

**Statement of John Niles, Co-chair, CETA
Coalition for Effective Transportation Alternatives**

Public Comment to the Puget Sound Regional Council General Assembly,
May 26, 2011

I'm John Niles, Seattle resident and co-chair of CETA, Coalition for Effective Transportation Alternatives. Since 2002 we've supported the kind of transit that delivers the biggest ridership gains per dollar of investment.

I'm going to bring you up to date on the status of Sound Transit's 15 year old urban rail program, perpetually endorsed by PSRC in its Metropolitan Transportation Plans such as Destination 2030 and T-2040.

Recall I told you at the Assembly last May that the T-2040 Plan forecast 164 thousand mass transit train rides per day in 2040, 47% lower than the Sound Transit forecast of 310 thousand riders in 2030 claimed in the ST phase 2 "Mass Transit Now" tax campaign for the '08 election. In response, nothing has been published by Sound Transit or PSRC to explain this discrepancy.

I think local transportation governance looks inept when two involved agencies cannot agree on what a premium, high visibility transit mode like light rail is likely to achieve. There should be an official investigation. Worse, forecasting failure is now being illustrated month by month along the light rail tracks in Seattle and Tukwila.

Namely, Sound Transit's light rail from SeaTac Airport to downtown, opened December '09, as of this spring is not achieving its annual ridership forecasts that set the path to meeting the longer term ridership commitment sold to the U.S. DOT to justify the \$500 million construction grant of 2003.

2010 ridership came in 5,600 per day lower than the forecast of 26,600 per weekday made in 2009 after the recession had begun.

The forecast for 2011 light rail began at 32,000 average boardings per week day but by last month, as the observed ridership slump of late 2010 continued into 2011, Sound Transit cut that forecast by 22% to 25,000 per day. Even this new lower number is obviously a stretch goal, reached only three days in the past six months, the Mariners' opening day on April 8, and the two consecutive days of last November's snowstorm.

To figure out how to achieve and beat 25,000 per day beyond simply waiting for the next two stations to open, the Sound Transit Board has just approved a two million dollar ridership building initiative of new polling and other market research. City of Seattle has helped out by authorizing 1,275 more parking spots near Rainier Valley stations. Still, CETA predicts ridership will be short of forecast again in 2011 based on the January to April revealed trend of lower growth compared to the previous year.

Based on the rule of thumb that a light rail segment hits a plateau of ridership after 18 months of service that won't change until the segment's extended, the ridership of the Airport light rail is headed toward reaching only about half the rider forecast of 45,000 daily provided by Sound Transit to the Feds throughout the last decade.

So in summary, a year after PSRC forecasts that future mass transit rail ridership will be about half of the promise to voters, Sound Transit is demonstrating the same 50 percent success ratio with its actual ridership.

Despite the popularity of urban trains, ugly facts about their development around here may eventually reach public consciousness: Sound Transit is consuming the elephant's share of transit money in the region, is holding \$800 million dollars in its treasury while other transit agencies claim starvation, and is able to deliver just half of the ridership expected on top of well-publicized problems with its construction schedule.

CETA urges all elected officials of the PSRC General Assembly to grasp and act upon the discrepancy between the hope of rail mass transit and the evolving reality.

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