

# **A Better Transit Plan for East King County**



**Proposed by the  
Eastside Transportation Association**

**September 15, 2008**

## A Better Transit Plan

Eastside cities and elected officials do not appear cognizant of the near total lack of transit service improvement for the Eastside that would be delivered by the Sound Transit 2 proposal. Sadly the ST2 program has totally ignored implementation of a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system in the I-405 corridor – the primary transit recommendation of the adopted I-405 Corridor Program.

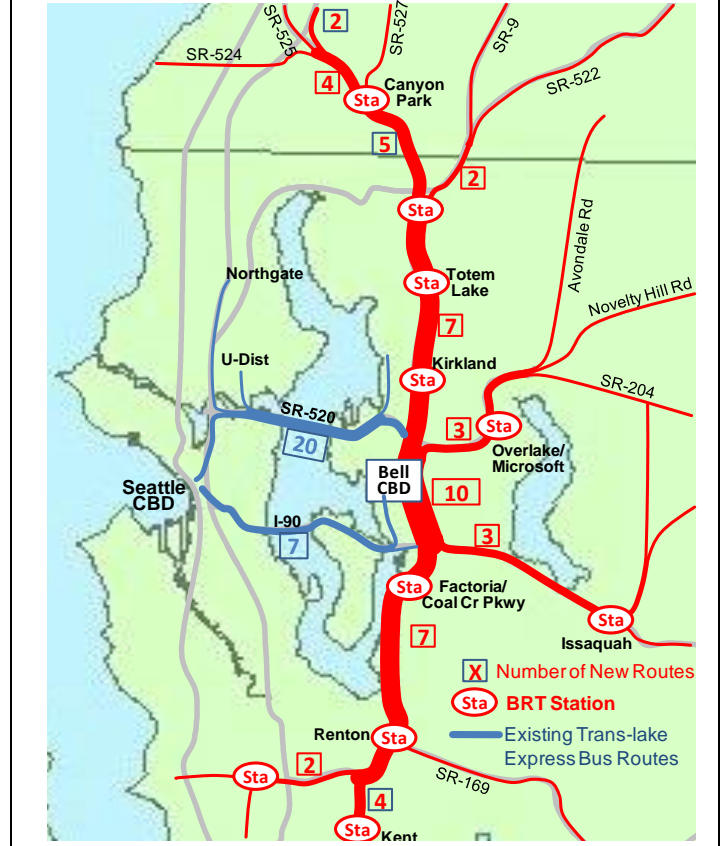
Our conceptual BRT system envisions ten new Regional Express (REx) bus routes operating along the I-405 corridor at its maximum load point between I-90 and SR-520. Existing trans-lake REx routes would blend into and add to the system. Note how this regional transit concept would much better fit the 2030 Bellevue CBD employee access patterns shown on page 4 than would building an LRT overlay of existing trans-lake transit services via the I-90 corridor.

Regional transit planning must acknowledge that the major residential development in the region is occurring in East and SE Snohomish County, far east King County, SE King County and SE Pierce County. And a major share of the growing labor force in these areas is focusing on Eastside employment.

From the north there is an urgent need to recognize the Eastside travel access patterns from the rapidly growing SR-527, SR-9, and SR-522 corridors where no transit currently serves the Eastside. No transit planning attention is being given to these corridors. Likewise growth in the Avondale Road, Novelty Hill Road, and Redmond-Fall City Road corridors is being ignored. Similar observations can be made for SE King and SE Pierce Counties south of Renton.

The new 10-route transit system concept could be implemented for a capital investment of \$100 million (\$10 million per route). Add 10 BRT stations at \$10 million each and the cost is \$200 million (in current dollars). Include an additional \$800 million for five additional HOV lane direct access systems and P&R lot enhancements, and this major improvement of Eastside regional transit access needs **could be implemented for about \$1 billion.**

## A Bus Rapid Transit Concept for the Eastside



This BRT concept would far better serve Eastside transit needs than the \$4.4 billion light rail transit replacement of just a few existing trans-lake bus routes. **And it could be implemented by 2012 with no Sound Transit tax increase.**

Sound Transit is alleging that BRT on HOV lanes is doomed to failure due to traffic overloads. It is essentially telling us that we have wasted billions of dollars in building over 250 miles of HOV lanes. It claims that to serve regional transit needs, all transit must operate on exclusive lanes or guideways.

The ETA believes that express limited-stop bus service on HOV lanes is Bus Rapid Transit. The WSDOT has committed to keep HOV lanes operating at 45 mph or better. When capacity is threatened, the HOV designation can be increased to 3+ occupants, and/or, the lanes can be converted to high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes.

# A Central Bellevue Bus Tunnel

A BRT system can require an exclusive busway in the most congested sectors of its service area. Given the huge increase in bus volumes estimated by the City of Bellevue in its Downtown Implementation Plan, the downtown Bellevue street system and its transit center will become significantly overloaded with buses. This is what happened in Seattle over two decades ago when downtown Seattle was the size downtown Bellevue will be by 2030. The proposed east-west single rail line would do little to relieve surface bus congestion. There will be a strong need for an underground bus facility serving multiple regional transit access corridors.

If the City of Bellevue is looking for a “glitzy” 21<sup>st</sup> century regional transit plan, it should focus on a north-south bus transit tunnel under central Bellevue to far better serve its regional transit needs compared to an east-west LRT line to serve only two east-west transit access corridors. **The adjacent exhibit shows a potential north-south bus transit tunnel concept that could serve BRT routes from six Bellevue CBD freeway access corridors.**

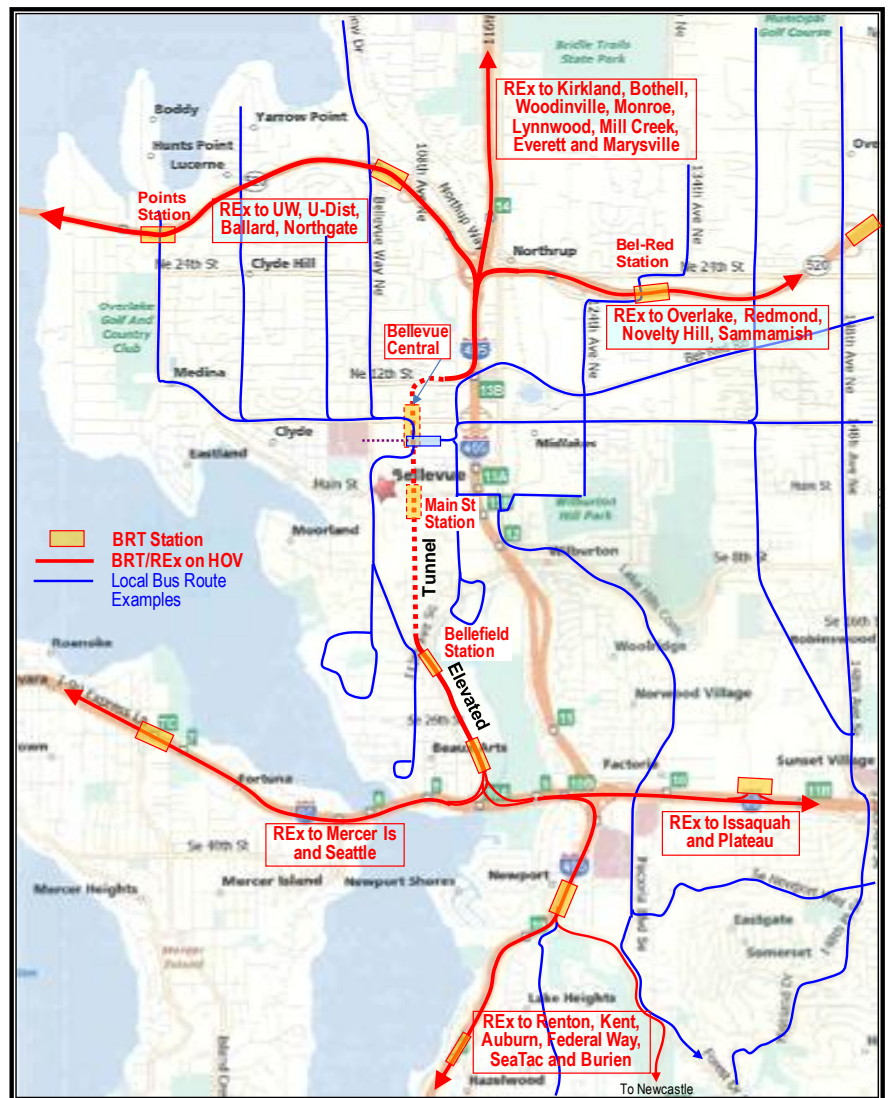
This concept would bring REx routes from I-90 east and west and from I-405 south to a South Bellevue transit center convergence point. From there an exclusive elevated transit guideway would take the buses to a Bellefield Station over 112<sup>th</sup> Avenue SE and then enter a tunnel under 108<sup>th</sup> Avenue thru Central Bellevue, reemerging at NE 12<sup>th</sup> Street with ramps into the I-405 North HOV lanes to serve routes to I-405 north and to SR-520 east and west.

Two underground transit stations could be developed to serve downtown Bellevue – a Main Street Station to serve the south CBD business and residential development transit access needs, and a

NE 6<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> Street Bellevue Central Station to serve the heart of downtown Bellevue and interface with the existing surface transit center serving the local transit routes.

This BRT service route and tunnel could perhaps be developed at a capital cost of under \$1 billion. It would be the far better focus of a Sound Transit ST2 tax increase than building an LRT duplication of existing trans-lake transit services. It could become a nationally acclaimed regional transit asset for a major suburban city – a pride of 21<sup>st</sup> century regional transit service and example of BRT service planning for the suburban cities of urban America.

**Rather than focusing on more transit for Seattle, all of the Eastside cities must rally together to build a regional transit system to serve the Eastside.**



**BRT/REx on HOV and Central Bellevue Busway**

## Eastside Travel Patterns

A transit system for the Eastside must respond to Eastside travel patterns and needs, not just to Seattle access that has been the focus for many decades. By 2030 East King will have a population of 700,000 compared to 672,000 in Seattle – if Seattle meets its Urban Growth goals. East King will host 500,000 jobs compared to 708,000 in Seattle (PSRC Small Area Forecasts).

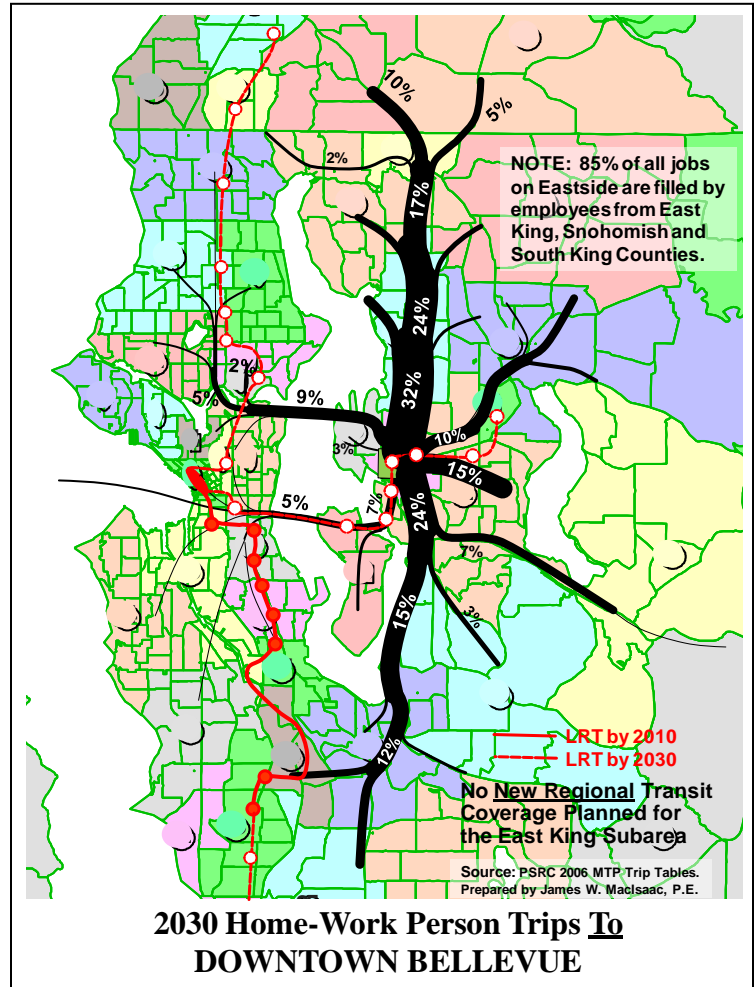
Sound Transit continues to focus its planning on the already well-served transit access to central Seattle. But it does little to focus on the transit access needs of the Eastside. By 2030 only 10% of all trips generated in East King have Seattle/North King as a destination. Only 7% of all trips generated in Seattle/North King have a destination in East King. Yet regional transit planning continues to focus only on travel patterns from the Eastside to Seattle.

More important for the Eastside is its job access needs via public transit. The accompanying figure illustrates the 2030 job access patterns for downtown Bellevue. Only 15% of its employees will be coming from Seattle where there are already 33 bus routes. However, nearly all of these routes are focused on Seattle access needs with only four serving downtown Bellevue.

Another 15% of Eastside employees will come from Snohomish County and another 15% from South King, each currently served by only four regional transit routes. The remaining 55% all come from East King, providing the challenge for Metro Transit.

Access patterns for the Overlake/Microsoft area are similar, but even more oriented to the SR-520 corridor from Seattle. Job access patterns for the balance of the Eastside are even less oriented from Seattle and more oriented from Eastside and Snohomish/South King County origins.

**Providing far more transit service to downtown Bellevue and to Microsoft is essential to accommodate the projected 2030 employee access needs.**



## What Does ST2 Provide?

Sound Transit 2 will only provide a light rail line from Seattle to Overlake/Microsoft via downtown Bellevue for a capital cost of \$4.4 billion. That line would merely duplicate or replace express bus routes 550 and 545. It would serve the bridge of least choice for work trips from Seattle to the Eastside, and force commuters between North Seattle and the Eastside to make much longer trips via I-90 and through downtown Seattle – more than doubling travel time.

Because of the huge capital cost of the one rail line to the Eastside, Sound Transit has eliminated all of the park-ride lot expansions and additional HOV lane access ramps originally recommended by Eastside agencies for inclusion in the ST2 program. No new regional bus routes are included in ST2. Sound Transit has totally rejected a north-south BRT system in the I-405 corridor – the primary transit recommendation in the adopted I-405 Corridor Program.

## What is Sound Transit 2 (ST2)?

Sound Transit will be asking voters In November to reauthorize its current 0.4% sales tax and to approve a 0.5% increase – for a total of 0.9%. This is the same tax proposal voters rejected in November 2007, but now for a greatly reduced capital program.

The Sound Transit 2 (ST2) plan is estimated to cost \$18 billion during its 15-year construction period from 2009-23. Of that cost, 88% will be used to fund 34 miles of light rail extensions. The rail lines would merely duplicate existing express bus routes in the already best-served transit corridors oriented to downtown Seattle – I-5 and I-90. The rail lines would not be completed until 2023.

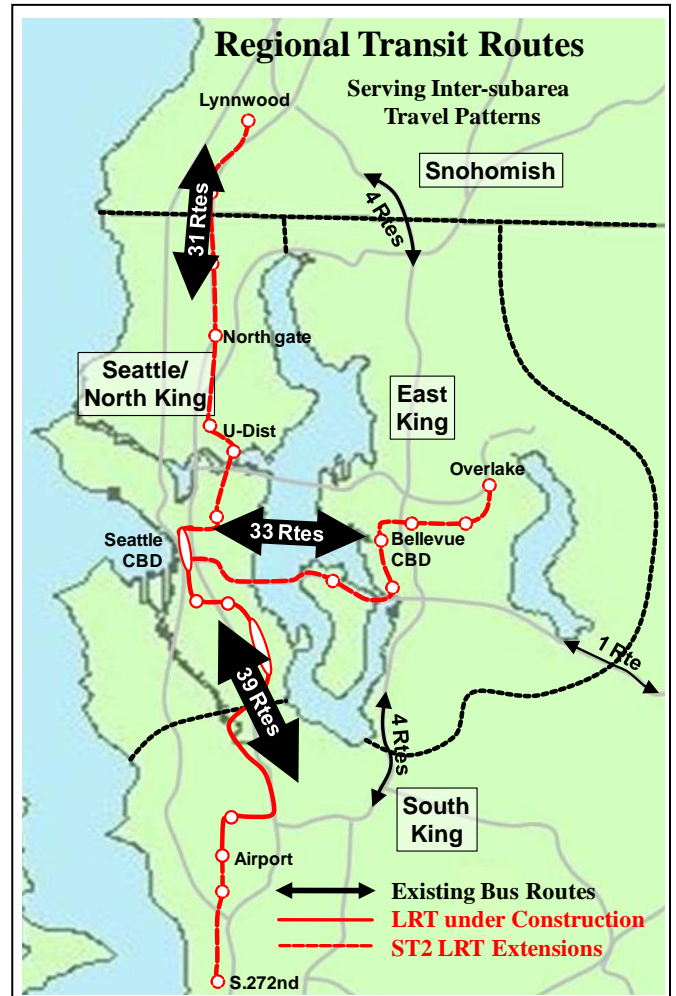
Since the light rail lines would not reach Everett or Pierce County, 8% of the ST2 capital expense will expand Sounder services and station facilities. However, about half of that expenditure on Sounder will merely be completion of facilities and services that were promised in the 1996 *Sound Move* program.

Only 3% of the ST2 program will be dedicated to the Regional Express Bus (REx) program. Though Sound Transit claims that ST2 will increase bus service, it will only bring service frequencies on existing Regional Express bus routes up to the levels promised in *Sound Move*. And most of those service increases will not occur until the Airport rail line opens and competing bus service is eliminated or reallocated.

## We Need More Transit – NOW!

With fuel prices at all-time highs and likely to remain high, the demand for more transit service is immediate. The Seattle/North King subarea already has an extensive grid of local and regional transit routes. However, many of those routes are overloaded and need service increases NOW – not in 15 years.

An even more urgent need is to improve transit access to the 85% of the region’s jobs located outside of central Seattle that are poorly served or unserved by public transit. **East King County is a prime example of unserved transit needs.**



Note that there are currently over 100 Metro Transit, Community Transit and Sound Transit regional bus routes serving travel patterns into and out of the Seattle/North King subarea. All of these are oriented to downtown Seattle and to the U-District where only 15% of the region’s jobs are located. Light rail will merely duplicate several of these bus routes.

By 2030 the combined employment of downtown Bellevue and the Microsoft/Overlake area will be about the same as that of downtown Seattle. Yet only 16 regional bus routes currently serve downtown Bellevue and only 8 serve the Overlake area (excluding Microsoft sponsored bus routes).

Proposed ST2 projects would only replace two existing east-west bus routes with a \$4.4 billion light rail line and maintenance facility. **No new regional bus routes are included in the ST2 program.**

# The Essential Vanpool Element

Equally important to suburban transit service is an aggressive vanpooling program. Today, the central Puget Sound region has three separate vanpool programs operated by the public transit agencies in King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties. Together, the programs sponsor over 1,400 vanpools. Research by the Washington State Department of Transportation in 2003 projected a market potential for 10,000 vanpools in the central Puget Sound region by 2020.

This Better Transit plan offers two vanpool recommendations. The first would provide a regional coordinating body to assure uniform fare structures, policies and identities, and to provide more aggressive marketing. This can be best achieved by a private-sector agency operating under contract with the 3 transit operators and with incentive provisions to significantly increase vanpooling. The second recommendation is to set a target of boosting the number of operating vanpools to about 8,000 by 2015 – a five-fold increase from today.

Implementing the recommended program would by 2015 carry about 110,000 new daily trips in vanpools (after deducting 16% assumed to have switched from bus transit). This can be achieved at little or no additional local public cost. Compare that to Sound Transit's ST2 program capital cost of \$17.9 billion to carry only 62,000 new daily riders, a capital cost of \$290,000 to attract each new daily transit rider.

This region leads the nation in vanpooling, both in the number of public vanpools and in the ratio of vanpools per capita. This success is achieved in spite of limited marketing and the confusion caused by overlapping programs with differing identities, fares and policies. Vanpools are a regional public transportation service – 60% cross county lines, and they serve longer-distance commutes that remove more vehicle-miles from the road system.

Vanpool fares range from about \$50 to \$80 per rider per month, based on trip length. These fares cover 65% to 100% of operating and maintenance costs, some or all of the administrative costs, and may cover some or all of the capital costs. For example, the fares of the King County Metro vanpool program actually recover 100% of all costs -- operating and maintenance, capital and administrative -- although the agency then chooses to subsidize the administrative costs by 75%. In addition, Federal operating subsidies currently pay the transit operating agencies about \$600 per month per vanpool. These funds are not used to support the vanpool programs.

**Expansion of the vanpool program is very cost-effective and is an essential element of A Better Transit Plan for East King County as well as for the entire region!**

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### ETA's Mission

*ETA believes there are clear transportation choices that will allow us to go where we want to go, how we want to go, and when we want to go. We are a private-sector group whose membership includes concerned citizens, business representatives and transportation professionals who are dedicated to making these choices happen.*

*Our goal is to bring objectivity and simplification to the political decision-making process to define, select, fund and implement transportation projects. We support policies that encourage each mode of transportation to operate efficiently and economically to meet growing demands.*

*Rather than using costly transportation projects to try to change or influence human behavior, we want to develop a transportation system that supports increased efficiency, productivity and quality of life.*

*ETA is dedicated to improving our quality of life and the environment in the Puget Sound Region by reducing congestion through increased mobility.*