

WSDOT Frequent transit service study

Technical advisory group meeting 5 summary
8:00 - 10:00 a.m., February 3, 2023

Attendees

TAG members

- Anna Zivarts (Disability Rights)
- Brad Windler (Skagit Transit)
- Brian Lee (Puget Sound Regional Council)
- Justin Leighton (Washington State Transit Association)
- Karl Otterstrom (Spokane Transit)
- Lindsey Sehmel (Pierce Transit)
- Melissa Gaughan (King County Metro)
- Steffani Lillie (Kitsap Transit)

Project staff

- Coby Zeifman (WSDOT)
- Jenny Thacker (PRR)
- Justin Nawrocki (WSDOT)
- Kate Gunby (PRR)
- Katy Asher (PRR)
- Monica Gosh (WSDOT)
- Sahas Soc (WSDOT)
- Stan Suchan (WSDOT)
- Thomas Craig (WSDOT)

Discussion

Slide numbers included in this meeting summary refer to the [TAG meeting 5 presentation](#) saved on engage.wsdot.wa.gov/frequent-transit-service-study.

Please note, this document refers to goals or goal setting and that path forward was changed during the March 6, 2023 meeting. Please reach out to Monica Ghosh, the study's project manager, if you have any questions.

Slides 1 and 2 – Jenny Thacker

Jenny welcomed the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) members and led a round of introductions.

Slide 3 – Jenny Thacker

Jenny described the meeting objectives:

1. Review accomplishments from Phase 1.
2. Review final report deadline, requirements, and decision-making structure.
3. Review and provide feedback on the framework for describing gaps in transit access based on population demographics.
4. Provide feedback on different frameworks for approaching the funding scenarios.

Slide 4 – Jenny Thacker

Jenny reviewed the study purpose and schedule. In 2022, the Legislature directed WSDOT to:

- Define “frequent fixed route transit”
- Identify how many people live within a half-mile walk of transit

- Analyze where gaps exist to these types of transit, particularly for certain demographic groups
- Provide potential funding scenarios to address the gaps

During Phase I, the Policy Advisory Group (PAG) and TAG supported WSDOT in defining six levels of transit frequency and produced an analysis of populations living within a half-mile of frequent fixed route transit.

Lacking sufficient statewide active transportation infrastructure data, WSDOT, the PAG, and TAG determined it would be difficult to accurately determine the coverage of accessible walking routes to frequent fixed route transit stops. To address this data limitation, WSDOT included recommendations for further data collection in the Phase I report.

During Phase II, WSDOT will identify gaps in accessible frequent fixed route transit, analyze those gaps for disparities in race, age, disability, and potentially other categories, and develop funding scenarios to address the identified gaps. PAG and TAG members will help inform this work, which will result in a final report due to the Legislature by June 30, 2023.

Slides 5 - 6 – Jenny Thacker

Jenny reviewed the roles of stakeholders, the PAG, the TAG, the Joint Transportation Committee (JTC), WSDOT executives, and the WSDOT project team. Feedback and contributions from these stakeholders are important and will shape study processes and outcomes. The final decision-makers for this study are members of WSDOT executive leadership.

Jenny also reviewed the working agreements of the TAG, rooted in the goal to create more access to public transportation and improve mobility with an emphasis on the needs of vulnerable populations in overburdened communities and tribes.

Slide 7 – Thomas Craig

Thomas reviewed key tasks and challenges for Phase II of the study, and how the TAG will support WSDOT in addressing study challenges.

Slide 8 – Thomas Craig

WSDOT worked internally and in consultation with subject-matter experts to propose the path forward:

1. Calculate the number of people from each demographic group who have access to each level of frequent fixed-route transit.
2. Use the results as the current statewide 'benchmarks' of fixed route transit access.
3. Select a goal for each calculated benchmark in the statewide analysis table.
4. Define the 'gaps' to accessible frequent fixed-route transit as the difference between the calculated statewide benchmark and our goals.
5. Explore and discuss disparities through a narrative format which will supplement and clarify the analysis.
6. Define a 'funding scenario' as the estimated cost to provide service that eliminates that gap.
7. Calculate the overall cost estimate to address the defined gaps in frequent fixed route transit. (Process is yet to be determined).

Slides 9-10 – Thomas Craig

Thomas reviewed a table of current transit service benchmarks, detailing the population of the state that lives within a half-mile of frequent fixed-route transit at each service level defined during Phase I, including population counts for specific demographic groups listed in the proviso.

Thomas invited TAG members to inform the fixed route transit service goals, relative to the benchmarks, that should be achieved for each demographic group by a given timeframe. Using the benchmark and goals, WSDOT will calculate the gaps. By exploring disparities through a narrative format, we will fill in details and local context.

Discussion

- The WSDOT study team will control for population growth between the benchmark and goal by measuring the service growth as the percentage of people living in areas with transit service out of the total population.
- Measures outside of the control of transportation agencies, like zoning and housing costs, influence who has access to frequent fixed route transit. The TAG discussed the importance of acknowledging the need for collaboration with land use and planning agencies in the narrative of the final report.
- The TAG discussed the potential need for disaggregated goals by geography, population density, or Growth Management Act (GMA) planning designation to ensure an equitable spread of improvement goals across the state. Though the scope of this study is statewide, WSDOT is studying data on a county-by-county level and will be incorporating differences in needs across geographies and service areas into the final report. Statewide goals will not be applied universally across jurisdictions. WSDOT will continue brainstorming this topic in one-on-one meetings with PAG and TAG members.
- TAG members requested service level benchmarks and goals for public transportation services beyond fixed route transit (e.g., micro-transit, on-demand transportation services, first- and last-mile services, etc.) to better understand the full coverage of services across the state. The WSDOT study team could make a recommendation in the final report for further studies of public transportation access. The final report will also include a narrative describing how frequent fixed route transit fits into the bigger picture of public transportation access in Washington communities.
- TAG members expressed concerns about the focus of meeting goals for statewide populations rather than closing the gaps between demographic groups. The WSDOT study team will package the information in a way that manages the potential for misunderstanding and intentional misuse. The narrative section of the report will also provide needed nuance about access gaps between demographic groups.
- The TAG also requested educational content in the final report, defining different types of transportation services and what makes each mode of transit acceptable and successful from the perspective of the state department of transportation.
- The TAG discussed whether the final report should acknowledge that, in an ideal world, WSDOT would provide access to frequent fixed route transit to 100% of the state population. TAG members noted that this ideal goal does not acknowledge coverage of other mobility services and increase access and favored goals to aim to increase access with a balance of aspiration and pragmatism.

Slide 11 – Jenny Thacker

Jenny asked participants to imagine a future with increased access to transit within a half-mile walk from residents' homes and consider the magnitude and pace of change that makes sense for their agencies. The WSDOT team will use information from this conversation to begin developing goals, which will be refined in one on one meetings with PAG and TAG members.

Discussion

The TAG discussed the importance of infrastructure, capital investment, and land use to the goal of increased frequent fixed route transit access. Many of these factors are outside of the influence of transportation agencies, and the agencies that do control these investment decisions have variable funding dependent on population size and available resources. In addition to service provision goals, the TAG recommended that WSDOT set goals to partner with statewide and local agencies to implement goals related to transportation access. WSDOT will consider including a recommendation for future collaborative, cross-agency studies to determine what is needed to develop multi-modal and accessible communities in the final report.

In addition to missing sidewalks, curb cuts, and other land use and planning barriers, the financial pressure associated with outdated facilities, transitions to zero-emission vehicles, and other infrastructure investments creates barriers to service expansion for transportation agencies. TAG members noted the importance of considering the investments needed to restructure and deploy services more intensively.

TAG members also discussed which service level transitions are most needed where, which might be most easily achieved, and the rate of change. For example, in rural areas, providing basic connections with Level 5 and 6 service is key to improving access, while in urban areas, Level 1, 2 and 3 services should be the focus. One TAG member suggested that service growth at rate of 5% statewide would be significant.

Slide 12 – Thomas Craig

Thomas reviewed the proposed approach for identifying funding scenarios. Based on discussions internally and with subject-matter experts, the WSDOT study team proposes defining “funding scenarios” as cost estimates. To calculate the cost estimate, WSDOT is proposing a simplified method using different units of account (e.g. cost per person served or cost per vehicle mile) in conversation with a level of confidence to ensure the estimate is not misinterpreted as a fixed bid.

Discussion

The WSDOT study team clarified that cost estimates will describe the additional funding needed over a given timeframe to improve service access from our benchmark to the goal. WSDOT cannot anticipate how the results of the study may influence the funding decisions of the Legislature. However, the WSDOT study team acknowledges the need for funding support to achieve a large expansion of service.

TAG members discussed which unit of account might be most accurate for this approach, including

- cost per revenue hour,
- cost per platform hour, and

- cost per fully encumbered service hour.

Both cost per revenue hour and cost per platform hour focus on the temporal costs, irrespective of geographic reach. TAG members agreed upon the importance of including capital costs and consideration of geography in the selected unit of account.

To acknowledge capital investment costs and land use and planning needs, TAG members discussed presenting multiple cost scenarios in the report. Scenarios could explore the outcomes of land use and planning moving in tandem with transportation improvements or split out the costs of capital, administrative, and service investments. This would highlight the need to coordinate and show there is a better return on investment if agencies coordinate. The TAG also requested that WSDOT add narrative context to the funding scenarios to explain the value of the return on investment.

WSDOT acknowledged that, with more time, a more accurate funding scenario would be developed in collaboration with transit agencies statewide to define a service growth pathway, strategize the long-term processes, and develop costs in terms of 10-15 years of growth.

Slides 13 – Jenny Thacker

Jenny shared next steps for the TAG and the WSDOT study team:

- WSDOT will incorporate PAG and TAG feedback to develop draft goals.
- WSDOT will host one-on-one meetings with PAG and TAG members to get feedback on goals.
- WSDOT will invite PAG and TAG members to a joint meeting in early March to discuss final goals and work towards consent.