

WSDOT Frequent Transit Service Study

Policy and technical advisory group joint meeting 7
9 - 10 a.m., April 14, 2023

Participants

PAG and TAG members

- Amy Asher, Mason Transit
- Angie Peters, Valley Transit – Walla Walla
- Anna Zivarts, Disability Mobility Coalition – Disability Rights Washington
- Brad Windler, Skagit Transit
- Brian Lee, Puget Sound Regional Council
- Dave Catterson, Joint Transportation Committee
- Hester Serebrin, Transportation Choices Coalition
- Justin Leighton, Washington State Transit Association
- Karl Otterstrom, Spokane Transit
- Lindsey Sehmel, Pierce Transit
- Melissa Gaughan, King County Metro
- Tom Hingson, Everett Transit

Project staff

- Brian Lagerberg, WSDOT
- Coby Zeifman, WSDOT
- Don Chartock, WSDOT
- Emma Dorazio, PRR
- Jenny Thacker, PRR
- Kate Gunby, PRR
- Monica Ghosh, WSDOT
- Sahas Sok, WSDOT
- Stan Suchan, WSDOT
- Thomas Craig, WSDOT

Summary

Slide numbers included in this meeting summary refer to the PAG and TAG joint meeting 7 presentation saved on engage.wsdot.wa.gov/frequent-transit-service-study.

Slide 1-2 – Jenny Thacker

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

Slide 3-4 – Jenny Thacker

WSDOT convened PAG and TAG members to introduce and prepare participants for the review of the initial draft of the Frequent Transit Service Study (FTSS) Phase 2 report. The project team will review feedback from prior meetings before presenting.

The project team will invite feedback on the draft report, funding scenarios and gaps analysis, and demographics analysis presentation. PAG and TAG members can share additional comments through email or one-on-one follow-up meetings.

Slide 5 – Jenny Thacker

Jenny reviewed the study purpose. 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 for these types of transit, particularly for certain demographic groups.
- Provide potential funding scenarios to address the gaps.

Slide 6 – Monica Ghosh

Monica outlined the content in the final report, which follows the format of the initial report:

- Executive summary
- Introduction
- Results
- Conclusion
- Appendices

The final report will balance findings within the context of the data limitations and other challenges and integrate PAG and TAG recommendations, especially in the barriers and requirements section. The project team will lead with findings and provided detail in the appendices.

Slide 7-10 – Monica Ghosh and Thomas Craig

Monica presented tables of transit frequency benchmarks, population scenarios, and expected costs.

Current benchmark of transit frequency levels

Transit frequency	Description	Population estimated living within half mile	Percent of Washington residents
Level 1	12 min headway days, 15 nights, and weekends	530,000	7%
Level 2	15 min headway days, 30 nights, and weekends	1,520,000	20%
Level 3	30 min headway days, 60 nights, and weekends	3,040,000	40%
Level 4	60 min headway minimum 5 days a week	4,390,000	58%
Level 5	6 trips per day on weekdays	4,610,000	61%
Level 6	2 trips per day on weekdays	4,720,000	63%
24-hour	1 trip every 2 hours overnight	690,000	9%

Benchmarks compared to scenarios

Transit frequency	Population served benchmark	Population served scenario 1	Population served scenario 2
Level 1	640,000 (7%)	2,750,000 (30%)	1,840,000 (20%)
Level 2	1,840,000 (20%)	3,670,000 (40%)	4,590,000 (50%)
Level 3	3,670,000 (40%)	5,050,000 (55%)	5,320,000 (58%)
Level 4	5,320,000 (58%)	5,600,000 (61%)	5,600,000 (61%)
Level 5	5,600,000 (61%)	5,780,000 (63%)	5,960,000 (65%)
Level 6	5,780,000 (63%)	5,960,000 (65%)	6,420,000 (70%)
24-hour	830,000 (9%)	3,210,000 (35%)	2,290,000 (25%)

Expected costs for benchmark and scenarios over 15 years

	Expected 2038 annual system cost	Expected total 15-year funding need	15-year funding gap from benchmark
No expansion from benchmark	\$5 billion	\$66 billion	--
Scenario 1 expansion	\$10 billion	\$106 billion	\$40 billion
Scenario 2 expansion	\$8 billion	\$85 billion	\$19 billion

During the joint PAG and TAG meeting on March 6, 2023, the project team presented a single goal for expansion for each of the seven frequency levels. Based on feedback shared during that meeting, the project team adopted a scenario analysis approach that supports an understanding of the different paths that could expand access to fixed route transit.

The draft report presents three scenarios:

- **No expansion from benchmark:** Service coverage remains consistent with benchmark
- **Scenario 1 expansion:** Focused increase for the percentage of the statewide population served by the highest transit frequency levels.
 - Four-fold expansion in the percentage of people served by 12-15 minute headways.
 - Doubling of the percentage of people served by 15-30 minute headways
 - Nearly 50% increase in the percentage of people served by 30-60 minute headways.
 - Least frequent transit levels would see modest increases.
 - Overnight access would increase nearly fourfold.
- **Scenario 2 expansion:** Increase focused on expanding coverage of access to at least some transit.

- Steepest increases in those served by 15-30 minute headways and those served by 30-60 minute headways.

For each scenario, including the no expansion from benchmark scenario, WSDOT developed an estimate for the expected annual cost in 2038, 15 years from now, as well as an estimate for the total funding need over the next 15 years. The no expansion from benchmark scenario demonstrates that there is still a significant cost to operate the system, even without expansion.

Scenario 1, which would quadruple the percentage of the population with access to 12-15 minute headways, is expected to have a 15 year funding need of \$106 billion.

Scenario 2, which would expand the statewide coverage of transit, has an \$85 billion funding need over 15 years.

To continue providing services in alignment with our current coverage and no further expansion, \$66 billion in funding over 15-years will be needed.

The project team welcomed feedback on the presentation of the scenarios and cost estimates.

Discussion

PAG and TAG members shared questions and comments about the cost estimate methodology and supporting narrative in the draft report.

- The project team identified levels of expansion described in each scenario in alignment with the values and visions discussed during meetings with PAG and TAG members. The scenarios, detailed on page 6 of the draft report, have shifted slightly since the last meeting based on feedback received in prior meetings.
- The scheduled point in time benchmark uses schedule data from August 2022 and the demographics analysis uses data from 2020 ACS 5-year estimates. The project team will clearly document these sources in the report and will acknowledge potential impacts of using data that reflects post-COVID-19 ridership decreases.
- The cost estimate framework analyzed operational and capital costs over the last 10 years to project total state transit system costs for the next 15 years, through 2038, as described on page 7 of the draft report. While the projections do account for capital investment needs, the methodology is too broad to forecast these needs with complete accuracy. The project team will incorporate consideration of capital infrastructure investments, and varying costs between agencies, in the barriers section of the report.
- Several PAG and TAG members advocated for stronger branding for each scenario to guide the reader through the report and to clearly describe how each investment would increase access to frequent fixed route transit services.
- Several PAG and TAG members asked for more detailed cost estimate data, including data breakdowns by year, more information about the estimate methodology, record of selected inflation rates, and a list of agencies included in the cost estimate. WSDOT will follow up with participants to ensure the estimated inflation rates in the cost estimate are representative of the experiences of transit agency representatives.
- Several PAG and TAG members noted preference for expressing cost estimates as a range to acknowledge limited confidence in the accuracy of the results. The project team noted that the two scenarios were developed to address this concern and shared appreciation for the feedback.

- Several PAG and TAG members supported incorporating additional narrative about the cost of inaction in conversation with the estimated investment needed for each scenario.
- Another participant requested acknowledgement of land use and other needs that must be paired with transit service investments in order to improve access in Washington communities.
- One participant noted a recommendation for the legislature to designate transit agencies as Essential Public Facilities under RCW 36.70A.200, which would support transit agencies in citing needs for growth. The project team will follow up to discuss this recommendation.
- One participant expressed concerns about unrealistic cost estimates for the provision of fixed route transit in an example on page 13 of the draft report. The project team will tweak this example to represent the cost of transit service provision more accurately.
- Another participant noted that linear service growth is not realistic, since services jump based on investments in infrastructure, like new operations bases.

Slide 11 – Jenny Thacker

Jenny reviewed the barriers and requirements to the funding scenarios identified by PAG and TAG members in prior meetings.

- **COVID-19 recovery:** Transit agencies are still dealing with the impacts of the pandemic and the resulting reduction in service levels and will find it difficult to contemplate expansion in the near term.
- **Electrification:** Transit agencies are working on significant fleet planning and operational changes to move away from fossil fuel dependency in an effort to meet Washington's climate emissions reduction goals. Expanding service during this process will be challenging.
- **Labor shortages:** Transit agencies all over the state are having trouble recruiting and retaining drivers and other skilled staff. Any expansion would require addressing these labor shortages.
- **Land use patterns:** Fixed route transit works best in places with a certain level of density. In some places, local and statewide land use policies do not support the kind of density that would support expansion of fixed-route transit. To increase the level of expansion in the two scenarios, the state may need to encourage density, transit-oriented development, and sustainable transportation.
- **Fiscal constraints:** The funding model for fixed route transit relies on local sales taxes, local funding initiatives, and grant funding – all of which can be inconsistent, come with barriers, or be politically difficult to pass.
- **Vehicles and facilities:** The level of expansion described in both scenarios will require thousands of new vehicles, and facilities to store and maintain those vehicles.
- **Infrastructure improvements:** To increase fixed route transit to this extent, the state and local jurisdictions will need to invest in roads and other infrastructure to accommodate all the new buses, including transit-only lanes and turn lanes.
- **Tribal engagement:** Any big planning effort like this needs to happen in consultation with tribal governments across the state.

Discussion

Participants shared adjustments to the draft list of barriers and requirements and suggested new items to consider.

- Several participants recommended reframing this section so that tribal engagement is not interpreted as a barrier. The project team will incorporate this feedback and reframe the section to acknowledge the importance of coordination between sovereign nations.
- Two participants noted that "Zero-Emission Transition" is more accurate than "electrification," since not all agencies are developing fully electric solutions to greenhouse gas emission reduction requirements.
- Another participant requested reframing the electrification bullet to avoid conveying greenhouse gas emission reduction investments as at odds with frequent transit service expansion, since the two work towards a shared goal.
- One participant requested stronger language in the draft report describing how the state will support transportation agencies to overcome these barriers. The project team will consider adding language to address this request in the recommendations section.
- One participant noted the absence of supply chain delays from the list of barriers and requirements.
- Another participant requested the addition of local priorities in the list of barriers and requirements. Most transportation agencies gather funds from local PTBA taxes, and local boards of directors set the priorities for that funding, which may conflict with the priorities identified in this report.
- One participant recommended sorting or grouping the list of barriers and requirements into categories, such as economic, technological, political.

Slide 13-14 – Thomas Craig

Thomas presented high-level demographic findings and noted that more detail is available in the draft report.

Key findings from the demographic analysis include:

- The likelihood of living near frequent transit relies mostly on factors other than race, age, and disability. Population density, local transit tax rate, and self-reported use of public transit to get to work are more closely correlated with living near frequent transit than race.
- While there are statewide and regional differences in levels of access to transit by different demographics, there is no disparity in access on a statewide basis due to differences in race, age, disability, or income.
- Adults with disabilities have access to transit at rates similar to the general population statewide. However, reduced transit access for adults with disabilities occurs in some counties where the transit agency serves primarily a single town within the county (e.g., a college town)
- Youth (i.e., under 18) and older adults (i.e., 65 and older) are slightly less likely to live near transit than the general public.
- Low-income, working-age adults and people of color tend to be somewhat more likely to live within a half-mile of transit than the general public.

The demographic analysis considered access to frequent fixed-route transit by demographic groups, across and within different regions of the state. In addition to the methods used in the initial report, and a direct comparison for groups in all counties within the state, the project team also used regression analysis and cluster analysis.

WSDOT considered the following demographic variables in the analysis:

- Adults 18+ with a disability
- People of color (total people minus white non-Hispanic people)
- Youth under 18
- Adults 65-years-old or older
- People in households below 100% of the federal poverty line
- People in households below 200% of the federal poverty line
- Population density
- Job density
- Households without a vehicle
- Limited English Proficiency households
- Local sales tax rate

Discussion

The project team plans to include a narrative description of the results, which show no evidence of statewide disparities, in conversation with limitations of the data, rather than the raw data tables in an effort to avoid making falsely confident statements.

Several participants advocated for the project team to include the raw demographics data, information about the types of regression analysis, and the strength of the coefficients to help to tell a more complete story about the conclusions. Other participants recommended removing the demographic findings altogether, noting that weak conclusions and poor data could portray an incomplete picture that could be taken advantage of by bad actors.

Participants also advocated for more and clearer explanations of the caveats of the study throughout the report. Clear identification of the limitations might support the identification or creation of better data sets in the future.

One participant expressed interest in seeing if the analysis would display different results with pre-pandemic data sources, since many transit agencies have recently reprioritized service to reach audiences that are more transit dependent. The project team will follow up on this request.

Slide 15 – Monica Ghosh

Monica reviewed the recommendations and conclusion from the Phase 2 report before asking for input from the PAG and TAG to inform additional recommendations.

- A future study should research levels and types of demand-response service and measure access to these services within the state.
- The funding scenarios and findings about disparities in this study are not a defined conclusion. Rather, this study provides an initial framework for the beginning of a discussion to identify the policy and budget changes necessary to maintain a sustainable, cost-effective, and equitable transportation system.

Discussion

One participant asked WSDOT to include an acknowledgement of the connection between transportation needs and land use needs in the recommendations section of the draft report. Another asked the project team to acknowledge that improvements at different frequency levels require different investments.

Slide 16-17 – Monica Ghosh

Monica shared next steps for the PAG, TAG, and the WSDOT study team:

- Policy and Technical Advisory Groups will review draft and send comments back by EOD April 21.
- WSDOT will incorporate edits and feedback from policy advisory and technical advisory groups.
- WSDOT will share the updated draft report for interdepartmental review.
- WSDOT will share the updated draft with PAG/TAG members in mid-May for final review.
- WSDOT will finalize the draft report, share the draft with WSDOT decision makers, and submit to Legislature by June 30, 2023.