



**"WHAT A MESS!"  
A CENTURY OF TRANSPORTATION MISTAKES  
IN THE CENTRAL PUGET SOUND REGION**

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The Central Puget Sound Region has a long and honored history of transportation mistakes that has gotten the region into its present dilemma. When there are too many people and not enough transportation infrastructure, the result is gridlock. Many urban regions developed good rail systems with strong connectivity only to dismantle them to make way for the private automobile. Then they spent billions to recreate the rail systems as the population grew, the cities and suburbs became denser, and the highway system became a liability, not an asset.

Seattle is no different from many other cities in North America, but its track record of failure puts it in a special category. It is the city that never seems to learn from its mistakes.

### **In the Beginning...**

The **Seattle-to-Tacoma interurban** ran from 1902 to 1928 from Seattle's Pioneer Square to Tacoma via the Green River communities (Kent, Auburn, etc.). The right of way paralleled the current BNSF (ex-Northern Pacific) line from Seattle to Tacoma, and there was a branch line to Renton. In both cities the high speed interurban connected to the existing **trolley network**, and in Seattle it connected to the city's **cable car lines**. Once governments built roads and people bought cars to drive on them, the line went bankrupt. Other cities, peering into the future, saved these lines, but this region chose to cast its lot totally with individual transportation. In the ultimate insult, the right of way today is largely occupied by Interurban *Avenue*.

The **Seattle-to-Everett interurban** ran from 1911 to 1940 from a terminal in downtown Seattle (currently the Greyhound station) and was owned by the corporate ancestor of Puget Sound Energy. This high speed interurban also connected with Seattle's extensive trolley network. The construction of US 99 (Aurora Avenue) in 1930 provided an easy automotive route between the two cities, and the line went out of business with no attempt to save it. Today the right of way is occupied by a power line, bike path, houses, businesses and Interstate 5.

The **Great Northern** operated passenger service to Vancouver (BC) and the **Northern Pacific** and **Union Pacific** to Portland. The **Southern Pacific** took passengers to Los Angeles and the **Northern Pacific**, **Great Northern** and **Milwaukee Road** to Chicago. Eventually, the Great Northern and Northern Pacific merged to form the **Burlington Northern** (1970), the Southern Pacific was acquired by the **Union Pacific** (1996), and the Milwaukee Road went bankrupt (1980). Passenger service ended up with **Amtrak**.

The **Woodinville Subdivision** (the "Eastside Line") was part of the Northern Pacific's Sumas Line, linking Auburn Yard to the inland communities north of Seattle all the way to the Canadian border where it connected with the Canadian Pacific. In the Seventies, the Burlington Northern severed portions of the line to move the traffic to its ex-Great Northern water level route through the cities.

From its creation in 1930, US 99 (SR 99 since 1965) ran through downtown Seattle on a couplet consisting of Western and Elliott Avenues. It often took more than an hour to traverse downtown, and by the postwar era traffic had become intolerable. The **Alaskan Way Viaduct**, built in 1953 to turn US 99 into a freeway, separated Seattle from its waterfront, and by the Seventies there were serious suggestions to tear it down. During this period of local depression, there was enough capacity on I-5 to handle traffic through downtown, so the suggestion was not outlandish. By the Eighties, traffic had built back up, so no one took the idea seriously anymore. The 2001 earthquake is causing the structure to slowly capsize.

**Interstates 5 and 405** were built in the Sixties and had to be widened immediately. There have been few periods when improvements were not being made to these two freeways to increase capacity. The war between capacity and use continues unabated and at tremendous cost due to the **Ironclad Law of Transportation Dynamics**: **“Transportation infrastructure always creates its own demand.”**

**Interstate 90** was completed from Factoria to the Idaho border in the Sixties, but the final stretch of interstate into Seattle, to include the new tunnels and floating bridges, was not ready until 1994.

The **Evergreen Point Floating Bridge** (SR 520) was opened in 1965 and charged tolls until it was paid off. The bridge has now reached the end of its useful life, and its replacement will be one of the most expensive highway projects in the state’s history.

The **Seattle trolleybus network** was put in place in 1940 when Seattle dismantled its system of trolley and cable cars. By the Sixties the network had been reduced to a shell, and there was serious discussion of bus replacement. However, by the Seventies it had become apparent that bus engines and transmissions could not take the hills of Seattle without tremendous cost, while the trolleybuses were as nimble as mountain goats. At significant cost, in 1979 the network was torn out, rebuilt and extended to cover most of its 1940 domain.

Seattle’s **George Benson Waterfront Streetcar** opened for business in 1982. The line was extended in 1993 and ran successfully until its barn was demolished for the Seattle Sculpture Garden in 2005. Despite optimistic press releases from King County, no one is sure whether the trolleys will ever run again, especially as the Alaskan Way Viaduct situation is still unresolved. The **South Lake Union Streetcar** is under construction, but no one is quite sure whether it will connect with the Waterfront Streetcar.

## **The Bogue Plan Fiasco**

Virgil Bogue's far-sighted 1911 plan was intended to redefine Seattle's urban core and transform the city into an American Paris. The plan included Central Station, a multimodal transportation facility on South Lake Union that would host boats and trains, and a **regional 91 mile rail rapid transit network**. Like similar rapid transit plans (1907, 1920, 1926) the main stem of this subway network would pass under Third Avenue. As Bogue saw it, building such a network in the city's formative years would be easier and cheaper than building it in later years after the city's pattern had set.

But Bogue also envisioned Seattle bestriding both sides of Lake Washington. One subway line was to go under Lake Washington and link downtown Seattle to Kirkland, a new planned bedroom community already linked to Seattle by ferry.

In 1912, due to opposition from property owners and organized labor, the voters turned this vision down by two-to-one.

## **The Forward Thrust Fiasco**

In 1968 two prominent Seattle attorneys, the Ellis brothers, put together an initiative to fund the building of a \$1.15 billion high speed, electric, heavy rail subway-elevated system that would serve the county. The federal government would put up 80% of the cost, and all the region had to do was come up with the remaining 20% via bonded indebtedness. This would have required a 60% approval vote on an initiative. The idea was based on the fact that similar lines were being built in South Jersey (PATCO) and the San Francisco Bay area (BART). Unfortunately, the approval vote was only 51%, so the measure failed.

The Ellis brothers succeeded in getting a re-vote for a \$1.3 billion system in 1970, but the voters rejected it again. The federal money allocated for Forward Thrust went to Atlanta to build MARTA, its high speed, electric, heavy rail subway-elevated system.

In 1971 the federal government cancelled the supersonic transport contract with Boeing, triggering massive layoffs and a depression that lasted until 1984 when the company began hiring again. Thanks to the poor economy, the highways emptied out as people moved away.

The remaining population got a rude awakening with the first oil shock in 1973. Had the 1968 vote gone the other way, a starter line would have been in place for this era of gas lines and lower speed limits. Seattle itself would have grown in a denser fashion and would have looked more like Boston over time.

## **The Stampede Pass Fiasco**

Rail lines heading east to Chicago had to cross the Cascades, and the three railroads had their tunnels through the mountains. The Great Northern had a 7.75 mile tunnel at **Stevens Pass** that is still the longest rail tunnel in the US. The Northern Pacific tunneled at **Stampede Pass** and the Milwaukee Road at **Snoqualmie Pass**.

Rail mergers and bankruptcies changed the situation. With the 1970 merger to form the Burlington Northern, the new company decided it no longer needed Stampede Pass, so it shut the line down. With the bankruptcy of the Milwaukee Road, the Snoqualmie Pass tunnel ended up becoming part of the John Wayne Trail. Eventually, the Burlington Northern sold much of the Stampede Pass line to Nick Temple, who formed the Washington Central Railroad and ran a dinner train on routes out of Yakima.

By the Nineties container traffic through the Puget Sound ports had grown to the point where the BN (now the **Burlington Northern Santa Fe**, thanks to yet another merger) had to reacquire the Stampede Pass line in 1996 for \$40 million and spend another \$135 million to get it in shape. Eric Temple, Nick's son, moved his dinner train to Renton on the Woodinville Subdivision. The BNSF had shown it could recover from a major mistake, but it was forced to pay heavily to do it.

## **The Bus Tunnel Fiasco**

As urban traffic grew through the Eighties, King County Metro decided it needed a tunnel under Third Avenue through which to move buses under downtown Seattle. Ramps were designed to provide easy access to the I-5 express lanes and I-90. This part of the project performed well.

But everyone understood that the tunnel was a stalking horse for an eventual subway; thus rails were embedded in the bus tunnel. Unfortunately, due to time and budget constraints, the rails were neither properly insulated nor super-elevated along curves. The tunnel had to be closed to bus traffic for two years to retrofit the rails.

## **The Regional Transit Master Plan Fiasco**

In 1995 Forward Thrust returned under a new title and new management. However, the financial landscape had changed dramatically. Federal largesse, which would have covered 80% of the 1968 Forward Thrust, would now cover only 20% of the \$6.7 billion Regional Transit Master Plan. Struck by sticker shock, the voters turned it down by 54%. The federal money allocated for this latest version of a high-speed, electric, heavy rail subway-elevated system went to New York to link the Long Island Railroad to Grand Central Terminal.

In 1996 the Regional Transit Master Plan returned with the words “light rail” substituted for “heavy rail” in the description and a new name.

### **Learning from San Diego**

The light rail renaissance had begun in San Diego in the early Eighties.

The massive floods of the winter of 1977-78 had washed out a Southern Pacific subsidiary that ran into Mexico. After abandonment the local transit authority bought the line, which paralleled I-5 from downtown to the border crossing at San Ysidro. The authority built a single track light rail (trolley) line with a few sidings for passing and opened it in 1981 using German rolling stock bought off the shelf. This starter line was a huge success and was double-tracked by 1983.

The authority then issued a master plan to build light rail lines all over San Diego County, mostly using abandoned or lightly used freight rail lines. Neighborhoods formed associations to create the political momentum to raise the taxes necessary to get “their” lines built. By 1989 a line was built east to the suburb of El Cajon, and it was quickly extended to Santee when that town begged – and paid – for an extension.

San Diego’s successful technique was to build the cheapest starter line that would work, let the people touch, feel and ride the line – and then stand back.

### **Sound Move Wins!**

To distill the argument that brought Sound Move to the voters in 1996, it was that “light” sounded cheaper than “heavy”. While it was obvious to many that Seattle needed a heavy rail, not light rail, solution, sticker shock would have killed it again. Thus, the Powers That Be decided to sell a light rail solution to the voters but low-balled the estimate, some bus advocates say deliberately.

With the successful vote in 1996 the Regional Transit Authority (later renamed **Sound Transit**) was created, and it was given a mandate for regional transit planning. Highways were outside its purview because they belong to the Washington State Department of Transportation, with the single exception of bus-only ramps off freeways. Sound Transit developed a plan for **freeway express buses**, **light rail**, and **commuter rail** that would run on freight railroad tracks. It developed a plan for **sub-area equity** that permitted taxes collected in an area to pay for transit improvements in that area.

Sound Transit immediately bought a fleet of buses and opened up an extremely successful freeway express bus network.

## The *Link* Light Rail Fiasco

The original proposal for *Link* light rail entailed a line that would go north from downtown Seattle to Northgate and south from downtown to SeaTac Airport. The airport line would eventually be extended to Tacoma in a later phase.

The line to the airport was not to run directly there from downtown. Instead it was to leave the Third Avenue bus tunnel for a line next to the existing bus way and then go under Beacon Hill in a very expensive tunnel with a station deep underground that could only be reached by elevator. From there it would surface and run down Martin Luther King Way in the Rainier Valley through minority neighborhoods and then cross I-5 to Boeing and the airport.

From the beginning it was apparent that *Link* was a real estate development project, rather than a transportation project. Further, once *Link* was built and created high density transit-oriented development, the resulting gentrification would force the minority residents out of their homes. (Gentrification is not a pretty process.)

What triggered the *Link* crisis of 2000 were cost overruns, because of which the **South Line** would end short of the airport and put the connection to the University of Washington on the **North Line** in doubt. Eventually it was deemed possible to build the North Line as far as Husky Stadium and add the South Line connection to the airport, but behind schedule. The South Line should be ready by 2009 and the North Line by 2016.

**ST2** will include an **East Line** across the I-90 floating bridge to Bellevue, and extensions on the South Line to Tacoma and on the North Line to Lynnwood. Finances permitting, there will be further extensions from Bellevue to Redmond and Lynnwood to Everett.

## ***Sounder***

The BNSF tracks between Seattle and Portland carry over 60 freight trains a day from the BNSF and both the Union Pacific and Tacoma & Eastern, which have rights over the line. Further, Amtrak has its *Cascades* trains and the Seattle-to-Los Angeles *Coast Starlight*. Finding 18 slots for *Sounder* trains was going to be impossible without major improvements.

The two tracks between Seattle and Tacoma, where the bulk of *Sounder* trains would run, were mono-directional. This meant that one track was reserved for northbound use and one for southbound. There were no switches to permit movement from one track to another. (In highway terminology, this is like a long two lane road with no passing allowed anywhere.) To permit *Sounder* trains to run on these tracks, they would have to be converted to bidirectional signaling, and a series of high speed switches would have to be installed to permit passenger trains to switch around slow freights. BNSF charged **\$350 million** for these improvements.

BNSF has a simple policy for those who want track improvements: “We’ll build anything you want, as long as you pay for it.” Sound Transit sent an inexperienced negotiator who gave BNSF a blank check. When questioned about the increased throughput for freight that the improvements would create, the railroad answered: “We’re more than happy to be a 40 mile an hour hauler of containers and bulk goods. Sure the improvements will help, but if you didn’t ask for them, we’d never build them.” Thus Sound Transit, intending to pay for track improvements for passenger rail, ended up paying for a major expansion of freight rail.

The line north from Seattle to Everett has long stretches of single track, and this line carries BNSF trains eastbound to Chicago via Stevens Pass and northbound to Canada. To permit *Sounder* trains to run on these tracks would require a double tracking project, and Sound Transit is assuming the bill for those improvements (with a perpetual easement) for **\$250 million** – even though the improvements will have dramatic effects on freight rail.

The improvements on the two lines are happening incrementally, so new slots open up slowly for *Sounder* trains. Sound Transit bought a full fleet of passenger cars and locomotives but discovered that this rolling stock could not all be put in service immediately. The agency has been leasing one-third of its rolling stock to other transit authorities over North America and recalling the cars and locomotives as new slots open up. By 2009 all 18 round trips to Tacoma and 4 to Everett will be in place.

The good news is that trains on the **Seattle-Tacoma** route run full at all times. The **Seattle- Everett** route runs about half full, but that is expected to increase after more trains are placed in service and the Mukilteo station opens in 2008.

### **The Monorail Fiasco**

The citizens of Seattle were unhappy with King County Metro’s buses and a light rail project that was years away from completion. So a Seattle cab driver pushed for an initiative that would create a monorail system to cover the city. There was a naive belief that a system designed by “the people”, not transit experts, would be a better system, and two successful initiatives created an authority to tax people in the city to build the monorail.



As usual, the cost estimates were low-balled, and once the correct figures arrived, so did sticker shock. Another initiative killed the project after **\$183 million** had been spent for nothing.

### **Fixing Stampede Pass**

With the (ex-Great Northern) Stevens Pass line saturated with freight trains, it became obvious to the Burlington Northern Santa Fe that their (ex-Northern Pacific) Stampede Pass line needed to be upgraded. The tunnel at Stampede Pass is not high enough to handle **double-stack container trains**, the latest innovation in railroading, so it permits only limited use of Stampede Pass. Raising the ceiling in the tunnel by crown-mining would cost **\$100 million**, and BNSF was looking for a partner to help pay for it.

### **The Eastside Line**

BNSF had used the Woodinville Subdivision for the occasional movement of aircraft parts to the Boeing plant at Renton, certain freight movements to other customers on the line, and Eric Temple's dinner train. Beyond that, the railroad believed the line had no further use, so it filed for abandonment. This decision was similar to the one that had caused the railroad to divest Stampede Pass years earlier. Sale of the line would provide a large one-time influx of cash.

Sound Transit had looked at the line in 1992 and concluded it had no use.

In the earliest phase of the multi-billion dollar I-405 widening project, three committees looked at alternatives to widening I-405, and one of them was to put some kind of passenger rail on the Eastside Line. However, Kenndale and Renton objected strenuously, so the idea was dropped.

Because of the constriction of the freeway right of way where the rail line crosses it at Wilburton, WSDOT decided it would be best to sever the rail line as part of the I-405 project. That would reduce the **multi-billion dollar** price tag by a mere **\$30 million**.

At this point, Ron Sims, the King County Executive, announced that he and the Port of Seattle had come to an agreement which would be set up in three provisions.

§ Provision #1. The Port of Seattle would buy the Woodinville Subdivision from BNSF for **\$103 million**.

Sims stated that this was the only way the Eastside Line could be preserved for rail service 20 to 40 years in the future when there was demand for it. But there were rumors in the halls of power that Sims wanted the corridor for a sewer trunk line that would open up large tracts of East King County for development.

§ Provision #2. King County would swap Boeing Field with the Port of Seattle for the Woodinville Subdivision. The rail corridor would be turned into a foot and bike path linked to the county trail system, and the port would pay \$66 million to turn the right of way into a trail, thus raising the port's stake to **\$169 million**.

Based on the sale of the nearby Associated Grocers property, Boeing Field is worth at least **\$1 billion**. This **\$169 million-versus-\$1 billion** land giveaway would hand the port control of two airports for a pittance. By structuring this deal as a swap, Sims could avoid a public vote.

Further, the argument that only by conversion to trail can a rail corridor be preserved is bogus. Rails and trails can co-exist, but thus far no rail line has ever been converted to trail and then converted back to rail. Like today's Burke-Gilman Trail, a trail becomes so popular that it becomes politically impossible to convert it back.

§ Provision #3. WSDOT would come up with **\$25 million** to help defray the cost of raising the ceiling of the Stampede Pass tunnel.

This provision was not really relevant to the first two provisions, but it was seen as a sweetener to help the ports increase their throughput.

A task force was created for this project by Sims with Julia Patterson, a King County councilwoman and former state senator, as chair. On the task force were politicians, people from the Puget Sound Regional Council, Discovery Institute, and Eric Temple of the dinner train. The recommendation of this task force was preordained.

In Olympia, in her testimony before the Senate Transportation Committee, Patterson stated that all three provisions had to go through or the deal would unravel. Senate Transportation chair Mary Margaret Haugen stated plainly that the state didn't have \$25 million to give her for the tunnel.

Testimony before the House Transportation Committee was acrimonious. Several House members denounced the deal and stated that passenger service needed to be initiated on the Eastside Line today, not 20 to 40 years from now.

Sims needs the state legislature to appropriate \$25 million for Provision #3, and the deal requires approval from the full King County Council.

### **All Aboard Washington's Solution**

With East Side communities not fully served by *Link* until 2024, there are burning questions in the minds of East Side taxpayers:

- Where are *our* lines?
- How come everybody else is getting some kind of rail and the East Side has to wait?
- Why are we adding rail in Seattle and tearing it out on the East Side?
- What happened to all that sub-area equity money?
- With the I-405 widening project and the gridlock it will create, why is nobody thinking of taking the rail line that parallels I-405 and using it for some kind of traffic mitigation?
- Why are people talking about rail service on the East Side in 20 to 40 years when the transportation crisis is today?

All Aboard Washington believes that Sound Transit holds the key. We suggest that Sound Transit divert money from its East King County sub-area equity pool to buy the line from BNSF. Then, by recalling leased-out cars and locomotives, Sound Transit could run trains on a clockwise loop line that would originate in Seattle, go north to Everett, east to Snohomish, south on the Eastside Line to Black River Junction (Tukwila), then go back north to Seattle. Train service would also run counterclockwise on this loop.

Further, Sound Transit could sell track rights to BNSF to move freight over the line in the event of an emergency.

This would require some rail improvements, to include refurbished roadbed and the installation of a number of judiciously spaced sidings to permit trains to go around each other on a single track line. This would also be financed via the East King County sub-area equity pool. Service could begin as quickly as 18 months following acquisition. At \$5 million per mile, the cost for this would be approximately **\$200 million**.

All Aboard Washington's goal is to end the almost unbroken string of transportation mistakes in the Puget Sound region and get the region on the same track as San Diego, Portland, St. Louis, Denver, Salt Lake City, Dallas and other metropolitan areas that have solved the urban public transportation mystery.

The region cannot afford another mistake. It's time to do something right.