



Council to review RTA Plan

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On March 14, the voters of the Central Puget Sound Regional Transportation District (about 85 percent of the population of King, Snohomish and Pierce counties) will approve or reject a proposal to proceed with implementation of the first phase of the Regional Transit Authority's Master Plan. Their decision will fundamentally shape the region's transportation investments through the year 2020, and will have a major impact on statewide transportation planning and finance.

The Phase I Plan has six parts: (1) A commuter rail line extending from Lakewood in the south through Tacoma and downtown Seattle to Everett in the north. (2) A light rail line extending from downtown Tacoma in the south, through downtown Seattle, to 164th Street SW, Snohomish County in the north, with an additional corridor from downtown Seattle across the I-90 bridge to the Overlake area. (3) A \$100 million "starter project" in the I-405 corridor. (4) A Transit Development Fund that will direct money to projects of interest to the various subregions of the Regional Transit District. (5) Integration of the fare systems of all of the district's transit systems. (6) Eight regional bus routes.

Voters are being asked to raise the sales and use tax rates by 0.4 percent (from 8.2 percent to 8.6 percent in Seattle, an increase of 4.9 percent) and the motor vehicle excise tax (MVET) by 0.3 percent (from 0.22 percent to 0.25 percent, or a 13.6 percent increase). These tax increases will fund about half of the local portion of the estimated \$6.7 billion plan.

The RTA proposal should be considered within the context of the larger transportation plan established by the Puget Sound Regional Council, which last month identified metropolitan transportation needs totalling \$62.4 billion through the year 2020. According to the regional council, currently available revenues would provide about \$37 billion, or 59 percent of the total required. While hoping that federal funding might increase by \$3.5 billion, the council suggests the additional \$21.9 billion will have to be raised from new taxes and fees within the region.

As voters consider the RTA proposal, they should keep a number of questions in mind:

- What are the various forms of transportation within the region and how important is each to our social and economic health?
- How much are voters willing to spend on transportation generally over the next quarter century and how should that money be raised?
- Does the RTA's plan make sense within the context of the region's overall needs?
- How much will the system actually cost?
- How will we pay for it?
- Will paying for the RTA system mean that other more important needs will go unsatisfied?

Over the next several weeks, the Washington Research Council will be issuing a series of policy briefs to aid voters in thinking through these very difficult issues. Specifically, these briefs will examine the RTA's cost and revenue forecasts, the impact of the Phase I system on congestion and mobility within the region, and the experiences of other regions that have recently introduced light rail.

— *Kriss Sjoblom*