

Regional Transit Task Force Summary of Meeting

**July 15, 2010, 5:30 – 8:30 PM
Mercer Island Community Center**

Task Force members present: Gene Baxstrom*, Fred Butler, Suzette Cooke, Grant Degginger, Kevin Desmond*, Bob Drewel, Chris Eggen, David Freiboth, Noel Gerken, Chris Hoffmann, Carl Jackson, Rob Johnson, Kate Joncas, Josh Kavanagh, Jane Kuechle, Steve Marshall, Ed Miller, Lynn Moody, Estela Ortega, Tom Pierson, Tom Rasmussen, Carla Saulter, Jared Smith, Jim Stanton, Bob Swarner, Larry Yok

Task Force members absent: Chuck Ayers, Shiv Batra, James Kelly, Ron Tober*, Liz Warman

Facilitator: John Howell (Cedar River Group)

1. Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 5:40 p.m. John Howell asked task force members and attendees to introduce themselves. He then reviewed the meeting agenda.

2. Summary of SubGroup Meetings

Cost Control/Efficiency SubGroup (Suzette Cooke)

This subgroup's recent meetings have explored two primary topics: (1) Metro payments to the county for overhead and internal departmental service charges; and (2) the potential for Metro to utilize alternative service delivery models, instead of fixed route services, as a cost savings measure. At the meeting earlier this week county budget office staff provided answers to a number of questions that had been asked previously by the sub group. One outstanding question is whether there is any "double charging" for overhead charges. Sub group members want to better understand if any of the departments that charge Metro directly for internal services (such as Sheriff services, Prosecuting Attorney's office, or information technology) include county overhead charges in the "fully loaded" costs that they charge to Metro. The subgroup also asked for greater clarification in understanding what is included in the \$6.4 million for "general government" that is included in the breakdown of overhead charges.

At the groups previous meeting a white paper describing alternative service delivery models, such as car pools, van pools, shared taxi, taxi scrip, Vanshare, Access, and DART, were discussed. At this week's meeting the group discussed the opportunities to expand these services, possibly through what Metro calls "managed competition," which involves putting a service out to bid for either public or private providers. The subgroup is interested in the possibility of using alternative services to serve areas that could be left with little or no fixed route transit service if significant service reductions are made. A subgroup member noted that Metro employees will need to be comfortable with the subcontracting approach, if Metro uses that method.

Mr. Howell will work with the county budget office to get a written description of overhead and inter-departmental service charges. The subgroup also asked him to draft language for a policy direction to encourage Metro to further explore the possibility of contracting out alternative service delivery approaches. He will circulate a draft for comment by the subgroup. Then the revised policy statement will come to the full task force.

* Non-voting member

Performance Measures Subgroup (Jim Stanton)

Mr. Stanton thanked Metro staff for the work they have done to provide information and analysis for the subgroup. At a subgroup meeting earlier in the day, Metro provided information about the sources and uses of revenue. This information provides greater transparency around overall revenues and expenses, as well as useful information about the revenues and costs for the different types of Metro services (i.e., fixed route, Access, Vanpool, and Metro Operated ST Express). Metro provided information about fixed route services grouped in the four categories used in the R1 Scenario presented at the last task force meeting: frequent arterial, peak commuter, local and hourly. Both Metro and the City of Seattle presented proposed performance measures, linked to the seven transit design factors that the County Council directed the task force to consider. There was a great deal of similarity between the two concepts. Staff will work together to create one proposal. For each measure, the subgroup would like to see assigned targets and reporting on those targets.

The subgroup suggested that the performance measures be divided into three categories:

1. Metrics-based measures consistent with the national transit database, that will allow for comparison with other transit agencies.
2. Service-based performance measures that will allow for analysis and comparisons of routes by types of service.
3. Performance measures that allow for understanding of how Metro is doing in achieving broader policy goals, such as land use, social equity, or environmental objectives.

In response to a question, Jim said that the subgroup looked for national and local performance measure criteria for transit services that would be useful. But some factors, such as land use, may require development of unique metrics suitable to King County and Metro. The subgroup hopes to create a template that will be a work in progress, and to propose recommending that Metro use and further refine the template. The subgroup would like to see one or two measures for each of the seven design factors. These measures would help county leaders to understand how decisions they make in designing the transit system will impact county policy goals.

Metro will create a revised performance measures document and circulate it to the subgroup for comment. Then the revised version will come to the full task force.

3. *Review of Updated Statements of Emerging Policy Direction*

Mr. Howell reviewed changes in the policy statements that he has made based on the discussion at the last task force meeting. (See “Statements of Initial Policy Direction,” revised draft 07/09/10 in the meeting materials.) He noted that one or two additional draft policy statements may come from the Cost Control Subgroup.

Service Allocation Policy Statements

Social equity (bullet 2). There were suggestions that this statement focus on serving the mobility needs of people in low-wage jobs, who work outside of 8 – weekday hours, students, and those dependent on transit. The ending phrase, however, deals with density, which is covered in the first bullet.

- There was agreement to delete the final phrase “in places where the highest numbers of such people live and work” so that the bullet ends with “basic mobility.”

There was a concern about being clear on the business model, since geographic and social equity might have different standards of productivity. The recommendations that will come out of the two subgroups might help to clarify these issues.

Developing communities (bullet 5). Regarding the statement about transit service for communities that are developing in a way that is supportive of high transit use, task force members asked how to define “supportive of high transit use.” The statement seems to be about local land use policies and capital facility decisions. Mr. Howell noted that the draft says that the concept still needs to be defined and brought to the task force for discussion. There was discussion about whether transit *follows* growth—the demand is present already—or whether to offer the benefit of transit to communities that accept a certain amount of growth or density in their comprehensive plans. It was suggested that the issue is whether the community is making a commitment to support density. This issue might be addressed by performance measures on the service levels that are tied to supporting county land use policy.

Task force members also asked if the bullet should address providing financial incentives and service partnerships as pathways to getting transit service. A task force member suggested that service partnership be a separate bullet since it can be a tool both for developing and for urban areas.

Mr. Howell will revise the statement for the task force’s further review.

Additional comments. There was a question about “service fairness”—fair amount of service for taxes paid. Several task force members suggested that tax equity is a separate issue from the third bullet that expresses desire for geographic balance. There will be additional discussion about this topic when the task force discusses issues related to service growth.

Performance Measure Policy Statements

New set of performance measures (bullet 1). There were suggestions from several task force members that the statement should be revised to reflect the direction discussed at the Performance Measures sub group meeting earlier in the day. The performance measures need to be realistic and practical for Metro to use consistently. Task force members said they want to be sure the agency and the public will get something out of the exercise. Members of the Performance Measures Subgroup said they will recommend choosing measures based on the intended outcomes, and identifying why these outcomes are important.

Comparisons with peer agencies (bullet 2). There was a suggestion related to analyzing the differences between Metro and peer agencies, to add “including differences in public policy goals.” Another suggestion was to revise the language so as to choose only the relevant performance measures of peer agencies, not to compare ourselves to each measure they use. Several task force members were concerned that the time spent to make comparisons with peer agencies would be considerable and may have limited benefit. Kevin Desmond noted that peer comparisons are the most useful on specific issues, such as security. It is more difficult to make meaningful comparisons of entire transit systems. Two task force members volunteered to work on modifying language.

Environmental sustainability (bullet 3). There was a question about the definition of environmental sustainability and whether the task force should add criteria to the list from the County Council. Mr. Howell noted that this addition was proposed and agreed to by the task force at the last meeting, and has since been shared with the project Executive Committee, who were comfortable with the suggestion. Mr. Howell asked for volunteers to help work (by e-mail) on the definition. Suzette Cooke, Chris Eggen, Rob Johnson, Josh Kavanagh, and Steve Marshall volunteered. There was a suggestion to start with the definition on page 3 of Spokane’s performance measures document that was distributed to the task force.

Mr. Howell will work with task force members on revising the statement.

Financial Sustainability Policy Statement

In addition to the two draft statements the task force reviewed at the last meeting, the Cost Containment Subgroup might have two more. There were no other comments on the draft statements.

4. *Continued Discussion: Criteria for Potential Service Reductions*

Victor Obeso of Metro presented information in response to questions task force members asked at the last meeting about the reduction scenario. (See the “Service Reduction Scenario – Application of Criteria” PowerPoint and “R-1 Reduction Network Design – Application of Criteria” tables in the meeting materials.)

Mr. Obeso reminded the task force that the Metro staff developed the reduction scenario as a way of showing the task force how their emerging policy statements would play out in reducing service. It is not an actual proposal but an illustration. The Metro planners developed the rough scenario in two weeks, while to do a full proposal, including discussion with stakeholders, would take about a year.

To determine the number of hours that the scenario needs to reduce, the planners started with the Fall 2009 baseline of hours, added the hours of RapidRide and SR520 Urban Partnership that will be added in 2010-11, and came up with a new total of service hours. From this new total hours, they subtracted 200,000 hours that would result from cost reductions and efficiencies that Metro has already identified for 2010-11. That leaves a total of 400,000 hours that the reduction scenario needs to reduce.

To apply the task force’s draft criteria (emphasize productivity, but address the needs for social equity and geographic balance), the planners took the following steps:

- Step 1: Productivity Screen – Eliminate all services below 15 rides per platform hour.
- Step 2: Network Considerations: Restore lost core connections between centers and higher density residential areas, and provide at least hourly service within most smaller cities now served.
- Step 3: Identify Efficiencies – To reach the remaining hours that need to be cut, consolidate routes, eliminate neighborhood tails, connect with Sound Transit services, and match capacity to demand.

Answers to Task Force members’ questions:

- *Density criteria:* Three households per acre is a rule of thumb in the transit industry for the density that supports transit use. That figure is equivalent to the 7 person per acre standard that has been discussed with the task force previously. Bob Drewel confirmed that the criteria PSRC uses for urban centers and population centers provide approximately the same result.
- *Route tails:* Just reducing the number of bus stops on the route tails would not provide enough savings. The main cost is the distance of the tails. In most cases, there are other routes available that can get riders to the main arterial corridor.
- *Elasticity of riders:* Staff did not have time to do an elasticity analysis. The basic assumption is that there would be riders both lost and gained.
- *Platform hours and deadhead to/from bases:* For any type of service, the cutoff solely for productivity was 15 rides per hour. Regarding Metro’s bases, if concentric circles are drawn around a base, no matter where the base is located, the farther away from the base the service is provided, the more it costs to serve the area. Metro does have transit bases outside Seattle.
- *Sound Transit:* The scenario assumes that Sound Transit services will continue at their current capacity. In some cases, Sound Transit and Metro both run all-day service in an areas where the buses or trains are full. On some other Metro routes, there is opportunity to connect riders to Sound Transit’s services (either express bus, Sounder, or light rail).

- *Standing passengers:* The scenario uses real data but not in enough detail to identify whether there would be passengers standing on specific routes.
- *Loss of riders in Seattle:* The scenario would retain coverage for most riders but not at all times of day. The loss of hours would affect some riders and would result in a forecasted loss of ridership in Seattle. But some routes and hours of service are more productive, and with the addition of RapidRide, there would be gains in ridership on some routes.
- *Efficiency:* Metro sees this as part of the productivity screen used in Step One.
- *Cutting Sundays/holidays:* Not providing service on weekends would violate the task force's desire to maintain social equity, so Metro did not consider this option for the scenario.
- *Temporary cuts:* The fall-off in revenues is not temporary. Even if revenues started to rise today, there would still be a gap in revenues from what was planned that will continue into the future. The revenue decline is a structural, permanent problem.

Discussion

Task force members made a number of comments on social equity in the scenario. These included:

- Reliance in the scenario on park and ride lots assumes that riders have a car.
- Service should prioritize riders who do not have a car rather than discretionary riders.
- For some riders, Sound Transit is a costly alternative because they cannot afford the higher fares of Sound Transit service.

A number of task force members said they liked the process of making the initial cut based solely on productivity, then considering those who are transit dependent. Some noted that it is also important to look at practicality. For example, there are more workers in downtown Seattle than parking spaces, so not all downtown workers with cars could drive to work.

One task force member did not find the explanation helpful, but would like to see more detail on the performance measures on the chart and where they came from. The Performance Measure Subgroup's work would help to inform this discussion.

Mr. Howell noted that because of the limited time for the task force to produce its recommendations, several elements of work need to occur at the same time. The condensed time frame makes it very difficult to wait until the performance measurement subgroup's work is done before looking at a service reduction scenario. Once the subgroup's work is done, the performance measures can inform the group's final decisions. Mr. Obeso said that the measures used by staff to develop the service reduction scenario are illustrations of different ways to assess service. If an actual service reduction proposal is developed the performance measures suggested by the sub group could be incorporated into that proposal.

One task force member summarized Mr. Obeso's questions for the task force as: (1) Did we correctly interpret the priorities the task force proposed? And (2) Now that you see what your priorities mean, can you live with the result or do you want to reconsider the priorities? Based on this framework, Mr. Howell asked the task force members if they were comfortable with the policy direction. Members had the following responses:

- Generally satisfied with the proposed policy guidance as illustrated by the scenario. (9 task force members)
- Concerned about the impact on low-income populations. Suggest possible consideration of fare differential between Sound Transit and Metro, access issues, etc. (3 members)
- Applying the steps makes sense, but have questions on which criterion to use first.
- Is there time to do due diligence in thinking about the reduction?
- The policies need to address financing, also. (2 members)

- Great job, but a lot of work is ahead.
- Liked the process to get the policy direction. Wonder if a different approach is needed for restoration.
- Would like to see the scenario revised using the performance measures from the subgroup, which would help to define it.
- Comfortable with the process but not the end result. Would like to see ways to fix the system and to identify other sources of funds.

Mr. Howell noted that there is a strong consensus among the task force regarding use of their proposed set of criteria for service reduction, but that some members want to see how the performance measures being developed would affect the results of the example scenario.

5. *Public Comment*

John Niles: Mr. Niles said that he appreciated the approach of using productivity as an important factor in cutting costs and reducing service.

6. *Next Steps*

Mr. Howell will revise the policy statements to take into account the comments at this meeting. The next meeting will be in three weeks, on Thursday, August 5. The agenda will include high-level concepts of alternatives for service addition, alternatives for service restoration, and initial information on possible revenue options.

The meeting adjourned at 8:45 p.m.