

2024 Update on Waterfront & Northwest Belltown Transit Report

April 24, 2024



King County

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II. Proviso Text

On November 15, 2022, the King County Council (“Council”) unanimously adopted Ordinance **19546**¹ appropriating \$2.47 billion for the public transportation operating fund in the 2023-24 biennium, and including Section 114, Transit, Proviso P7.

TEXT OF PROVISIO P7:

Of this appropriation, \$100,000 shall not be expended or encumbered until the executive transmits a waterfront and northwest Belltown transit study update report and a motion that should acknowledge receipt of the report, and a motion acknowledging receipt of the report is passed by the council. The motion should reference the subject matter, the proviso's ordinance number, ordinance section and proviso number in both the title and body of the motion.

The update report shall include, but not be limited to, the following:

- A. A summary of the long-term concepts for transit service along the waterfront and in northwest Belltown ("the study area") that were identified in the waterfront and northwest Belltown transit study, which was approved in 2018 by Motion 15263 ("the transit study");
- B. A description of changes since 2018 that could affect the feasibility of implementing the long-term concepts for transit service in the study area including, but not limited to:
 - 1. Construction impacts or changes to construction timelines;
 - 2. Pandemic-related impacts to the Metro transit department's operations or workforce;
 - 3. Changes to policies adopted to guide transit service in King County, including the King County Metro Service Guidelines that were adopted through Ordinance 19367;
 - 4. Changes implemented by partners, such as the city of Seattle, that could affect the availability of partner funding for transit service in the study area; and
 - 5. Changes to the needs of those stakeholders identified in the transit study; and
- C. A summary of options for improving transit service in the study area, including, but not limited to route alignments and other public transportation options that can address multiple goals including travel by residents, employees and visitors, as well as a summary of partnership opportunities for implementing these improvements.

The executive should electronically file the report and motion required by this proviso no later than April 25, 2024, with the clerk of the council, who shall retain an electronic copy and provide an electronic copy to all councilmembers, the council chief of staff and the lead staff for the transportation, economy and environment committee or its successor.

¹ [King County 2023-24 Biennial Budget, Section 114, Transit](#)

III. Executive Summary

This report responds to King County Ordinance 19546, Section 114, Transit, Proviso P7, as amended. This report pertains to transit concepts along Seattle’s Waterfront and northwest Belltown neighborhood.

In 2018, the Executive transmitted a Waterfront & Northwest Belltown Transit Study² (the 2018 study) in response to Motion 14970 and approved by Motion 15263. The 2018 study listed several options for near-term transit improvements to mitigate construction impacts associated with the removal of the SR-99 Alaskan Way Viaduct, and the reconstruction and improvement of downtown Seattle’s waterfront. The study also presented three long-term strategies. The strategies addressed three potential for revised trolleybus service, a new waterfront transit route, and an extension of Route 125 which could be implemented if funding was identified, including through partnerships, after the most significant construction projects were completed.

As called for by the Proviso, this report provides updates on the status of those projects, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, updates to Metro policies that guide transit investment, changes in waterfront stakeholder needs since the 2018 study, and new strategies in addition to the long-term strategies presented in the 2018 study.

Changes Since 2018

Since 2020, the transit system has changed substantially due to Sound Transit Link light rail and RapidRide Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) expansions, as well as service suspensions put in place due to the global COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent workforce shortages. Metro continues to recruit, hire, and train additional staff as part of its overall service recovery and restoration strategy. In the next few years, Metro plans to restore and grow service through major mobility projects, as major transit network restructures often done to better integrate Metro service with high-capacity transit expansion, such as Link light rail or RapidRide lines. This approach is outlined in Metro’s Service Recovery Plan³ approved by Ordinance 19581.

In 2020, Metro established new transit stops on Alaskan Way at Columbia St. and South Jackson St. in Seattle, improving connections to the waterfront in Pioneer Square and providing frequent transit connections with the Washington State Ferry Terminal. These new stops are served by numerous Metro routes, including both the RapidRide C Line and the RapidRide H Line, which launched in March 2023.

Construction projects continue to impact Seattle’s waterfront. While many projects have been completed since the 2018 study, several projects remain in progress due to delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the 140-day concrete workers’ strike that ended in April 2022. The City of Seattle continues to work on Seattle’s Culture Connector Streetcar (formerly the Center City Connector), a project that the City suspended in 2018. While a revised timeline has not been established, the City continues to evaluate options for implementation. It recently conducted a delivery assessment⁴ to

²2018 Waterfront & North Belltown Transit Study, March 1, 2024, <https://mkkclegisearch.kingcounty.gov/View.ashx?M=F&ID=6409443&GUID=2F7BA147-79C7-4BF4-BF6A-DAE109659279>

³ King County Metro Service Recovery Plan, March 1, 2024, <https://kingcounty.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=11645318&GUID=133718F4-ED42-4156-8CA5-81657FAB7781>

⁴ Culture Connector Delivery Assessment Final Report, March 12, 2024, https://www.seattle.gov/documents/Departments/SDOT/Streetcar/C3_Delivery_Assessment_10312023.pdf

confirm and update assumptions from the 2018 design, address changing conditions and requirements, and work towards a new timeline and cost estimate for the project. However, without a new timeline or specific implementation plan, the future of the Culture Connector Streetcar remains unclear as of the writing of this report.

In 2021, several key policies that guide or govern Metro transit service development and investment were adopted through Ordinance 19367. Metro will use these policies to develop, engage community, and determine future service changes. These policies include Metro Connects,⁵ the Strategic Plan for Public Transportation,⁶ and Service Guidelines.⁷ These policy updates were informed by King County Metro’s Mobility Framework.⁸ The Mobility Framework is a set of a set of guiding principles and recommendations intended to inform Metro policies and practices. The Mobility Framework was community-led and co-created with the King County Metro Mobility Equity Cabinet, a group of 23 community leaders representing riders and a variety of organizations and communities countywide, focused on low and no-income people, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, and linguistically diverse communities.

In addition to changes in Metro policies, there have also been changes in how partners fund Metro service, and the potential for partner funding for waterfront transit expansion. Since the 2018 study, the City of Seattle’s transit funding measure expired and was renewed with a smaller funding measure. The smaller measure, known as the Seattle Transit Measure (STM) approved by voters in 2020, combined with Metro’s workforce capacity constraints, limits how and where the City of Seattle invests in the Seattle transit network.⁹ Metro continues engaging with the City of Seattle to explore fixed-route service changes to be funded by the STM, including small-scale additions that do not require additional operators or buses, and reallocating existing Seattle Transit Measure investments to better align with the City’s STM program goals. Metro will continue to partner with the City of Seattle to provide additional service to address the city’s transit service priorities as operational capacity increases, including in new or emerging markets.

Community engagement has shown that waterfront transit remains a priority for those living and working within the Seattle waterfront. This engagement indicated a need for transit for residents, employees, and visitors to Seattle’s waterfront, and that the lack of available transit remains a challenge. Since the 2018 study, respondents indicated an increased demand for transit, and noted an increase in traffic to the waterfront as pandemic-era restrictions were lifted. Many respondents expressed a desire for the Free Waterfront Shuttle, which operated as a seasonal, free, privately-operated shuttle in 2023, to return in the summer of 2024.

⁵ King County Metro Long-Range Plan: Metro Connects, March 1, 2024, <https://metrotransit.net/en/connects/>

⁶ King County Metro Strategic Plan 2021-2031, March 1, 2024, <https://kingcounty.gov/en/-/media/depts/metro/about/planning/pdf/2021-31/2021/metro-strategic-plan-111721>

⁷ King County Metro Service Guidelines, March 1, 2024, <https://kingcounty.gov/en/-/media/depts/metro/about/planning/pdf/2021-31/2021/metro-service-guidelines-111721.pdf>

⁸ King County Metro Transit, King County Metro Mobility Framework Report, March 1, 2024, <https://kingcounty.gov/~media/depts/metro/about/planning/mobility-framework/metro-mobility-framework-report.pdf>

⁹ STM <https://www.seattle.gov/transportation/projects-and-programs/programs/transit-program/proposition-1>

Waterfront Transit Concepts, Strategies, and Next Steps

The three long-term transit concepts shared in the 2018 study remain viable, and Metro could implement them if partnership funding for the capital and operational needs of each concept becomes available. Since 2018, no new partnership funding has been identified, and Metro's ability to add new service has changed. In the short-term, Metro service growth will be guided by the Service Recovery Plan.

Metro will use service restructure projects, also referred to as mobility projects, as the primary means for reshaping service, consistent with the Council-approved Service Recovery Plan and policies. If there are future opportunities to further develop, refine, and implement any new waterfront and northwest Belltown transit service operated by Metro that meet emerging ridership needs and build towards the Metro Connects vision, Metro would need to conduct a robust community engagement process and use its adopted policies.

While Metro would need to work with waterfront stakeholders to develop and refine proposed transit changes in Seattle, there may be opportunities to consider other concepts to serve the waterfront and address a variety of user needs. Options include a modified version of the waterfront route proposed in the 2018 study, a non-fixed route option such as a Dial-A-Ride Transit (DART) route, and a modification to Route 106, extending the route from its current terminal in the International District to the waterfront. These options, in addition to those studied in 2018, could serve a variety of transit needs along Seattle's waterfront and could be further explored.

More analysis on each concept, community engagement, and additional coordination with waterfront stakeholders would be needed to move any concept forward, along with identification of additional resources needed to support implementation. A partnership among waterfront stakeholders, including public agencies such as the City of Seattle and Port of Seattle, could be a pathway to further developing, funding, and implementing the concepts shared in this report.

IV. Background

Department Overview: King County Metro is the Puget Sound region’s largest public transportation agency. Metro provides bus, paratransit, on-demand, vanpool, and water taxi services, and operates Seattle Streetcar, Sound Transit Link light rail, and Sound Transit Express bus service. Metro is committed to providing safe, equitable, and sustainable mobility, and prioritizing service where needs are greatest.

Historic Context: The Waterfront Advisory Committee was formed in response to King County Council Motion 14970. This Motion requested options for improving service in northwest Belltown and on the waterfront north of Columbia Street; route alignments and other public transportation options to address multiple goals, including travel by residents, employees, and visitors, and partnership opportunities for making these improvements. Committee members included representatives of Metro, the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), Office of the Waterfront, the Seattle Historic Waterfront Association, Belltown Business Association, Alliance for Pioneer Square, Victoria Clipper, Martin Smith Inc., Commute Seattle, Port of Seattle, Seattle Aquarium, as well as Seattle City and King County Councilmembers.

In 2018, Metro produced a Seattle waterfront transit study¹⁰ that outlined both long-term and short-term strategies for supporting public transportation on the Seattle Waterfront. Short-term strategies were driven by the Alaskan Way Viaduct closure in Fall 2018 and included increased outreach efforts for businesses along the waterfront and an employer shared shuttle program. Long-term, post-construction, strategies included a trolley wire extension, a new transit route via Alaskan Way, and an extension of existing Metro Route 125.

Since the 2018 study, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted transit in King County, the region, and beyond. Metro implemented service suspensions in 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023 under the emergency authority granted by King County Code (KCC) 28.94.020.2a to respond to rapidly changing ridership and workforce availability. In addition, Metro implemented three restructures during the COVID-19 pandemic, including: North Eastside Mobility Project (March 2020); Renton, Kent, Auburn Mobility Project (September 2020) and North Link Connections Mobility Project (October 2021). Metro is also proposing two restructures to be implemented in August 2024, if approved: the Lynnwood Link Connections Mobility Project and the Madison Street Area Bus Service Change. Policies related to service provision were updated in 2021, including Metro Connects,¹¹ the Strategic Plan for Public Transportation,¹² and Service Guidelines.¹³ Service restorations and restructures were informed by Council-approved policies and community engagement processes and findings. Restorations and changes also prioritized service using equity and sustainability considerations, focusing on restoring service where needs are greatest and where ridership remained high.

¹⁰ 2018 Waterfront & North Belltown Transit Study, March 1, 2024, <https://mkcclegisearch.kingcounty.gov/View.ashx?M=F&ID=6409443&GUID=2F7BA147-79C7-4BF4-BF6A-DAE109659279>

¹¹ King County Metro Long-Range Plan: Metro Connects, March 1, 2024, <https://metrotransit.net/en/connects/>

¹² King County Metro Strategic Plan 2021-2031, March 1, 2024, <https://kingcounty.gov/en/-/media/depts/metro/about/planning/pdf/2021-31/2021/metro-strategic-plan-111721>

¹³ King County Metro Service Guidelines, March 1, 2024, <https://kingcounty.gov/en/-/media/depts/metro/about/planning/pdf/2021-31/2021/metro-service-guidelines-111721.pdf>

As outlined in the Service Recovery Plan,¹⁴ service restructure projects are the primary means for reshaping service and reinvesting suspended hours back into the system. Metro will work with the community and use policies to add service in ways that meet current and emerging needs and build towards the Metro Connects vision of all-day service that is frequent and reliable.

Key Current Conditions: Since the completion of Metro’s 2018 waterfront study, many major projects outlined in that study have reached completion. The Alaskan Way Viaduct has been removed and the Highway 99 Tunnel is now open and fully operational. Other projects along Seattle’s waterfront have been completed or are in progress. However, delays related to the pandemic and 2021/2022 concrete workers strike have affected numerous project timelines. In addition to construction impacts, new ridership patterns have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic. Weekday peak-period ridership continues to recover, but demand during the peak commute hours remains below pre-COVID levels. Weekends have and continue to maintain higher shares of ridership relative to weekdays when compared to 2019.

In 2023, as part of Ordinance 19712, \$500k was appropriated within the King County General Fund to support a free waterfront shuttle service during the summer months of 2024. This one-time funding from did not affect the Metro operating fund, as free waterfront service was not prioritized by Metro’s policy framework. The one-time General Fund monies are not expected to be re-appropriated for 2025, and there is currently no replacement funding for either a summer waterfront shuttle or a year-round shuttle. However, should funding be identified through new or expanded partnerships, the return of a summer waterfront shuttle or similar service, including the opportunity for Metro to operate a partner-funded service, such as a Dial-a-Ride Transit (DART) service, could occur.

Report Methodology: Metro’s Service Planning work group, within the Mobility Division, led the development of this report. Metro’s Community Engagement work group led the engagement with waterfront stakeholders, including a survey of transit needs as well as other waterfront community feedback.

¹⁴ King County Metro Service Recovery Plan, March 1, 2024, <https://kingcounty.legistar.com/View.ashx?M=F&ID=11645318&GUID=133718F4-ED42-4156-8CA5-81657FAB7781>

V. Report Requirements

This section is organized to align with the Proviso requirements.

A: Summary of long-term concepts for transit service along the study area identified in the Waterfront & Northwest Belltown Transit Study

The following section summarizes three long-term fixed-route transit strategies presented in the 2018 Waterfront & Northwest Belltown Transit Study.¹⁵ The study focused on two primary corridors, First Avenue and Alaskan Way, and identified three strategies:

- Extension of Route 125;
- Creation of a new fixed-route along the waterfront; and
- Extension of trolley Routes 1 and 14.

At the time of the 2018 study, no funding had been identified for these concepts. However, since the completion of the 2018 study, Metro implemented the new RapidRide H Line, and established new bus stops along the waterfront in Pioneer Square on Alaskan Way at Columbia St. and S Jackson St., served by both the RapidRide C and H Lines, and several other bus routes, providing greater transit access to the waterfront in Pioneer Square.

A summary of each concept is outlined below. More information on each concept can be found in the 2018 Waterfront & Northwest Belltown Transit Study.

Route 125 Extension

- Route 125 is an all-day SR-99 South route from South Seattle College and Delridge to Downtown that currently begins and ends in south Belltown.
- The 2018 study suggested that once two-way Columbia St. was completed (completed and opened in 2019), Metro could consider extending Route 125 via 1st Ave. to Broad St. or Seattle Center.
- This option carries a significant operating cost, requires 1st Ave. to be available to transit (the City of Seattle currently has curb lane restrictions for heavy vehicles on 1st Ave. between Marion St. and S Dearborn St.) and requires the securement of bus layover space in Belltown.

New Waterfront route

- In 2014, a previous study by the City of Seattle recommended a new route along the future surface Alaskan Way that would operate every 15 minutes.
- In the 2018 study, Metro shared a conceptual routing and supported exploring partnerships to help fund and operate the service.
- This option carries a significant operating cost and requires the securement of bus layover space in Pioneer Square and Belltown.

¹⁵2018 Waterfront & Northwest Belltown Transit Study, February 2, 2024, <https://mkcclegisearch.kingcounty.gov/View.ashx?M=F&ID=6409443&GUID=2F7BA147-79C7-4BF4-BF6A-DAE109659279>

Trolley wire extension on 1st Ave

- Routes 1 and 14 are through-routed together, meaning both buses transition from one route to the other along a shared pathway. New trolley wire along 1st Ave. could support moving the routes from 3rd Ave. to 1st Ave.
- Trolley wire extension on 1st Ave. is not in the current Metro Capital Improvement Program but could be explored to provide continuous trolley service between Pioneer Square and Seattle Center.
- This option requires approximately 0.6 miles of two-way trolley wire to be constructed and re-establishing bus zones on 1st Ave.
- The added operating cost for this option would be low.

B: Description of changes since 2018 that could affect feasibility of implementing long-term concepts for transit service in the study area

While many projects related to the replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct and improvement of public spaces along Seattle's waterfront have been completed, several ongoing projects and associated impacts to the public right-of-way along the waterfront are still underway. Additionally, since the completion of the 2018 Waterfront & Northwest Belltown Transit Study, travel patterns and needs have changed. The pandemic had significant impacts on travel demand as many office workers shifted to fully remote and hybrid in-office/remote work. Metro recently engaged with waterfront residents and employers to better understand the impacts the pandemic has had on the transit needs of employees, visitors, and residents in the waterfront and Belltown areas. Several key policies that guide Metro's transit service expansions and investments were also updated in 2021 to better reflect Metro's values of safety, sustainability, and equity. Details about these changes, and their current and potential impacts are described in the subsections below.

B.1. Construction impacts or changes to construction timelines

Pier 62 has been rebuilt with wildlife habitat improvements. Pier 58 has been removed and is in the process of being rebuilt. Construction on Colman Dock, that began in 2017, was completed at the end of 2023. The concrete workers strike of 2021/2022 has led to delays on the new Alaskan Way Park Promenade, East/West connections between Pioneer Square and Belltown, Pike and Pine streetscape improvements, Marion Street Bridge, Overlook Walk, Pier 58, and the Aquarium Ocean Pavilion. These projects are slated for completion at the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025. Construction timelines are further detailed in the tables below.

The 2018 study included concepts for both Alaskan Way and 1st Ave., between Pioneer Square and Belltown. However, in 2019, a comprehensive review of historic areaways, which are the hollow areas underneath sidewalks adjacent to streets along 1st Avenue, revealed significant structural vulnerabilities that could create unsafe conditions for heavy vehicles. The City of Seattle implemented curb lane restrictions along several portions of 1st Ave. Heavy vehicles, such as transit buses, can't drive or park next to the sidewalks in these areas along 1st Ave., where a vulnerable areaway exists. These constraints limit 1st Ave. as a viable pathway for the transit service concepts presented in the 2018 study, shifting the emphasis to Alaskan Way.

Alaskan Way north of Columbia St, could remain a viable transit pathway, however, numerous construction projects along Alaskan Way are currently limiting Metro's ability to maintain a predictable

and reliable pathway for transit operations. Many of these projects have experienced construction delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021/2022 concrete workers' strike. Construction activities will continue at least until 2025, and likely beyond, for projects along Alaskan Way including the Waterfront Promenade, Pioneer Square Street improvements, Pike and Pine Streetscape improvements, Overlook Walk, reconstruction of Pier 58, as well as the Aquarium Ocean Pavilion. Between S King St. and Columbia St., sidewalks may be narrowed and streets periodically closed to traffic. The Washington State Department of Transportation's surface streets connections project is underway, and may lead to occasional short-term, single-lane, or sidewalk closures.

Together, these projects limit Metro's ability to ensure reliable and unimpeded transit pathways to, from, and through the waterfront and Belltown areas that could be served with 40-ft. or 60-ft. transit vehicles. They also limit the ability to establish bus stops and bus layover areas, and may cause detours, reroutes, and closures that make transit service less reliable. Layover areas are places needed at each end of a route where the operator can park the bus to allow for the operator to take a rest break, and to allow time for the bus to begin its next trip on time, should the bus finish a preceding trip behind schedule. Adequate layover is needed at each end of a route to help maintain schedule reliability.

Table 1. Current and Planned Construction Projects on the Waterfront

Timeline	Project Name	Agency	Scope
2019-2024	Promenade	Office of the Waterfront	Bike improvements, public art, and public restrooms
June 2017-2025	Waterfront Park	City of Seattle Parks & Recreation	Seismic upgrades and access improvements
Aug 2015-2025	Seattle Aquarium Expansion	City of Seattle Parks & Rec	Pier 59 & 60 improvements. Visitor capacity additions
2019-2024	Alaskan Way/Elliott Way	Washington State Ferries; Office of the Waterfront	Rebuilding Colman Dock; Central Transmission Line Relocation Project
2020-2025	Pike/Pine Renaissance Act 1	Seattle Office of the Waterfront	Enhancing the public realm and pedestrian experience
2021-2024	Bell Street Park Extension	Seattle Office of the Waterfront	Between First Avenue and Elliott Way: adding landscaping, lighting and public space
2022-2025	Overlook Walk (Pike)	Office of the Waterfront	Provides pedestrian access from waterfront to Pike Market
2022–2025	Pier 58	Office of the Waterfront	Reconstruct Pier 58 between Miner’s Landing and the Seattle Aquarium
2024-2025	Pioneer Square East West Pedestrian Improvements	Office of the Waterfront	Construct improvements on portions of King, Main and Washington Streets, Yesler Way, and 2nd Avenue S to prioritize pedestrians
Project on hold	Culture Connector Streetcar	SDOT	City of Seattle currently evaluating

The Culture Connector project began as the Seattle Center City Connector in 2017. This 1.27-mile streetcar connection through downtown would link the existing South Lake Union Streetcar and the First Hill Streetcar lines. The Culture Connector project was paused in June of 2020 because of diminished funding due to COVID-19. A delivery assessment was completed in late 2023 to update existing project assumptions, costs, and requirements, however, a construction and delivery timeline has not been set. Without a specific timeline or implementation plan, further development of the Culture Connector Streetcar remains paused, and its potential impacts to 1st Ave. are unknown.

B.2. Pandemic-related impacts to the Metro transit department's operations or workforce

As has been previously shared with the Council, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted transit in King County, the region, and beyond. Metro implemented service suspensions in 2020, 2021, 2022, and

2023 under the emergency authority granted by KCC 28.94.020.2a to respond to unprecedented changes in ridership and workforce availability. Metro prepared a Service Recovery Plan to authorize continued suspensions and provide an outline of Metro’s plans for service recovery going forward. The Service Recovery Plan was approved by the King County Council in March 2023, via Ordinance 19581.

While Metro currently possesses adequate funding to partially restore service in the remainder of the 2023-2024 biennium consistent with the adopted budget, work remains to stabilize operations before restoring suspended service or expanding services. Additionally, Metro needs to hire and train staff not only to deliver bus service, but also to support the planned expansions of Sound Transit Link light rail extensions. Hopelink, Metro’s contracted service provider for Dial-a-Ride Transit (DART) and other services, is also experiencing capacity challenges that are resulting in the continuation of service suspensions. Metro will continue to coordinate with Hopelink to consider restoration of suspended DART service when staffing allows.

Availability of bus operators, mechanics, and fleet availability are key constraints on Metro’s ability to increase service levels and expand transit services. Metro currently provides regular workforce updates and operational capacity updates in a variety of forums, including regular reports on current workforce and fleet availability status to the the King County Council. Regular updates are also provided by Metro’s Chief of Staff at the King County Council Staff Transit Interbranch meeting, as well as ongoing and regular reporting at the King County Council’s Transportation, Economy, and Environment Committee meetings. At this time, and through spring of 2025, Metro is submitting Transit Riders Now reports as directed by Ordinance 19546, Section 114, Transit, Proviso P5, subsequently amended via Ordinance 19633, which also offer details on Metro’s current workforce and service.

These constraints currently limit Metro’s ability to consider new service along Seattle’s waterfront. The pandemic and increased rates of remote work have created shifts in travel demands and ridership that are likely to persist for many years. As Metro’s workforce recovers, there may be future opportunities for partners to fund waterfront stakeholder-identified needs. The transportation landscape has changed, and Metro is looking to improve services and better match current and future transit needs, rather than focusing on pre-pandemic needs. Service recovery will be guided by current policies, including Metro Connects, the Strategic Plan for Public Transportation and Service Guidelines. Relevant components of each are described in the next section of this report. These policies were updated in 2021 to better align with King County equity and sustainability goals. Aspects of these policies most relevant to service recovery and growth are described below.

[B.3. Changes to policies adopted to guide transit service in King County, including the King County Metro Service Guidelines that were adopted through Ordinance 19367](#)

Since the adoption of the 2018 waterfront study, several key policies that guide or govern Metro transit service development and investment were updated. These policy updates were informed by King County Metro’s Mobility Framework. The Mobility Framework is a set of guiding principles and recommendations intended to inform Metro policies and practices. The Mobility Framework was community-led and co-created with the King County Metro Mobility Equity Cabinet, a group of 23 community leaders representing riders and a variety of organizations and communities countywide, focused on low and no-income people, Black, Indigenous, and people of color, immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, and limited-English speaking communities.

King County Metro's Mobility Framework designates mobility as a human right and elevates issues of equity and sustainability as key issues in delivering mobility services to communities. Particularly relevant to Metro's ability to explore fixed-route waterfront transit are the key updates to the following guiding policies that were approved by the King County Council in December 2021, via Ordinance 19367, in accordance with the Mobility framework process.

King County Metro Service Guidelines

King County Metro's Service Guidelines establishes policies for Metro that guide planning and operations of most Metro services, particularly fixed-route and flexible services. The Service Guidelines outline how ridership, performance, and reliability are measured and how those metrics impact potential restructures to service. The Guidelines also create prompts for service restructures, thus giving way to Mobility Projects and the ability to adapt service to better suit community needs. The 2021 Updates to the Service Guidelines aligns priorities with the Mobility Framework, identifies roles and performance measures for Flexible Service, prioritizes equity in all service investments, describes land uses that support each transit service type, better incorporates Metro Connects, updates engagement and partnership section, and looks at low-performing routes for negative greenhouse gas impacts.

Service that exists today does not always have an equivalent in the Metro Connects networks. Metro evaluates the existing service until a service restructure triggers consideration of network adjustments to fully integrate the Metro Connects interim network. While the Service Guidelines offer direction on how new transit services should be designed, they do not identify new corridors or markets for transit service, such as Seattle's waterfront. Where Metro Connects envisions service where none exists today, the routes from Metro Connects will be evaluated as a service growth need. However, the Service Guidelines do provide direction on how Metro can partner with others to serve business or community priorities with new or expanded public transportation options that may not be identified in Metro Connects. Metro could explore partnerships to serve the waterfront that adhere to this guidance.

King County Metro Strategic Plan for Public Transportation 2021 – 2031

King County Metro's Strategic Plan is a guiding document that establishes 10 agency goals, along with objectives, outcomes, and strategies to achieve them and measures to track progress. The plan highlights Metro's dedication to providing equitable opportunities for people to access public transportation and empower people and communities. In a rapidly growing region, Metro is responsible for adjusting and responding to ever-evolving community needs. The goals of any new or expanded services, including along Seattle's waterfront, should be in line with established objectives in the Strategic Plan. The 2021 Updates to the Strategic Plan align goals, strategies, and objectives with the Mobility Framework's Guiding principles and recommendations, include updates on key initiatives such as Climate Goals, Innovation, and equitable transit-oriented communities' policy. Lastly, the updates simplify performance measures and align them with policy drivers.

Metro Connects

As the long-range vision document for King County Metro Transit, Metro Connects is the path toward a more integrated transit network that accommodates growth, promotes social equity, and protects the environment. This planned network allows Metro to plan for future network growth using a multitude of rider options, including Link light rail, RapidRide, Metro's frequent network, local service, and flexible transit. The transit networks included in Metro Connects represent a vision for the agency as growth is possible. To fully implement this vision, additional funding is needed, which has not yet been identified. The 2021 updates to Metro Connects update costs, incorporate mobility framework recommendations,

clarify expectations and opportunity for partnerships, update targeted revisions to service network map, acknowledge COVID-19, and update the document to reflect Metro becoming a mobility agency.

Currently, Metro Connects long-range service networks do not include a dedicated Seattle waterfront fixed-route service, nor modifications to existing routes proposed in the 2018 waterfront study. Rather, Metro Connects, alongside Metro’s Service Guidelines, offers direction on how Metro should prioritize service growth and investment, particularly through major mobility projects.

B.4. Changes implemented by partners, such as the city of Seattle, that could affect the availability of partner funding for transit service in the study area

Several changes to various potential funding partners have occurred since the acceptance of the 2018 waterfront study. The City of Seattle’s transit funding measure in effect at that time expired and was replaced in 2020 by a new Seattle Transit Measure. The renewed STM provides lower funding for transit service than the measure in place in 2018 by roughly half of the amount of earlier measure, so Metro suspended some Seattle-funded service in 2020 and made permanent reductions in 2021. Metro and the City of Seattle worked together to plan and implement reductions in service funded by the STM in Fall 2021. Metro will continue to work with the City of Seattle to implement new and continued STM investments on Metro service. Unless renewed or replaced, the STM will expire in early 2027. If the City of Seattle expresses an interest in using these or other funds for waterfront transit service, Metro could partner with the City of Seattle to conduct a robust community engagement process and further develop or refine various service concepts for implementation.

B.5. Changes to the needs of those stakeholders identified in the transit study

In accordance with the Proviso P7 of Ordinance 19546, King County Metro requested feedback of stakeholders identified in the Waterfront & Northwest Belltown Transit Study originally submitted in 2018, to determine any travel changes by residents, employees, and visitors to the area.

Waterfront Advisory Group

Metro previously convened a Waterfront Advisory Group comprised of stakeholders representing businesses, employers, and residents in the waterfront and north Belltown corridor, as well as staff from the partner agencies. For this updated report, Waterfront Advisory Group members received an online survey to convey changes in their travel needs.

Stakeholders

The Waterfront Advisory Group consists of the following stakeholders:

- Alliance for Pioneer Square
- Belltown Business Association
- Belltown Community Council
- City of Seattle - Seattle Department of Transportation
- City of Seattle - Office of the Waterfront
- Commute Seattle
- Downtown Residents Council
- Friends of the Waterfront
- King County Water Taxi - Marine Division
- Martin Smith Inc.
- Office of King County Councilmember Jorge Barón
- Office of King County Councilmember Teresa Mosqueda

- Port of Seattle
- Seattle Aquarium
- Seattle Historic Waterfront Association
- Victoria Clipper
- Washington State Ferries

Survey Results

The survey was released January 17, 2024, with a deadline of January 26, 2024. Metro received 40 responses with an 82 percent completion rate. Several key themes were identified in the survey results.

- **The demand for transportation options along the waterfront has increased since 2018.** More than 75 percent of survey respondents said that demand for transportation had increased among their employees; 80 percent said that demand had increased among visitors to their business.
- **As pandemic-era restrictions have lifted, life has come back to downtown Seattle – and this has meant more traffic to businesses along the waterfront.** Many that were working from home during the pandemic are transitioning back to the office and have increased transportation needs. Hiring has also increased along the waterfront as businesses have reopened. Respondents noted a significant increase in traffic to shops, storefronts, and tourist attractions (like the Aquarium) and in many cases, even surpassing pre-pandemic volumes.
- **Parking is becoming tougher to find along the waterfront, shaping the travel behavior of employees and visitors alike.** Some who live in the area have turned to transit instead. Although, as will be discussed in more detail, this decision has not always been without compromise (particularly within the context of diminishing transit options). Out-of-towners, by contrast, often turn to rideshare services, creating additional (unwanted) traffic.
- **The lack of transit options accessible from the waterfront remains a challenge – for businesses, for tourists, and for residents.** Survey respondents noted the lack of transit service to connect downtown hotels to the waterfront, or to help feed their employees into the Metro and Link connection points along 3rd Avenue after their shifts. Some reminisced about previous transit options that no longer exist (e.g., the waterfront trolley) and the opportunity these provided. Others called attention to emergent safety considerations downtown such as rising incidence of assaults, which have rendered the demand for accessible transit more urgent.
- **Many respondents – nearly a quarter of them – called for the return and expansion of the Waterfront Shuttle program, which proved very popular over the summer.** As the survey respondents put it (in their own words):
 - “With the massive investment in the Seattle waterfront, including the Aquarium, Colman Dock, the city’s new event pier, and the fabulous art and boulevard, PLEASE provide easy access to this area. How about the waterfront shuttle year-round? Why wait for the streetcar, which might not ever happen? If we made the Waterfront Shuttle a reliable service with easy connections, people will use it!”

- “This is a critical moment for the County to invest in transportation options along the waterfront. The shuttle has been an important first step; the County investment has been critical, given the impact of construction on the business community and ensuring greater access to visitors and local residents. With Waterfront Park opening in 2025, we have an opportunity to map a stronger, more expansive, effective transportation plan to/from the waterfront and neighborhoods and parts of downtown. This will ensure better access to residents, visitors, and employees and reduce the traffic challenges.”

Based on the feedback from stakeholders, many stakeholders along Seattle’s waterfront have maintained a strong desire to see transit services expanded to Alaskan Way. There was also positive feedback provided on the free waterfront shuttle that operated in 2023. The desires to serve multiple important destinations and to address a variety of travel patterns informed several updated service concepts presented in the next section of this report. The new and updated concepts represent the desire to connect the waterfront to additional key destinations, such as Link light rail and the civic campus, as well as the desire for seven-day a week service.

Transit Proviso P7, Requirement C: Summary of options for improving transit service in the study area

As part of the 2018 study, Metro identified potential transit options to increase service to waterfront destinations. However, each of these options would require additional operating resources and capital investments such as new bus stops, layover space, and operator comfort stations (restrooms for operators during breaks). Metro does not currently have resources identified for this service investment or operational capacity to add new service, or for necessary capital improvements. However, new or additional resources identified through partnerships could support implementation of those concepts.

New options to improve transit in the waterfront study area with fixed-route bus service beyond those presented in the 2018 study are limited. This is because only a small set of routes could serve the waterfront via an extension (e.g., Routes 106 or 125), and changes to other existing transit routes would reorient those routes away from their current markets to serve the waterfront. Feasibility of adding or constructing new bus stops could be impacted by current construction projects, availability of space, technical requirements for in-lane bus stops (such as stop length), and staff capacity. New service like a dedicated waterfront transit route would require resources that Metro does not currently have the capacity to deliver. Partnerships with other agencies, organizations, and businesses, including the City of Seattle, could provide opportunities to fund and deliver additional concepts and solutions.

Metro has also expanded some service along the waterfront in Pioneer Square since the completion of the 2018 study. In 2023, Metro implemented the new RapidRide H Line, and in 2019, Metro established new bus stops along the waterfront in Pioneer Square on Alaskan Way at Columbia St. and S Jackson St., served by both the RapidRide C and H Lines, and several other bus routes, providing greater transit access to the waterfront in Pioneer Square. This new connection also provides frequent transit connections with the Seattle Ferry Terminal, and makes connections to numerous other routes on 3rd Ave.

To further develop, refine, and implement any new waterfront and northwest Belltown transit service that meet emerging ridership needs and build towards the Metro Connects vision, Metro would need to work with community and use its adopted policies. Metro would need to conduct a robust engagement

process to develop and refine service priorities in conjunction with the community, which would include opportunities for waterfront stakeholders to further participate in Metro’s engagement process. Any proposed changes to service along Seattle’s waterfront and Belltown neighborhood should be considered in the broader context of the transit network and prioritize changes to service using equity and sustainability considerations, focusing on areas where needs are greatest and where demand is highest.

If there are future opportunities for Metro to consider changes to transit along Seattle’s waterfront, Metro could consider or refine other concepts to serve the waterfront and address a variety of user needs in addition to the potential revisions to Routes 1 and 14, extension of Route 125, and new waterfront transit route presented in the 2018 study. In addition to the concepts presented in the 2018 study (summarized in Section A of this report), other options include a modified version of the waterfront route proposed in the 2018 study, similar to the free Waterfront Shuttle that operated in 2023, and a modification to Route 106 to extend the route from its current terminal in the International District to the waterfront. Each concept would require more analysis, community engagement, and additional coordination and funding partnerships with waterfront stakeholders to move any one of these concepts (or something different) forward for consideration of implementation. The following section summarizes a revision to a concept presented in the 2018 study, as well as an additional concept to revise existing Route 106.

Revised Waterfront Shuttle Concept

The updated waterfront shuttle concept would add a revision to the concept shared in the 2018 study to serve civic buildings along 4th Ave. and 5th Ave., connecting them to the downtown waterfront. This shuttle service could be operated by Metro with funding secured through a partnership with waterfront stakeholders, which could provide additional flexibility on defining its service levels and span since it would be independent from other Metro fixed route service. Some challenges with the waterfront shuttle concept include serving a market which may not perform well compared to other Metro fixed route service. Any new waterfront transit route would also require new layover/comfort station access at both the northern and southern ends of the route. Details for the modified waterfront shuttle concept are outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Revised Waterfront Shuttle Concept

Service Design – Waterfront Shuttle	
Northbound (Outbound)	Southbound (Inbound)
To: North Belltown or Uptown (pathway & layover TBD) From: International District Station	To: International District Station From: North Belltown or Uptown (pathway & layover TBD)
<p>Notes: Could also explore options that serve Pioneer Square instead of the business district along 4th/5th Ave.</p>	<p>Notes: Could also explore options that serve Pioneer Square instead of the business district along 4th/5th Ave.</p>

Table 2 Revised Waterfront Shuttle Details

Service Details - Waterfront Shuttle	
Destinations Served	International District-Chinatown Link Station, the civic buildings along 4th Ave. and 5th Ave., Colman Dock, Pier 54, the Seattle Aquarium, Port of Seattle Headquarters, and North Belltown and/or Uptown neighborhood.
Service Levels	Every 20-minutes between 6:00AM and 11:00PM
Span	From 6:00AM to 11:00PM
Day of Operation	All-week (7 days a week)
Operational Costs (Service Hours)	23,800 annual service hours
Potential Right-of-Way Challenges / Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pathway through Belltown/Uptown will need to be determined in coordination with Metro and SDOT Staff. ○ Turning movements from Madison to Alaskan Way will need to be analyzed further with SDOT.
Layover location & Comfort Station	A layover location and comfort station would need to be identified or secured. The estimated operational cost of this service is contingent upon finding a comfort station and layover and could be much higher if Metro is unable to secure it within North Belltown or Uptown.

Route 106 Waterfront Extension Concept

The Route 106 currently has its northernmost first and last stop at the International District-Chinatown Link Station. Extending Route 106 north to serve the downtown waterfront could attract new riders to this route that serves over 4,600 daily weekday rides (Fall 2023 data), and establish a new frequent, all-day transit connection between the waterfront, International District, and the International District-Chinatown Link station. However, this possible extension faces several challenges. The extension of the route to the downtown waterfront would likely negatively impact Route 106’s reliability. Extending the route from its current terminal could create more variability in the schedule, due to additional traffic related to sports and other events at Lumen Field and T-Mobile Park ferry loading and unloading at Colman Dock and operating on streets with limited or no transit priority. Routing through Pioneer Square would need to be determined through a collaborative effort with SDOT – existing area ways may be a challenge when determining a pathway through this neighborhood. Additionally, this concept would add a frequent all-day route to the downtown waterfront where that level of service may not be warranted. Details of the proposed concept are outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Route 106 Extension Concept

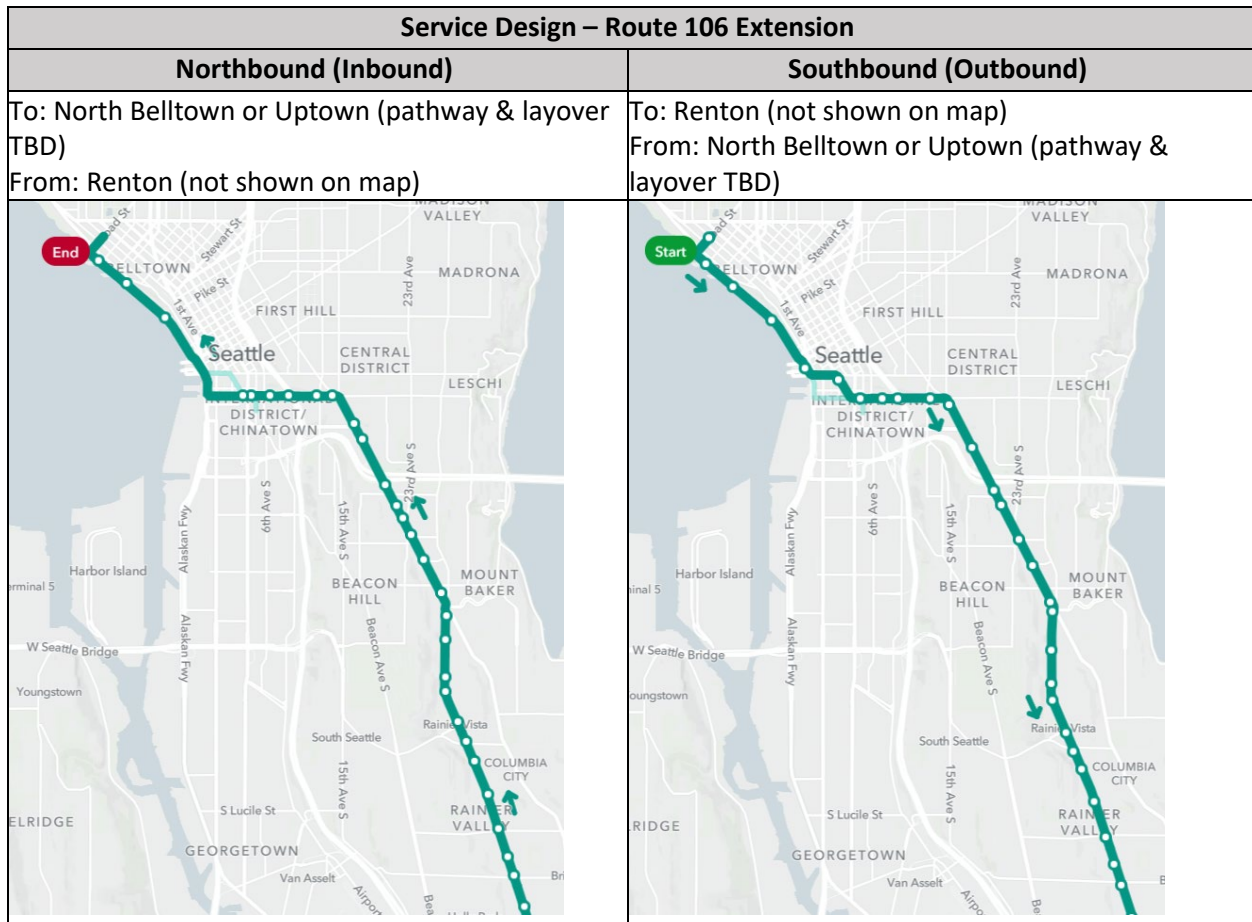


Table 3. Route 106 Extension Details

Service Details – Route 106 Extension	
Destinations Served	International District, Pioneer Square, Colman Dock, Pier 54, the Seattle Aquarium, Port of Seattle Headquarters, and Northwest Belltown and/or Uptown neighborhood.
Service Levels	<p>Weekdays:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Every 30-minutes between 5:00AM and 6:00AM ○ Every 15-minutes between 6:00AM and 7:00PM ○ Every 30-minutes between 7:00PM and 11:00PM ○ Every 60-minutes between 11:00PM and Midnight <p>Weekends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Every 30-minutes between 5:00AM and 7:00AM ○ Every 15-minutes between 7:00AM and 7:00PM ○ Every 30-minutes between 7:00PM and 11:00PM ○ Every 60-minutes between 11:00PM and Midnight
Span	From 5:00AM to midnight
Day of Operation	All-week (7 days a week)
Operational Costs (Service Hours)	21,300 annual service hours
Potential Right-of-Way Challenges / Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pathway through Belltown/Uptown will need to be determined in coordination with Metro and SDOT Staff. ○ Areaways and turning movement in Pioneer Square might be a challenge. ○ Speed and reliability of service through Pioneer Square every day and especially during sports and events at Lumen Field and T-Mobile Park, and during peak ferry loading and unloading at Colman Dock, can be challenging.
Layover location & Comfort Station	A layover location and comfort station has not yet been identified or secured. The operational cost of this service is contingent upon finding a comfort station and layover. Service costs could be much higher if supporting facilities are not secured in Northwest Belltown or Uptown.

The concepts shared in the 2018 study, in addition to those above, each carry capital and operating costs. For capital improvements such as bus stops, layover, and transit priority, Metro must engage with the City of Seattle about partnering to deliver those types of improvements needed to support transit operations, as SDOT must approve locations for bus stops and layovers. Funding would need to be identified to design and construct any improvements in the City's right-of-way. Businesses and other stakeholders along the waterfront could also engage Metro to fund additional transit service on existing routes, as operational capacity constraints allow. Past examples of partnerships with Metro to fund transit service on existing routes include Amazon funding additional trips on routes serving its South Lake Union campus, and Microsoft funding additional service on routes serving its Overlake campus. These partnerships are enabled when stakeholders approach Metro with resources to address a transportation need. Waterfront stakeholders, including the City of Seattle and Port of Seattle, could

partner with other waterfront stakeholders to fund a Metro-operated service that responds to those needs.

Other non-fixed route options, such as a Dial-A-Ride Transit (DART) route may also be an option for a partner-funded service, as operational capacity allows. Similar to the waterfront shuttle that operated in the summer of 2023, this type of service would use smaller transit vehicles but with the added flexibility to perform a limited number of off-route deviations upon request. In addition to operating fixed routing according to a regular schedule, DART vehicles can also go off route to pick up and drop off passengers within a defined service area.

Funding partnerships for waterfront transit would follow the guidance provided by Metro’s Council-approved Service Guidelines. Metro will make exceptions to the investment priorities outlined in the Service Guidelines to leverage partner funding as follows:

- Services that are fully funded by Metro’s partners generally will be implemented at the next service change if the investment clearly and substantially benefits Metro’s goals and if Metro has capacity to deliver added service. The goals include meeting unmet needs of priority populations, advancing King County’s climate goal of reducing car trips, increasing ridership, and supporting Metro’s long-range vision.
- Metro will ensure that service partnerships have acceptable contract terms, adequate operational infrastructure, and robust community engagement.
- Metro will prioritize the implementation of partner investments that advance Metro’s goals. Metro’s priorities are, in this order: services that serve equity priority areas, productive service, and reliable service. If a service partnership is partially funded, Metro will consider the level of contribution and level of support for Metro policy goals in the prioritization of implementation.

Following the guidance above, businesses, public agencies, and other organizations could partner together with Metro to fund concepts from the 2018 report, the updated fixed-route concepts, or potential DART service. Partner resources to fund these or other concepts operated by Metro could respond to a community a need along the waterfront where current policies may not prioritize waterfront service growth among other competing needs across the transit system.

VI. Conclusion/Next Actions

Waterfront stakeholders continue to support transit expansion to Seattle’s waterfront to address a variety of needs, including those of residents, employees, and visitors.

This study identified two additional concepts that could be considered along with the three long-term concepts presented in the 2018 study. Each concept summarized in this report would require greater community and stakeholder engagement to refine the concept, substantial capital improvements (new bus stops along Alaskan Way, new transit layover and comfort station access in either Uptown or northwest Belltown), additional transit operating funds, and close coordination with Metro’s partners at the City of Seattle. Each of the waterfront transit concepts would require:

- Additional Service Hours: Each concept has a service hour cost associated with it, and operational resources would need to be identified.

- **Community Engagement:** To determine how best to serve the waterfront, Metro would need to better understand community needs. Broader engagement would be needed with riders and community members travelling to, from, and through the waterfront study area to determine what solution works best.
- **New Bus Stops Along Alaskan Way:** Metro would need new or potentially revised bus stop pairs along Alaskan Way to serve the waterfront as part of any of the concepts shown in this study. Metro continues to coordinate with the City of Seattle on waterfront planning efforts to ensure design changes along Alaskan Way, such as a new protected bike lane, can support future transit use.
- **Northern Terminal Pathway, Layover, and Comfort Station:** The northernmost pathway and terminal location for each of these concepts is assumed to be in either northern Belltown or Uptown, as the stakeholder engagement conveyed a desire to ensure a connection with those areas to the waterfront and Pioneer Square. Without a known layover or comfort station, these concepts might not be feasible, or costs might be much higher if services need to travel to a distant layover and comfort station location.
- **Consideration of current and planned construction impacts:** While many construction projects that were active and in progress in 2018 have been completed, several construction projects that could impact or limit transit service and bus stop placement remain active, and their timelines for completion have been impacted by both the COVID-19 pandemic and concrete workers' strike.

A partnership among waterfront stakeholders, including public agencies such as the City of Seattle and Port of Seattle, could be a pathway to further developing, funding, and implementing the concepts shared in this report.

Metro is closely monitoring metrics and setting goals related to workforce recovery, including changes in staffing and overtime in front-line roles, fleet availability, and trip delivery. Service recovery and expansion will be guided by current policies, including Metro Connects, the Strategic Plan for Public Transportation, Service Guidelines, and Service Recovery Plan. Metro will continue to consider where changes could be made to expand or revise service, consistent with the approach outlined in the Service Recovery Plan.