

John Niles to Sound Transit Board, March 22, 2012

Thank you Board Members. I'm John Niles, a 30 year resident of Seattle, speaking to support and comment on Motion M2012-08 to purchase nineteen 60 foot buses, 56 seats each, at \$832K each. In fact, I wish you were buying even more buses and creating new plans to operate them using some of the billions you are planning to spend on a network of passenger trains. Mobility improvement with Regional Express Buses could occur much sooner compared to train lines not yet under construction and some a decade away from operation.

For example, look at the Lakewood extension of Sounder Commuter Rail – Approved by voters in 1996; \$300 million capital spent so far. It opens in 2012, after 16 years of planning, development, and construction. All this time and money for no more than 1,700 riders in 2030 assuming even more money is spent for car parking at the two stations.

I urge you to continuously ponder the cost-effectiveness of bus public transit as we learn about the attractiveness of the various modes in today's transit practice worldwide and as we also learn how to make roads work better in this region. SR 520 tolling yielding a mostly free-flowing bridge is a new example of what's possible with road use fees that drop lower outside of peak period to influence traveler behavior.

Your Sound Transit staff's forecasts in the 2012 Service Improvement Plan show that moving customers on Sounder Trains in 2017 is expected to cost taxpayers \$10 each while the equivalent cost for Regional Express buses on similar long trips is only \$6. This difference translated to a similar passenger mile differential arguably makes Sounder illegal under existing State law, [RCW 81.104.120](#).

On the other hand, compared to the Central Link 2017 forecast taxpayer cost per boarding of \$2.34, Regional Express at \$6 does not look as good, but yet all hope for getting light rail down to \$2.34 depends on people boarding trains in much greater numbers than now seen in the lagging ridership performance of the Airport train. Because of poor ridership so far on Central Link, the [2011 reported](#) light rail subsidy per rider is \$13.74, while your express buses are at \$6.88, about half of light rail. Sounder commuter rail's subsidy from taxpayers is \$17.61 per boarding.

Back to today's Motion to buy more buses, capital expenditure matters: Buses cost less than trains. Three buses like you'll authorize today with combined seated capacity of 168 equal one light rail car with 150 passenger half sitting and half standing comfortably, but those three buses cost \$2.5 million, a million dollars less than the single light rail car for \$3.5 million.

Now rail fans will note that the light rail car takes just one operator while the three buses take three operators... that's now, but what about the future, since light rail is a 100 year investment, right? In just 50 years, or maybe 20 years, closely following buses behind a lead bus won't need a driver because of [electronic virtual tow bars](#), that is, automated control of the following buses letting them be driverless, forming a train on the road. Smaller vehicles will have their own electronic features to stay out of the way of these road trains. All this technology has already been demonstrated in Japan and Europe as well as [North America](#). It will happen.

Also informing my view of the future is the official 2040 Transportation Plan of the Puget Sound Regional Council, near-unanimously approved in May 2010 by cities and counties. This plan independently forecasts bus ridership will exceed rail ridership by four to one in 2040 and

reduce Sound Transit rail ridership to half of your agency's forecast used in 2008 to sell Prop 1 to voters. This is likely because universal road use fees with off peak discounts in the PSRC Plan to be implemented by the 2030s will make the region's expressways free flowing in peak like the tolled SR 520 bridge is today. Newer generations of high tech buses will move people in greater volume than trains because buses can go to more places than trains, places where people live, work, and shop --- more corridors and destinations can be served by buses than by light rail.

Bus service can be expanded incrementally across a whole subarea swiftly, while rail planning and construction takes decades, as we are witnessing with your work.

FTA New Starts funding is as available for Bus Rapid Transit as for light rail.

And especially as volumes are more shaped by road use fees with off peak discounts, and incident response keeps improving, buses operating in Freeway HOV/HOT lanes will consistently run at higher average speed than light rail. Buses stuck in traffic will go out of date in your lifetime.

So keep on buying more buses like you are today, and please – at your April 5 Retreat and other Board Meetings -- keep open the option of buying and operating even more as disappointing rail ridership and cost per rider numbers keep getting your attention in the months and years ahead.