pavement to maintain buoyancy despite the weight of the trains. They would roll at reduced speeds through special track joints, where the fixed bridge meets the floating pontoons.

The state expert panel "saw nothing in the analysis completed to date to suggest that light rail cannot operate well on the floating bridge," but called for more research.

Siim Soot, chairman of the panel, sees a Catch-22. To prove the system will work, voters need to authorize Proposition 1 to pay for engineering.

John Ladenburg, Sound Transit's chairman, said it will take about two more years of design work before the project can get final approval for construction. In the event it doesn't work, Ladenburg said backup ideas might be bus rapid transit on I-90, or light rail on a future Highway 520 bridge.

Another difficult spot is downtown Bellevue, where a possible tunnel could cost \$500 million more than an elevated option. If Bellevue gets a tunnel, less money would be available to someday extend light rail

to Redmond.

Sound Transit's own Citizen Oversight Panel is disputing an important financial assumption. The agency's view that operating costs would rise only 5 percent a year is "unsustainable over time," the panel says. Members suggest 9 percent.

### **THE BIG PICTURE**

When the agency was at rock bottom in 2001, a special committee led by former Seattle Mayor Charles Royer urged Sound Transit to start building tracks south of downtown.

Even though the first line would miss the U District, political momentum would build once people rode the trains, and they would vote to build more, the committee thought. This week, Royer said Sound Transit is far enough along to deserve Proposition 1 money for new projects.

It's an argument that's already being made for yet another phase of projects, far into the future.

One Sound Transit board member, Richard Marin of Edmonds, said that if Proposition 1 passes, construction should start early at the north terminus near Lynnwood.

He thinks the sight of work under way would create support in Snohomish County to reach Everett with a "Sound Transit 3" ballot measure, to come as early as 2015. That's a year before a station opens at Husky Stadium.

*Mike Lindblom: 206-515-5631 or [mlindblom@seattletimes.com](mailto:mlindblom@seattletimes.com)*

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