

## Key Findings

1. Over the last ten years, King County Metro has twice sought and received increases in the sales tax rate but only delivered about one third of the bus service promised to voters.
2. Over the same time period, salaries paid to Metro bus drivers grew 70%, from \$79 million in 2000 to about \$135 million in 2009.
3. Average wages for Metro bus drivers grew more than twice the rate of inflation.
4. Metro does not even require a high school degree to become a transit operator, yet there are now 243 who make over \$75k per year and 20 who make over \$100k per year.
5. These high wage bus drivers cost taxpayers \$1.6 million in 2000. By 2009, these high wage drivers cost taxpayers \$20.7 million per year, an increase of nearly 1,200%.
6. Voters were told the higher taxes would be used to deliver more bus service, not to increase wages for bus drivers.
7. Metro officials should gain control of wages and deliver the service promised from the previous two tax increases before additional taxing authority is considered.

## King County Metro Bus Driver Wages Grow Out of Control

*With two sales tax increases, driver salaries balloon 70 percent in ten years*

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### Background

Over the last ten years, King County Metro has twice increased the sales tax rate. In 2000, Metro officials were successful in asking voters to approve a 0.2 percent rate hike and another 0.1 percent in 2006. Metro officials said these two tax increases would expand county bus service by 1.28 million hours by 2016. So far, Metro officials have only delivered about 307,000 hours, a third of the bus service they promised voters.<sup>1</sup>

While taxpayers and transit users have not received what they were promised, one group has benefited from the two tax increases, public bus drivers.

In 2000, Metro employees received about \$220 million in total compensation.<sup>2</sup> Despite two recessions, total compensation for Metro employees grew to \$324 million by 2008, an increase of 47 percent.<sup>3</sup>

In analyzing wage data provided by Metro officials, the growth in salaries for public bus drivers is even more notable. The following table compares wage data for Metro bus drivers in King County between 2000 and 2009.<sup>4</sup>

Year	2000	2009	% Growth
Metro Bus Drivers*	2,663	2,850	7.02%
Total Gross Salary**	\$79,169,848	\$134,810,069	70.28%
Annual Average Salary	\$29,730	\$47,302	59.11%
Drivers above \$75k	19	243	
Drivers over \$100k	0	20	

\*Excludes trainees, \*\* Includes overtime

In 2000, King County Metro had 2,663 transit operators who received compensation. In 2009, the number of drivers grew about seven percent to 2,850. Yet, total salaries grew 70 percent, from \$79 million in 2000 to about \$135 million in 2009.

<sup>1</sup> "King County officials overpromise bus service for tax increases, Metro collects enough money but fails to deliver service," Michael Ennis, Policy Note, Washington Policy Center, May, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> "Agency profiles, King County Metro," 2000 National Transit Database, September 2001, at [www.ntdprogram.gov/ntdprogram/pubs/profiles/2000/agency\\_profiles/0001.pdf](http://www.ntdprogram.gov/ntdprogram/pubs/profiles/2000/agency_profiles/0001.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> "Agency profiles, King County Metro," 2008 National Transit Database, November 2009, at [www.ntdprogram.gov/ntdprogram/pubs/profiles/2008/agency\\_profiles/0001.pdf](http://www.ntdprogram.gov/ntdprogram/pubs/profiles/2008/agency_profiles/0001.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Salary information obtained directly from King County Metro officials. The full wage list is available at [www.washingtonpolicy.org/sites/default/files/metro-drivers-salaries.xls](http://www.washingtonpolicy.org/sites/default/files/metro-drivers-salaries.xls).

In 2000, the average salary for bus drivers in King County was \$29,730 per year.<sup>5</sup> After the two sales tax increases in 2000 and 2006, the average salary for Metro bus drivers grew to \$47,302 per year, an increase of nearly 60 percent.<sup>6</sup>

Inflation over the same time period was only 25 percent.<sup>7</sup> This means average wages for Metro bus drivers grew by more than twice the rate of inflation.

### **Higher Wages Replace New Bus Service**

In 2000, only nineteen drivers made more than \$75,000 per year and none made over \$100,000. After the two sales tax increases, the number who made more than \$75,000 rose to 243 drivers, and now twenty drivers make more than \$100,000 per year.

These high-wage bus drivers cost taxpayers \$1.6 million in 2000. By 2009, these high wage earners required \$20.7 million per year, an increase of nearly 1,200 percent.

In part, the rapid growth in drivers' wages has stalled the ability of Metro's previous two tax increases to purchase the expanded service officials promised to voters. Nearly half of the projected revenue from the two tax increases is now devoted to higher wages.

Sharply higher wages have contributed to Metro's budget problems. Given the rapid growth in salaries over the last decade and as Metro wrestles with how to close its \$200 million budget hole, gaining control of high wages is an obvious starting point.

### **Driver Qualifications Do Not Justify Such High Wages**

It can be uncomfortable measuring the relationship between wages and a particular job. Many times the judgment can be subjective, arbitrary and emotional. It is true that bus drivers work hard, and on occasion, under dangerous circumstances, but sometimes wages can be so misaligned with qualifications that any reasonable person would be skeptical.

In this case, the skills needed to drive a bus do not generally require the qualifications that justify compensation within the six figure range. Here are the minimum qualifications Metro requires of transit operators in King County<sup>8</sup>:

- 21 years of age
- Valid Washington driver's license and ability to obtain a CDL Learner's Permit with Air Brake and Passenger endorsements
- An acceptable driving record at the time of the offer
- Reliable transportation to report to work
- Ability to speak and write in English
- Acceptable work history and employment references

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, CPI Calculator, at [www.minneapolisfed.org](http://www.minneapolisfed.org).

<sup>8</sup> King County Jobs, Transit Operator, April, 2010, at [www.washingtonpolicy.org/sites/default/files/Green-transit.jpg](http://www.washingtonpolicy.org/sites/default/files/Green-transit.jpg).

- Demonstrated ability in providing excellent customer service to the general public

With the exception of obtaining a Commercial Driver's License, the qualifications to drive a bus in King County do not require high levels of technical experience or any education. These qualifications are typical of many private sector jobs that pay far less than \$100,000 per year.

On the other hand, there are many other jobs that need substantially more skills, experience and education but pay less. For example, King County was recently hiring a payroll manager for its District Court system. The position requires knowledge and experience with dozens of court and accounting procedures, a four-year college degree, four years of payroll experience and two years of management experience. The starting annual salary is \$61,477 and tops out at \$78,242.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

The growth in wages for Metro bus drivers is financially unsustainable and harms King County's ability to provide transit service. Officials have claimed the depressed economy has eroded new sales tax revenue and caused it to miss new service delivery. Yet, drivers' salaries have risen at twice the rate of inflation over the same time period.

Voters who approved two tax increases were told the revenue was for expanded bus service, not higher wages for bus drivers.

Metro officials should gain control of these increases and deliver the service promised from the previous two tax increases before additional taxing authority is considered.

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<sup>9</sup> King County Jobs, Payroll Manager, April, 2010, at [www.washingtonpolicy.org/sites/default/files/KCOjobposting.jpg](http://www.washingtonpolicy.org/sites/default/files/KCOjobposting.jpg)