



City of Tacoma
Transportation Commission

April 30, 2021

Kent Keel, Chair
Sound Transit Board of Directors
401 S. Jackson Street
Seattle, WA 98104
(Sent to: emailtheboard@soundtransit.org)

Re: Comments on 2021 Sound Transit Program Realignment

Dear Chair Keel:

The City of Tacoma Transportation Commission (Commission), Bicycle and Pedestrian Technical Advisory Group (BPTAG), and Transit-Oriented Development Advisory Group (TODAG) respectfully submit our recommendations on the proposed realignment of schedules and plans for Sound Transit projects.

Sound Transit provided presentations to the Commission on March 17, 2021, BPTAG on March 22, 2021, and TODAG on February 22, 2021. The presentation included a discussion of the proposed realignment schedule and potential tools to address the funding gap for Sound Transit 2 (ST2) and Sound Transit 3 (ST3).

Keep Commitments Intact

We are pleased to see Sound Transit's commitment to Tacoma as part of ST2 and ST3 packages that include significant investments in new regional transit connections, increased service, and infrastructure improvements that will make it easier for people to access transit by walking and rolling. Key among these are:

- Construction of the Tacoma Dome Link Extension (TDLE)
- Access improvements at the South Tacoma Sounder Station, Tacoma Dome Station, and new Portland Avenue Station
- Sounder expansion projects
- Construction of an extension of Tacoma Link to Tacoma Community College
- A planning study to explore extension of Central Link to the Tacoma Mall Regional Growth Center
- Completion of Hilltop Tacoma Link Extension (which we understand is not under consideration for realignment)

Ensure Equity

The highest impact of these is TDLE, which will bring the Central Link from South Federal Way to Fife, East Tacoma and the Tacoma Dome. We believe the highest consideration for Sound Transit should be equity – serving BIPOC, moderate- to extremely low-income people, and transportation disadvantaged groups. Tacoma leads the region in diversity and economic disparities. Many people are heavily dependent on transit service – the number of people we have employed at the airport and in service industries, factories, etc., working swing shift and graveyard is just a typical example.

When in operation, the TDLE will bring efficient, frequent and reliable Central Link service to the City of Tacoma, the Port of Tacoma, and the Puyallup Tribe of Indians. It is particularly worth noting how close in proximity both stations, particularly Portland Avenue Station, are to Salishan, one of the oldest and larger housing projects in the region. The terminal of the current phase of TDLE, the Tacoma Dome Station, is a truly multimodal transportation hub that integrates Link, Sounder, Amtrak, BRT, local and regional bus services, as well as Greyhound. With respect to equity and affordability, the Greyhound, as an example, provides connections to national destinations, Mexico and Canada, and offers discounts to students, veterans, and people experiencing homelessness (if they get tickets through a church or other means).

Light rail would be truly transformational. Pierce County has long awaited TDLE and has been diligently paying taxes in the meantime. The residents of Tacoma-Pierce County deserve to see a return on their investment without delay.

Complete the Spine

We applaud Sound Transit for applying “Completing the Spine” as one of the criteria to the evaluation of program realignment. Completing the spine can be best exemplified in the completion of the TDLE, which will connect the existing Tacoma Link (in operation since 2003) and its Hilltop Extension (opening in 2022) to the Central Link. Without this project, the “TL+HE” system would continue to operate as “a limb off of the tree.” On the contrary, and as one would expect, completing the TDLE and completing the spine of Link will substantially solidify the return on direct and indirect investments, including the investments by Sound Transit (on the system development), by the City of Tacoma (on transportation, economic development, and housing), by prospective developers (on future transit-oriented development projects), and by people (on choosing to reside or work close to ST systems).

While it is important to close the financial gap (realignment), it is equally if not more important to close the system gap (completing the spine) and the service gap (equity). One option currently under consideration by the Sound Transit Board is potentially deferring parking structures to support the financial viability of the ST3 plan. We support further exploration of this concept to fulfill construction of the regional light rail spine.

Promote Transit-Oriented Development

We would like to highlight the City of Tacoma's longstanding commitment to creating a transit-oriented development (TOD) neighborhood around the Tacoma Dome Station, one of the true multi-modal transit hubs of the Puget Sound region. A huge amount of work has been done or is underway to proactively put the planning and zoning in place (i.e., the South Downtown Subarea Plan/EIS, Puyallup Avenue Corridor Redesign, infill housing strategies, and Pierce Transit's Bus Rapid Transit project) to bring this TOD vision to reality. The private market is responding to this vision, as witnessed in the recent and planned significant private development investments in this area. Pulling back on the commitments made about the TDLE could significantly undermine this progress and the real regional vision of transit-focused growth which is happening in the Dome District.

Maintain Access Funding

We also urge Sound Transit to prioritize active transportation access as realignment proceeds. Sound Transit is investing billions of dollars to extend critical transit services throughout the region. Making it safer and easier to walk and roll, ride a bike, and take local transit to access regional transit hubs is a cost-effective strategy to make the most of these investments. Current conditions around the South Tacoma Sounder Station, Tacoma Dome, and the sites being considered for the future Portland Avenue Station include disconnected infrastructure, lack of ADA access, and unsafe crossings. We want to ensure that accessing transit is safe and inviting for community members who cannot or do not drive, and that those with a choice also find it easy and convenient to leave their car at home. We urge Sound Transit to maintain the full budget allocations for the Tacoma Dome and South Tacoma access projects, ST3 station access allocations, and system access funds and that the timeline for these investments remain on-track.

Continue to Invest in Sounder

Additionally, while the new light rail extensions and active transportation connections are essential and exciting, we also hope Sound Transit continues to invest in the Sounder as a core service. ST3 included capital projects and rolling stock to expand Sounder trains and stations between Lakewood and Seattle from the existing 7-car configuration to 10 cars. However, post-COVID conditions, where employers are exploring greatly expanded remote work and flexible scheduling options, may change capacity requirements and bring about the need to reevaluate the phasing of Sounder capital projects. While focusing on completing the regional light rail spine, Sound Transit should take the opportunity to identify and better understand the effect of new remote work policies from private and public employers on Sounder ridership and capacity before moving forward with Sounder capacity projects.

The importance of Sound Transit's investments in the South Sound region is manifest and incontestable and the scope and timeline of these projects should not be compromised. We appreciate the opportunity to add our voice to this process. The Transportation Commission, Bicycle and Pedestrian Technical Advisory Group, and Transit-Oriented Development Advisory Group have been working hard to implement the Transportation Master Plan for Tacoma that is not only visionary but also realistic. We hope that continuing the strong partnership between Sound Transit and the City will assist our community in realizing these goals.

Sincerely,



Jane Ann Moore, Co-Chair
Transportation Commission



Gerrit Nyland, Co-Chair
Transportation Commission



Jennifer Halverson-Kuehn, Chair
Bicycle & Pedestrian Technical Advisory Group



Imad H. Bahbah, Chair
Transit-Oriented Development Advisory Group

cc: Mayor Victoria Woodards
Councilmembers, Tacoma City Council
Elizabeth Pauli, Tacoma City Manager
Anna Petersen, Chair, Tacoma Planning Commission