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Guest columnist

## Don't believe the hype: Tri-county transit package is flawed

By **Jim MacIsaac**

*Special to The Times*

In November, voters in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties will decide on a joint roads-and-transit package that seeks all-or-nothing approval of new taxes to support the transportation needs of the three-county region.

What is touted as a "balanced" roads and transit package is anything but. (Never mind that we currently are spending 52 percent of every transportation tax dollar in this region on public transit.) A zeal for expanding Sound Transit's light-rail system (Sound Transit 2, or ST2) has doubled the transit "half" of the combined package. The roads-and-transit package will cost \$38.1 billion through 2027, with \$14.5 billion going toward the Regional Transportation Investment District (roads) and \$23.6 billion toward ST2.

While the RTID program will be completed and its bonds will be paid off by 2037, ST2 will have debt and large ongoing operations and maintenance costs that will likely require that taxpayers keep paying for ST2 through 2057.

If the roads-and-transit package is approved, it means Sound Transit's Sound Move (ST1) sales tax levy will be extended. By 2057, Sound Transit will have collected a whopping \$141 billion in extended ST1 plus ST2 local tax revenues. In the combined RTID/ST2 package, only 10 percent of the total revenue is dedicated to roads.

In talking about its light-rail expansion, Sound Transit hasn't been accurate or forthcoming about the true costs and projected effect on congestion. I've spent the past two years closely examining ST2 and cutting through Sound Transit's financial fog and rosy talk. Here is what I've discovered:

- The real cost to households is extremely high. Sound Transit claims that the per-household costs of the roads-and-transit package will be \$150 per year plus \$80 per vehicle. This is a lowball estimate that claims only 40 percent of sales-tax revenues are paid by household taxpayers and consumers. The combined ST1, ST2 and RTID taxes will actually be \$888 per household in 2008 and then inflate at Sound Transit's estimated 5.2 percent annually thereafter.



DEAN RUTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Northbound Interstate 5 is congested much of the day.



Jim MacIsaac

- ST2 light rail will have minimal impact on our region's traffic congestion. Sound Transit claims that its ST2 light rail will greatly reduce congestion. But the ST2 plan will result in a minuscule 0.5 percent shift of the region's estimated 16.4 million person-trips a day to transit by 2030.
- Sound Transit's claim that ST2 transit will serve 40 percent of all peak-period trips is a huge exaggeration. ST means that, by 2030, transit will serve 40 percent of work trips to downtown Seattle, where only 10 percent of the region's jobs are located. It will serve 9 percent of all other Seattle work trips, but only 2 percent of the work trips for the rest of the region, where 70 percent of the region's jobs are located. It's unconscionable and inexcusable to put forth what is essentially a Seattlecentric light-rail plan that will serve only a small portion of the region's work force.
- The ST2 light-rail program will run where express buses currently operate. That in itself is mind-boggling. Why would you remove an effective transit mode and replace it with an expensive mode that will hardly reduce congestion?
- In its exuberance to maximize light rail, the Sound Transit board eliminated 27 of 33 proposed Regional Express Bus (REx) projects and 11 of 18 Sounder commuter-rail projects that were in the January 2005 ST2 project list draft. The shift from the REx projects in effect eliminated the Bus Rapid Transit program for the heavily used Interstate 405/Highway 167 corridor.

If approved, the RTID/ST2 package will hamper the ability of the governor and Legislature to enact any statewide transportation packages for many years.

There is a better solution to our region's transportation problems than what ST2 offers. The combination of a freeway high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) network (which is approaching completion) and well-funded and coordinated local bus systems (including Bus Rapid Transit enhancements) can do far more to alleviate our congestion problems than light rail can, at one-tenth the cost. It makes sense to continue expanding the bus-transit system that has placed our region eighth in the nation in share of work trips served by public transit.

Voters in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties should reject the flawed RTID-ST2 proposal and demand that our region's transportation leaders immediately craft a more-sensible, cost-efficient package that will accomplish our top transportation priority — reducing highway congestion.

*Jim MacIsaac is a professional transportation engineer who has spent 45 years in the planning of the Puget Sound region's transportation systems.*

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