

John Niles statement to PSRC Executive Board, July 24, 2008

(Updated version of testimony delivered in writing for meeting of June 26,
amended to reflect new circumstances)

This statement for the official meeting record is from John Niles, a 25-year resident of Seattle, professional transportation policy analyst, and co-chair of Coalition for Effective Transportation Alternatives (CETA), a pro-transit research and advocacy association.

My topic in this comment is PSRC's responsibility to examine Sound Transit's pending expansion plans and tax increase for the fall election, an examination required for PSRC to certify conformity of ST's plans with the adopted regional transportation plan.

I now understand that this Executive Board plans to wait until its September 25 meeting to vote on the conformity question, the ultimate decision to be based on a recommendation earlier in September from the Transportation Policy Board.

Unfortunately, this timing for PSRC voting has put the Transportation Policy Board and the Executive Policy Board in the **difficult position of having to choose in September between rubber stamping the Sound Transit Plan as conforming, or alternatively issuing a veto that would stop the fall ballot with a non-conformity vote.**

There will be no opportunity to influence the details of this plan with your conformity deliberations. The YES and NO campaigns will be underway.

I urge you to consider informing Sound Transit immediately that its plan as of this date is too late to be considered sufficiently for a conformity finding to be issued before the election.

As I described earlier, certain characteristics of what will likely be the plan are emerging, and they are troubling.

Let me again emphasize two areas of the formal PSRC conformance checklist:

(1) Consistency with Destination 2030 Policies

(2) Appropriate Benefit-Cost Analysis

Number 1, on consistency with policies, I urge you think through two of them:

- Manage travel demand to address traffic congestion and environmental objectives, and
- Expand transportation capacity to offer greater mobility options.

Past Secretary of Transportation Doug MacDonald, a former Sound Transit Board member, offered a new analysis of Sound Transit's plan options in a 3-part essay published the week of June 23 at www.crosscut.com. He uses available data to reach damning conclusions about where Sound Transit is headed. His overall conclusion, and that of CETA, is that Sound Transit is offering the region a poorly performing transit plan in light of land development and transit ridership patterns. In addition to whatever information Sound Transit and PSRC staff offer you on conformance of ST's work in its current planning efforts, I urge you to read MacDonald's published essays carefully.

Furthermore, you have by now seen King County Executive Ron Sims' summary analysis of Sound Transit's plan in *The Seattle Times* on July 23, which bears on my point.

On the number 2 consideration for Sound Transit's conformity, Benefit-Cost Analysis, it is very important to understand whether Sound Transit's submitted work and what it shows passes the most minimal test of reasonableness. The reported results of ST's BCA so far, based on computer modeling, are clearly inconsistent with PSRC modeling done in connection with Vision 2040. In this regard, it is useful to quote Doug MacDonald in one of his essays published by *Crosscut*:

“According to the consultant [preparing the Benefit-Cost Analysis], the plan would cut the otherwise projected daily total of vehicle miles driven in the region in the year 2030 by a whopping 180 million miles a year. Sound like a big number? Well, the forecast for 2030, to which the reduction would be applied, is about 95 million miles a day. So the good news for \$6 billion of spending and a big tax increase is that, according to its own consultant and Sound Transit, not its critics, the region would see about two days' worth of reduction in miles driven, or about one half of one percent.”

MacDonald goes on to say, “Even this tiny shred of good news ginned up by the Sound Transit consultant depends on the assumption that when the cars come off the highway because riders shift to transit, nobody else decides to drive in the now freer flowing lanes. There is, in other words, no re-congestion effect from latent demand.”

MacDonald continues as follows: “Every environmentalist in America, and a lot of other people, too, believe that the best case against building more highways is that latent

demand will reconstitute the new capacity. That's the basis for the expression everyone's heard a thousand times: 'You can't build your way out of congestion.' Are you prepared to believe that the largest single slice of benefits the consultant identified in its report for Sound Transit is the benefit to car drivers who will be able to get places faster, because there will be a little more space on the road, and that no reconstituted effect will apply? That's got to be a head scratcher of mind-melt proportion for any environmentalist."

In addition, consider all that is now happening in regional transportation development: Bob Drewel is chairing the SR 509 tolling implementation committee, which brings road pricing to the forefront, but not until 2009. The existing regional bus transit system is operating under overload conditions brought on by soaring gas prices. A new independent technical committee appointed by the Legislature is finding that Sound Transit's expansion of light rail to cross the I-90 bridge requires more preparatory work and expense than previously described, with a report coming out after Sound Transit finishes its expansion plan. There is an interaction of I-90 transit planning with the transit planning for the SR 520 bridge replacement, all just below the surface of public understanding, but now heating up. The EIS for I-90 light rail which must include an alternatives analysis for cross-Lake mobility won't be done until after the fall election.

All this swirling action speaks to you PSRC leaders to be very cautious about being forced to issue a conformity finding for Sound Transit's plan in September during the middle of a campaign.

I urge that PSRC's transportation planning authority be invoked with special care and attention by you. Please use your power and responsibility to inform Sound Transit of the requirement for sensible, coherent transportation planning: PSRC members should receive and review a multi-billion dollar plan in sufficient time to study what it means for the region in the face of rapidly changing conditions and available alternatives.

Questions? John Niles is at jniles@alum.mit.edu, or 206-781-4475.