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Sound Transit's rising costs belie logic of light rail

By Michael Ennis

All sides can agree that the region's transportation system is woefully insufficient to handle the demand on our road system. The state's November Congestion Report concludes that travel times increased on most every major route monitored in the region. And population estimates show the region will gain another 1.2 million more people in the next twenty years.

Elected leaders responded to this looming congestion crisis and urged the region to embark on expanding the public transportation system. In 1996, voters agreed to raise both the sales tax and the motor vehicle excise tax to fund the first phase of Sound Transit. Officials promised it would cost \$3.9 billion and take only 10 years to complete.

Today Sound Transit says it will cost up to \$15 billion and take until 2020 to complete the project — a total of 24 years. It says it will collect the 0.4 percent sales tax forever, even after the first phase is complete in 2020.

In addition, Sound Transit officials are asking voters to increase the sales tax an additional 0.5 percent to raise up to another \$20.2 billion to complete a second phase of projects, which would exhaust its current taxing authority.

Combining both phases shows the total cost of Sound Transit would be \$35.2 billion, taking inflation into account, according to my study of Sound Transit's estimates. (Sound Transit hasn't produced an updated inflation-adjusted estimate of total cost.)

It goes without saying that the proposed costs of Sound Transit are staggering. What does the public get for its \$35.2 billion?

If Phase 2 is approved, Sound Transit predicts its total system would carry 351,000 riders a day by 2030.

This means Sound Transit will only capture about one in four of the predicted 1.2 million people that are expected to move into the region over the next twenty years. The remaining 850,000 people will spill onto our already congested roadways.

Based on Sound Transit's estimates, the cost to pull one passenger vehicle off the existing roadway and into the

agency's public transportation system is about \$100,000 per person.

To put this in perspective, King County's voter-approved Transit Now initiative will remove an estimated 50,000 passenger vehicles from the roadways by adding 175 new buses. The expansion will cost taxpayers about \$50 million by 2008. Under Transit Now, the estimated cost to move one traveler to the public transportation system is about \$1,000 per person.

It would be cheaper for Sound Transit to pay these people \$100,000 each to stay home. The effect on traffic congestion would be the same, we would not have to wait until 2030, and it would save taxpayers more than \$100 million.

Traffic congestion is the result of policy choices, not an inevitable consequence of growth. Spending on transportation has tipped toward public transit, but congestion is worsening anyway.

Reverences to sound business principles free a company from the pitfalls of failure and make long-term sustainability more likely. If these values are violated, the market will react and force more efficient decisions.

But in the public sector, when public money is at stake, government officials poke at these time-tested values. As a result, the public does not enjoy the protections of the market and bad policy choices are allowed to live on.

Sound Transit's plan to spend \$35.2 billion to move less than a quarter of the region's projected population growth by 2030 is not only expensive, it is not even enough to reduce today's congestion at today's current population. If Sound Transit's second phase is implemented, our daily commute will continue to get longer.

Rather than pouring more money into light rail, we should return to a policy of strategic increases in road capacity, easing congestion and reducing travel times for all citizens.

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