

Initial Response to Suburban Cities Association Information Request

March 25, 2011

March 15, 2011

To: Victor Obeso, Service Development Manager, King County Metro

From: Michael Hubner, Senior Policy Analyst, Suburban Cities Association

Re: Additional Information on Strategic Plan Update for SCA Caucus to the Regional Transit Committee

Thanks to you and the rest of the Metro staff for all of the hard work you did in preparing the draft Strategic Plan for Public Transportation for consideration by the Regional Transit Committee this spring. As the RTC begins that process, the Suburban Cities Association caucus and staff team has conducted a preliminary review of the plan document and service guidelines, and has identified a number of questions and requests for further information for King County staff. Given the relatively compressed time frame for reviewing and approving such a complex plan, we hope you will be able to respond to as many of these requests as early as possible. Along with other city staff, I am available to work with Metro and other King County staff to refine any of the below requests with respect to the resources available and in order to provide the most valuable and timely information to policy makers.

Questions

1. Questions about the implementation of Strategy 2.1.3. Explain more completely how the concept of “geographic value” is measured and factored into the system design decisions. Explain what aspects of the plan and service guidelines reflect the “relationship, but not an exact formula, between the tax revenue created in an area of King County and the distribution of public transit products and services.”

ANSWER: More information will be provided at the March 30 RTC workshop and additional written response may follow that session.

2. How were the activity centers selected? Please walk through process. Be prepared to address questions about why some areas were NOT identified as activity centers (for example, Bellevue College). How will the map of activity centers be updated over time?

ANSWER: In order to analyze and establish the basis for a future transit network that connects people to areas throughout King County that are currently served by transit, King County Metro identified activity areas to supplement the regionally designated Regional Growth and Manufacturing and Industrial Centers. The County-wide Planning Policy definition was the basis and starting point for determining activity areas, which is included below.

Activity Areas – from the Countywide Planning Policies:

“Activity Areas are envisioned as areas containing moderate concentrations of commercial development and housing that function as a focal point for the local community. Activity Areas contain a mix of land uses such as retail, recreation areas, public facilities, parks and open space. Although smaller in scale than Urban and Manufacturing/Industrial Centers, Activity Areas contain a sufficient density and mix of uses to provide similar benefits. Activity Areas are designed to 1) provide housing and employment opportunities, 2) provide retail, services and business opportunities, 3) reduce automobile use and support efficient transit service, and 4) consume less land with urban development. Encouraging compact development within Activity Areas is an important part of the Countywide Planning Policy vision promoting infill development and preventing sprawl.

Activity Areas are designated in local comprehensive plans. The size of the Activity Area and the mix and density of land uses are locally determined to meet community goals. Examples of Activity Areas include the central business districts of Kirkland, Burien, and Des Moines; East Hill in Kent; and a number of business districts in Seattle, such as Lake City, Wallingford, and West Seattle Junction.”

Metro consulted the comprehensive plans of cities in King County for their individual definitions of activity centers, which varied widely. Metro started with those defined activity centers and expanded on them to include more places that are indicators of transit use or that are transit attractions. The resulting combination of activity centers was intended to form the basis of a transit network serving areas throughout the county

These places include locations where all-day transit activity occurs; such as rail stations, transit centers and hubs, and park and rides. Typically, the transit related activity centers are either places where routes merge and a significant number of transfers occur or places that provide additional access to the rest of the transit system. Major institutions that are not in close proximity to other defined activity centers were also added to the list of activity centers. Examples are major medical centers, hospitals and community colleges. If an activity center had already been designated nearby the major institution, the institution was included as part of the activity center. For example, Bellevue Community College is not listed as a separate activity center because it is adjacent to the Eastgate Park and Ride, an identified activity center.

3. Please provide more explanation of the scoring and thresholds contained in the proposed service guidelines, for example, the table on SG-4 and others.

Answer: The scoring methodology was used to quantify qualitative factors that influence transit use. The technical documentation that was distributed to council staff and city staff on March 9th provided more detail about the factors and their thresholds. Scoring methodology and thresholds were established and calibrated according to industry standards and system-wide comparisons. An updated version of the definitions of measures as well as the data and scoring of the 113 all-day service corridors will be provided to the RTC at the March 30 workshop.

For example Metro's use of ¼ mile walk sheds is a use of industry standards while the specific land use and social equity thresholds were set relative to the different development patterns and demographics across the 113 all-day service corridors that were analyzed for walk distance to bus stops from households and jobs.

An important point dealing with the scoring of the corridors is that scores are summed together and it is not necessary to earn points in all factors to warrant higher levels of transit service. Measuring the concentration of transit use in minority or low income census tracts ensure that there are higher levels of service called for along these transit corridors. Primary connections between Regional Growth and Manufacturing and Industrial areas and other activity centers ensure that there is a network of transit services throughout the county regardless of land use, productivity or demographics. Land use scores ensure that development along each of the transit corridors throughout the county is evaluated equally.

Furthermore, Step Two of the scoring process, which looks at load and cost recovery, also ensures that the highest levels of transit service are matched with demand and productivity. It also ensures that service levels in each corridor will accommodate existing ridership.

As a result of the multi-step evaluation process, the total impact of thresholds and scores can only be appropriately assessed after completing both steps of the corridor evaluation process.

4. Given the growth and demographic changes within King County shown in the preliminary results of the 2010 Census, we urge Metro to use this data to the greatest extent possible to show to RTC the impacts of the policies and strategies under consideration in this plan. Please let the RTC know as soon as possible the degree to which this will be feasible within the timeframe of the next couple of months.

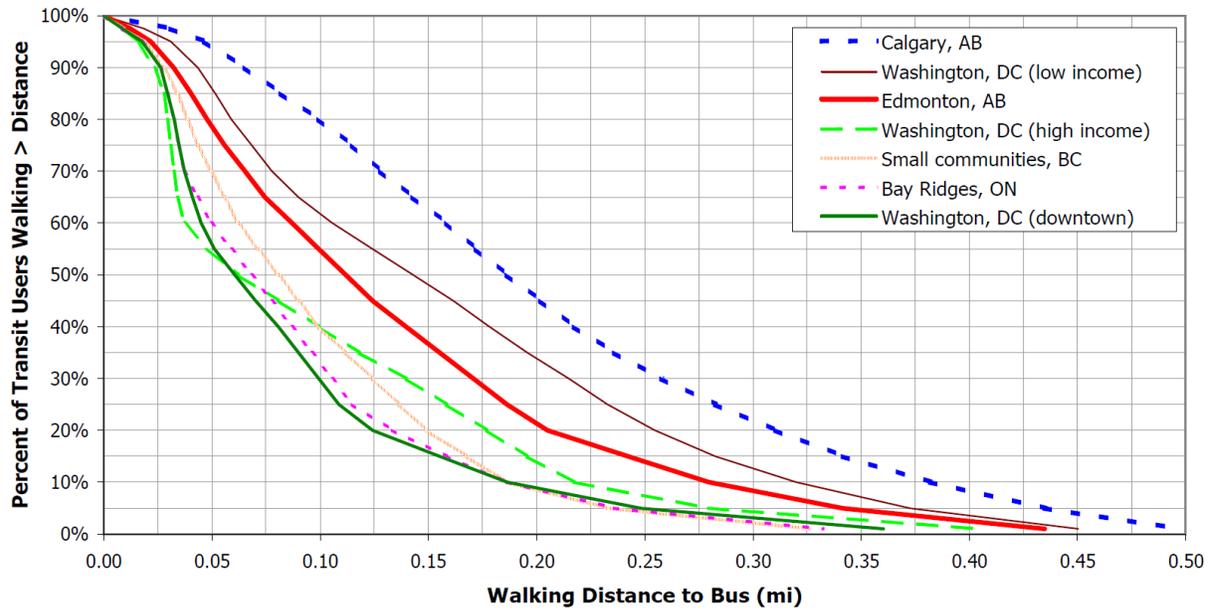
ANSWER: Census data from the 2000 Census was used in the analysis of the two social equity measures: low-income and minority. Metro is currently processing newly acquired income and minority data from the American Community Survey and the 2010 Census and will be reanalyzing low-income and minority measures in the near term using new data. This information is expected to be available by the March 30 RTC workshop.

5. How are park-n-rides addressed as a factor in the service guidelines? Can park-n-ride stalls be counted as components of “household density” in the scoring of corridors for appropriate service levels?

ANSWER: Some of the larger park and rides and transit centers are included in the identified activity centers, and are so captured in the analysis. There are other steps in the guidelines that account for ridership and the influence of park and rides. The analysis of over 90 routes that operate only in the weekday peak commute periods (sometimes called “peak overlay” service) includes a comparison of how full the bus is relative to the all-day service alternative – as many park and rides serve as primary points of origin for peak commute services, the concentration of riders at park and rides is captured in that manner as well. More information will be provided at the March 30 RTC workshop and additional written response may follow that session.

6. Radii of ¼ mile and 2 mile seem overly tight for suburban areas. What is the rationale behind choosing these distances? Can we look at alternatives and what difference might they make?

ANSWER: One quarter mile is considered the typical distance that a person will walk to access transit according to industry standards. The 1/4 mile distance is supported by significant transit industry research. While some people may be willing to walk farther than ¼ mile, the percentage of riders who walk more than a ¼ mile typically is less than 20% of total transit riders. The chart below shows an excerpt from the Transit Capacity and Quality of Service Manual 2nd Edition (TCRP Report 100). The guidelines analysis uses ¼ mile to assess how many jobs and households are within walk distance of a bus stop. In past plans, Metro has also assessed how many households are within 2 miles of a park and ride to determine the percent of county residents who have access to transit. However, the 2 mile distance does not factor into the current guidelines or their application.



Changes to the walking distance used in the analysis would not only impact suburban areas but, because of the denser street grid in urban areas, it would likely increase the measured land use densities in the urban areas more than in the suburban areas.

7. Focus on transit accessibility to minority and low-income households is appropriate, but perhaps too narrow. How are other “transit dependent” groups, such as seniors, disabled, and students, addressed in the service guidelines?

ANSWER: More information will be provided at the March 30 RTC workshop and additional written response may follow that session.

8. Corridor analysis appears to be exclusively focused on corridors that are served by the existing route network. Can you provide examples of analysis of prospective routes that are not currently served, particularly in the suburban areas of King County?

ANSWER: In the nearly 40 years of existence of Metro Transit, beginning from a framework where Metro assumed operation of public and private suburban and Seattle based transit systems and evolving from there, the current network reflects how Metro currently meets the transit needs of residents across King County. In the proposed Strategic Plan for Public Transportation 2011 – 2021, corridors were established using the existing bus and regional transit network as a starting point. These corridors provide the basis for specific proposals to grow, reduce or manage the Metro Transit network going forward. From this base we expect that new corridors will be analyzed in the future and that the methodology we have developed can be applied. Examples of new corridors that could be studied are:

- Green River CC – Kent East Hill – Fairwood – Renton
- Woodinville – Totem Lake – Rose Hill – Overlake.

Scenarios

1. Please provide to RTC projected outcomes of implementing the proposed service guidelines according to each of several scenarios, to include:
 - Service cuts over the near to mid term. We generally understand this to be in the range of 400,000 to 600,000 net hours, but will work with you to identify what scale of reduction is most appropriate for this scenario.
 - Service growth over a multi-year period that might occur in the future as funds become available. For comparability, consider a growth scenario that adds approximately the same number of hours lost in the service cuts scenario.
 - Service changes that might result in the near to mid term in the event that neither cuts nor additions are made to the overall Metro service level in the county.Output of these exercises should include estimated impacts within the current transit planning subareas, as well as jurisdiction level and route level detail where feasible. Following an initial round of scenarios, the SCA caucus would like to be able to request one or more “sensitivity tests” of alternative measures or criteria.

ANSWER: More information will be provided at the April 7 RTC workshop and additional written response may follow that session.

Other Information

1. We would like to see a crosswalk-type summary that indicates how the existing Metro Comprehensive Plan and Strategic Plan relate to the proposal under consideration. For example, which policies/strategies were retained? Which deleted? Which significantly amended?

ANSWER: This has been provided as a separate document on March 25, 2011.

2. A “sources and uses” table packet, such as provided to the RTTF, would be useful for the RTC to consider as background to the proposed plan.

ANSWER: RTC member notebooks contain this table on pages 49-51 of Tab 5. It can also be viewed online in the RTTF report, Appendix 5 at:

http://your.kingcounty.gov/kcdot/media/RTTF/RTTF_Final_Report.pdf

The sources and uses information was compiled from various Metro financial and service data sources and is not a standardized report. The October 2007 document in the RTTF report remains indicative relative to current conditions.

3. We would like to see more mapped data from the analyses performed pursuant to the service guidelines, such as:
- Walk radii around transit routes
 - Housing densities
 - Social equity factors
 - Output of corridor analyses in graphic or mapped form
 - Routes by “family” or service frequency/type

ANSWER: This will be discussed at the workshop on March 30 and additional written response may follow that session.

Finally, our representatives would like to have a clearer picture of how the strategic plan, as proposed, would likely be implemented through the budget process later this year, including information on specifically when and through what process Metro would be proposing service changes.

ANSWER: This response was prepared by RTC staff.

How the 2012-2013 transit biennial budget will implement the policy direction of the Transit Strategic Plan and the Service Guidelines:

Broadly speaking, the Transit Division budget provides funding authority to operate Metro Transit in a manner consistent with the countywide transit policies reviewed by the RTC. The biennial budget sets an overall funding level for the Transit Division, which is sufficient to support a certain amount of bus service hours.

If the adopted budget accommodates expanded bus service or requires service reductions, the Transit Division prepares a service change ordinance identifying specific bus route changes. The County Council must approve the proposed ordinance for the bus route changes to take effect. [The King County Code, K.C.C. 28.94.020, allows some minor bus route changes to be implemented by the Transit Division.] The overall impact of the bus service changes must reflect the policies established in the Strategic Plan for Public Transportation.

The biennial budget is now being prepared, and impacts of the Transit Strategic Plan and Service Guidelines will be factored in as soon as feasible. The Council will begin to review the budget starting in September.

During a budget crisis, like now, countywide transit policies and the transit budget both take on added importance. The current biennial budget for 2010-2011 is an example. This was an Executive-Council collaboration that implemented fare increases, staff reductions, audit efficiencies, and bus service reductions as a holistic approach to the crisis. This holistic approach also encompassed a review of the planning framework by establishing the RTTF process. The overall challenge and approach are described on page 15 of the RTTF Report in Tab 5 of the Notebook.

Because the budget crisis is still with us, the next biennial budget will likely involve similar comprehensive implementation strategies. Approval of the Strategic Plan and Service Guidelines prior to making future decisions will give these budget decisions much sharper focus, especially with respect to increased transparency, productivity, and efficiency.