

5. What should be the focus of transit planning?

As is the unfortunate focus all across this country, transit planning continues to focus on the center city and its primary economic center; in the case of this region – downtown Seattle. During the 1950s and 1960s with population dispersing to suburban “bedroom communities”, a major focus on mass transit to downtown Seattle appeared logical. But since 1960, employment growth has also largely dispersed to the suburban cities of the region. Today downtown Seattle employment has shrunk to only about 8% of the three-county total, and expected to shrink to 7% by 2030.

Currently there are 225 county and Sound Transit bus routes serving the three-county region. Nearly 80% (176) of these routes begin and/or end in Seattle; 123 routes serve downtown Seattle where only 8% of the region’s employment is located. Only 49 routes serve suburb-to-suburb travel outside of Seattle. Today Seattle generates only 27% of total regional travel, but 88% of all transit trips begin and/or end in Seattle. Transit serves only 0.5% of the 73% of the region’s trips generated outside of Seattle.

The former 2007 ST2 capital program was 95% dedicated to expanding the LRT system from 18 miles to 68 miles. However, the LRT system is merely an overlay of the already best-served transit corridors in the region, and all focused on downtown Seattle. The LRT system provides no new transit service for the vast majority of the region’s trips that are unserved or poorly served by transit today. ***By 2030 only about 1% of the 76% of total regional trips generated outside of Seattle will be served by transit.*** The transit share of total regional travel is expected to increase from about 3% today to about 5% by 2030. Most of that increase will benefit downtown Seattle, and most of the travel shift to rail transit will come from existing bus routes. New transit trips will primarily be induced by increasing road congestion and fuel prices – not as a direct result of rail transit.

Rather than merely replacing existing bus routes to downtown Seattle with light rail, what this region urgently needs is new and improved transit and vanpool services to the 85% of the region’s jobs outside of central Seattle. The time has come to reduce the focus of rail transit overlays to central Seattle and place the major focus of new regional transit system planning on better serving suburban employment centers.

The Microsoft/Overlake campus area is a prime example of the need for improved suburban employment center transit/vanpool access. Microsoft could not wait 20 years for a single rail line to serve its access needs. Existing Metro and Sound Transit bus routes already serve the employee travel patterns that the rail line would serve. In a one-year period and only a few \$million in capital expense Microsoft devised and implemented six regional bus transit routes to assist its employee access needs not served by the existing transit routes.

This is the kind of focus we should be providing for regional transit service over the next ten years – a focus on the unserved and poorly served transit needs of the suburban region.