Regional Transit Task Force
Summary of Meeting

June 3, 2010, 5:30 – 9:00 PM
Puget Sound Regional Council, Seattle

Task Force members present: Shiv Batra, Fred Butler, Suzette Cooke, Grant Degginger, Kevin Desmond[*], Bob Drewel, Chris Eggen, David Freiboth, Noel Gerken, Chris Hoffmann, Rob Johnson, Kate Joncas, Jane Kuechle, Steve Marshall (by phone), Ed Miller, Tom Pierson, Tom Rasmussen, Carla Saulter (by phone), Jim Stanton, Ron Tober*, Liz Warman (by phone), Larry Yok

Task Force members absent: Chuck Ayers, Gene Baxstrom*, Sue Blazak, Carl Jackson, Josh Kavanagh, James Kelly, Lynn Moody, Estela Ortega, Jared Smith

Facilitator: John Howell (Cedar River Group)

I.   Welcome

The meeting was called to order at 5:30 p.m. John Howell reviewed the agenda. The task force members and attendees then introduced themselves.

II.   Follow-up on Information Requests

Wage Rates and Overhead Costs
Jim Jacobson of Metro reviewed several of the charts and tables in the set of materials titled "Information for Task Force Members – June 3, 2010 Meeting." He first reviewed The Operator Pay Rate information that compared transit operator top wage rates for King County and 29 other U.S. transit systems. King County's top wage rate ($28.47) is the third highest, and the rate of increase between 2004 and 2009 is the second highest (3.9%). Mr. Jacobson then reviewed the page titled "Major Categories of Internal Service and Overhead Costs: King County Metro 2010-11 Biennial Budget." The information showed Metro's budgeted expenses for "internal services" (specific services Metro buys from other county departments such as the Sherriff or Prosecutor's office), and Metro's contributions to county overhead. In answer to a task force member's question, Mr. Jacobson explained that internal services are charged using a measurable factor such as the number of employees, and that the general overhead expense is based largely on Metro's operating expense level related to the operating expense of other County divisions. The general overhead expense is established during the county's budget process.

Discussion. It was suggested that the task force should focus on the key policy issues outlined in the work program defined by the County Council. There was discussion as to how the detail on wages and overhead costs relates to the task force's charge. Several members raised the following points. Looking at these costs helps to show what drives the budget. Metro's costs may influence policy decisions on how to balance productivity/cost effectiveness and coverage/equity. The cost structure may help explain key constraints, and may shed light on how financially sustainable the system is. It was suggested that when reviewing cost data, it is important to consider the values of the Metro transit system—e.g., for a high-quality system, a professional work force is needed. A caution was expressed that the county should not attempt to solve Metro's financial challenges by reducing operator wages. A question was raised about whether the task force should focus on the major policy issues first, or issues of efficiency and performance metrics. John H suggested that the full task force needs to stay focused on the major policy issues to provide direction for the task force recommendations. However, he noted that there was strong

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[*] Non-voting member

interest on the part of some members in addressing both Metro's cost structure and related efficiencies, as well as performance measures. He suggested forming work groups to examine both issues, and that the performance measures group would need to make sure that suggested metrics are in line with the policy recommendations being developed by the full task force.

III.   *Performance Measures by Subarea (Peer Comparisons)*

Jim Jacobson reviewed the charts (see meeting presentation handout) that compare King County Metro Transit on various measures to 29 other transit agencies, including six agencies that were identified as "peers" during work with the Regional Transit Committee (RTC) in 2006.

- *Transit Productivity – Boardings Per Platform Hour:* Metro ranked in the middle for this metric in 2008 among the 29 other transit agencies and third among the identified peers. Metro's growth in boardings per platform hour, between 2001 to 2008, ranked number one among all of the listed agencies. This is, in part, due to the restructuring of some transit service that resulted in ridership growth that was substantially higher than the system average (see task force presentation from April 20, 2010, slide #21).

- *Transit Productivity – Passenger Miles Per Platform Mile:* In 2008, Metro was sixth highest among the 29 transit systems, and higher than all but one of its peers. Metro's performance using this measure has been growing somewhat faster than the average annual increase for all agencies between 2001-2008, and faster than four of the six identified peer agencies.

- *Transit Efficiency – Operating Cost Per Platform Hour and Operating Cost Per Platform Mile:* Metro's operating cost per platform mile is the highest among the six peer agencies and the operating cost per platform hour is second highest. Only Pittsburgh among the identified agency peer groups had higher operating cost per platform hour. Metro ranked in the middle of the six peer agencies in the average annual percent change in these two cost indicators from 2001 to 2008. Of Metro's $126.28 operating cost per platform hour, about $50 per hour is attributed to driver and mechanic wages and benefits. The portion of the hourly cost that is due to general government charges has grown at about the same rate as other costs.

- *Transit Cost Effectiveness – Operating Cost Per Boarding:* In 2008, the cost per boarding was $3.67 placing Metro in the middle of the identified six peers for this metric. However, the average annual percent increase from 2001 to 2008 was second lowest at 3.2 percent.

- *Transit Cost Effectiveness – Operating Cost Per Passenger Mile:* Metro's *operating cost per passenger mile* was in the bottom third of the of the 29 other transit systems, and lower than all, except Detroit among the peer group for this metric.

Discussion. Task force members commented that if Metro can reduce costs, it could increase the amount of service provided. It was suggested that Metro may be more expensive than other cities, because of the agency's service quality focus. For example, it was brought to the attention of the task force that Detroit does not sign or provide schedules at many bus stops. Also, the lower operating cost of some of the listed agency's may be a result of lower wages paid to work forces that do not have collective bargaining rights, even if represented in certain states. It was noted that while this information is helpful, it would be even more helpful to understand why Metro ranks where it does on these metrics. There was a question about the ability of Metro staff to conduct a benchmarking analysis of other agencies to develop that comparison. Mr. Howell noted that it would be a major undertaking and take considerable time to complete a comprehensive comparison of Metro and its peers and doing so is beyond the task

force's scope. However, he suggested that the task force's recommendations could propose that such an analysis be undertaken.

Metro Service Types

Mr. Jacobson presented pie charts (see meeting presentation handout) that divided Metro services into three types—high ridership, local, and commuter service. The charts included Sound Transit Regional Express Service operated by Metro. The charts showed how service is divided by type for the system as a whole and within each subarea. Approximately 75 percent of the Metro bus system is investments in high ridership services. The remainder is split almost evenly between local and commuter service. Mr. Jacobson also shared two quadrant graphics that showed the three service types systemwide and by subarea. The first showed 2008 rides per platform hour and passenger miles per revenue hour. The second using the same format showed the rate of growth for the measures between 2005 and 2008. A service that performed well in both measures would show up in the upper right quadrant. Routes with low rides per platform hour and low passenger miles per revenue hour show up in the lower left quadrant.

High ridership routes tend to score better on the rides per platform hour due to high on and off activity throughout the route. Commuter routes tend to score better on the passenger miles per revenue hour scale due to their higher operating speed. Local routes tend to score low on both scales. However, it is important to understand that the purpose and performance expectations of the service types are different.

Mr. Jacobson presented a series of maps that displayed population density overlaid with the route network of each service type. The maps displaying the high ridership network showed that those routes serve the most densely populated areas of the County. Local routes serve primarily lower density land uses in the suburban areas of the County, although local routes operate in each subarea. The map of commuter routes shows them running throughout Metro service areas to Urban Center employment concentrations. Mr. Jacobson then presented a series of maps showing examples from each service type from each subarea. The 3d graphics of the routes showed the land use density near the routes and stop usage information along the routes. The high ridership routes tend to provide transit trips that connect population and employment centers. The local routes tend to provide circulation within a community, often connecting riders to other transit services and local commercial areas, often serving individuals with few transportation options. Commuter routes typically serve park-and-rides or dense residential communities and provide direct, limited stop service via freeways and major arterials.

Answers to Task Force members' questions:
- *Identifying a route by type:* The routes can be classified into the three service types pretty easily. For example, a route from Queen Anne Hill will most likely be high ridership, while one from Issaquah to Seattle is most likely commuter service.

- *Sound Transit routes:* The Sound Transit Regional Express routes were included in the service type information presented, but it would not be difficult to show only Metro routes. Sound Transit Regional Express was included based on earlier suggestions from task force members.

- *Comparing to other cities by service type:* It would be difficult to do this kind of comparison, since other cities would have to tie their data to the definitions Metro used for the three service types.

- *Service type definition:* Staff's classification of the service type divided the existing King County transit network into the three categories and is independent of the 40-40-20 policy. The *Transit Now* initiative followed policy that has resulted in the current distribution of service by type, slating the vast majority of the planned investment into the Core network or High Ridership routes.

Some task force members pointed out that in the *Transit Now* program, some local communities contributed local funds to improve/expand local routes. Also, some local routes serve commuters by taking them to train stations or transit centers.

Task Force Discussion

There were several views expressed on how to approach decision making regarding the design of the transit system. A number of task force members suggested focusing on productivity, with the tradeoff being reduced service to lower productivity areas. Taking this approach would tie transit service more to land use than to geographic equity. Another point of view expressed was the importance of focusing on social justice issues. Members suggested that low-income residents, live throughout the county and would be isolated without transit service. With regard to the productivity of local service, it was suggested that some local service feed into high ridership and commuter services.   The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires providing bus service for persons with disabilities whenever transit service is available in an area. Another point of view expressed was that land use, economic development (jobs) and productivity/efficiency are tied together. Others suggested that productivity is an important consideration, but should not be the only factor considered. It was suggested that productivity could be the initial screening, followed by other consideration -- social equity, geographic equity, and other factors.

There were several comments about the possibilities of providing incentives to encourage private transit-friendly development and perhaps developers could be required to share the cost of providing service through a process similar to street concurrency requirements. It was suggested that one factor that could influence service allocation could be a city's efforts to put in place land use that supports transit use. There could also be partnership arrangements with cities and/or businesses. Others suggested that partnership opportunities could involve collaborating with the Snohomish and/or Pierce transit systems for some routes. Another suggestion was to consider different service strategies or transit products for lower productivity areas.

There was a request for examples of different transit system design scenarios to see how an emphasis on different factors (i.e., productivity or social justice concerns) would affect network design and performance. There also was a suggestion to look at what service would be like if optimized for each of the three service types and then to lay those models on top of each other to see how they line up. Another suggestion was to develop metrics to measure each of the three service types, and to look at how each type of service has increased or decreased.

A task force member raised a concern regarding the information used in the productivity metrics, because it tilts the results in favor of Seattle and other areas that are proximate to a bus base. The member noted that the location of the current transit bases require long deadhead time/miles to and from some areas, particularly in South King County, unfairly lowering the productivity of South Subarea routes.

In response to a question about how service reductions are currently done. Kevin Desmond informed members about the current policy that directs reductions be made in proportion to the subareas' share of the system's total service hours -- currently 62 percent West, 21 percent South, and 17 percent East. Changing to a productivity basis could eliminate routes, which could limit some residents from accessing

the system. A task force member suggested that the focus should not be on how to cut the system but how to prevent cuts, and build a strong system.

Summary. After the meeting, Mr. Howell summarized the discussion as follows.

- There was a strong sentiment that productivity should be a major factor in designing the transit system and making service allocation decisions. Several members suggested they would like to see standards established for different types of service (i.e., high ridership, commuter, and local).
- A number of members also felt strongly that there needs to be a balance between productivity and social equity—making sure that communities that need transit service have access to that service. Precisely what the right balance is between these two policy choices was left unresolved. Some members raised questions about whether there are alternative (less expensive) ways to provide service to lower ridership communities, without providing fixed route services.
- Several members suggested that there is a strong connection between productivity, land use and economic development goals—that the design of the transit system should be influenced by those combination of factors.
- There was some support for the concept of creating transit service partnerships (i.e., "rewards" or incentives) with communities that develop in a manner that is supportive of high ridership transit use.
- Several members said it would be helpful to see some service scenarios based on different emphases or weighting of the six system design factors.

IV.   Public Comments

John Niles

Mr. Niles said that he appreciates the data that are coming out of this process. He noted the differences in cost in different systems across the country and in bus routes within King County. He suggested that different service is needed in different areas, and that the task force should seek to understand these differences in order to structure a better system.

V.   Next Meeting and Topics

Mr. Howell suggested setting up two subgroups, one for those interested in further discussion of performance measures and the other on cost control/efficiency. The subgroups could meet and bring ideas back to the whole task force. The following task force members indicated interest in participating:

- Performance Measures Subgroup – Shriv Batra, Chris Eggen, Christine Hoffmann, Rob Johnson, Kate Joncas, Jane Kuechle, Steve Marshall, Jim Stanton,

- Cost Control/Efficiency Subgroup – Suzette Cooke, Grant Degginger, Chris Eggen, Noel Gerken, Steve Marshall, Tom Rasmussen

The next task force meeting will be on Thursday, June 17, at 5:30 p.m., at the Mercer Island Community Center.

The meeting adjourned at 9:00 p.m.