



Light rail in the long run: Are buses a better choice?

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April 18, 2016

There's a chip on our shoulder. We've been overlooked for decades. It's time we get ours.

But is light rail worth the fight?

Under the Sound Transit “ST3” draft plan, light rail wouldn't reach manufacturing powerhouses Boeing and Paine Field until 2041.

Cars that drive themselves will fill used car lots by that time, if industry projections prove true.

By contrast, Community Transit's Swift II bus rapid transit route is expected to take riders between Boeing and Canyon Park in 2018 — just three years after voters approved the funding.

The issue may be about even more than time — or Boeing.

“Light rail is an obsolete form of travel,” said Randal O'Toole, a fellow at the Cato Institute. “Buses can move more people for far less money.”

O'Toole is known for railing against rail.

He's not alone in questioning the higher costs.

“Everybody likes railroads. I like railroads,” said Dick Startz, an economics professor at the University of California Santa Barbara. He used to work at the University of Washington and wrote columns for The Herald.

Still, could investing further in dedicated bus lanes and infrastructure be better than extending light rail to Everett, including a \$1 billion detour to Boeing?

“It might be a good question to ask before spending a billion dollars,” Startz said.

And it's a key question for Snohomish County voters as Sound Transit massages its draft plan into a final question for the November ballot.

Rail vs. bus to Boeing

An estimated 65,000 people work in the industrial areas around the Boeing plant and Paine Field. Local leaders say a commute by rail to Boeing is a must.

A commuter taking a direct light rail route to Boeing would reach work in 19 minutes from Lynnwood, 10 minutes faster than if they had to transfer to a bus from a rail line kept alongside I-5, according to Sound Transit estimates provided to The Herald.

That's \$100 million per minute to avoid a bus.

If \$10 tolls on I-405 are any indication, it's a higher price we may be willing pay.

And if national surveys are accurate, people have a raccoon-like fascination with trains.

Trains shiny.

Buses stinky.

That is, unless the bus functions like a train.

What's BRT?

“Bus rapid transit is the mode of the future,” said Martin Munguia, a spokesman for Community Transit.

And it's what would fill the gap between light rail along I-5 and the Boeing industrial area under an alternative Sound Transit's been talking up.

Bus rapid transit acts as much like light rail as it can on regular roads using pre-paid fares, set stops, and as many bus lanes as possible.

Snohomish County was the first to bring bus rapid transit to Washington. The Swift line, which connects Everett to Shoreline along Highway 99, is now the agency's most popular route, even

though its performance is hindered by a lack of bus lanes in Everett city limits.

The alternative ST3 plan would tap Swift II, and triple the money used to build bus-only lanes until they cover 85 percent of the route. Right now, the route is on track to have bus lanes just 40 percent of the way.

Light rail critics say that's reason enough to challenge the whole rail route. Why spend \$234 million a mile on a system that national trends indicate will make up only a small percentage of total transit use?

“This is absolutely stupid for a low-capacity system. It is like designing a house with three sinks and putting all the money into the sink that can only deliver one cup of water an hour,” O'Toole said.

Yet it might be the only tap left.

Not either-or

For all its cheerleading of buses, you won't hear Community Transit push for buses over light rail.

The farther north light rail goes, Munguia said, the easier it will be to get people to that service from the farther reaches of Snohomish County on buses.

For example, once light rail reaches Lynnwood in 2023, Community Transit will bow out of the I-5 commute into Seattle. That frees up money for service elsewhere, dumping those Double Talls onto different roads, including getting riders to the Lynnwood light rail station.

It's already happened in King County, where Metro has tripled the number of northeast Seattle households close to buses since light rail arrived there.

“Light rail and buses can really work together. They can really complement each other,” Munguia said.

As it is, Community Transit buses on I-5 are late a quarter of the time because of congestion. Rush hour affects the Swift route, too, slowing a trip by as much as 15 minutes.

The best option, local planners say, is to get off the road.

“This strategy using both trains and buses is employed by the vast majority of regions around the

nation and world that are of comparable size to ours,” said Geoff Patrick, spokesman for Sound Transit.

At a certain point, he said, that's what's left.

Trains of up to 400 feet in length could be running every three minutes. “So you can do the math. What's the capacity long-term of light rail? It's really like a freeway,” Patrick said.

Does that freeway need to go to Boeing?

Time is kicker

Sound Transit says it takes a minimum of 15 years to get any new light rail route in place. Light rail can make it to Boeing and downtown Everett in that time — but only with an additional influx of another \$1 billion, Patrick said.

The current package, with a \$1 billion Boeing detour and 2041 arrival, already will cost the average taxpayer \$200 a year.

By tapping the bus, light rail would reach Everett within 15 years, and do it with less money.

Dan McDonald of Everett voted for the first Sound Transit rail plan fresh out of high school at age 18. He's now in his 40s, and he'd be in his 70s when light rail reaches Everett should the draft ST3 plan move forward and pass.

“I'll have worked my entire career and retired without ever being able to use the system I voted for and paid for. Ridiculous,” he said. “I'll still vote for it though. It has to happen, even if it's ‘later than sooner.’”

There's still a “sooner than later” element, though. “Getting to Everett is the most important thing in the short run,” McDonald said.

Backers are banking on voters like McDonald who believe light rail will be as relevant in 25 years as it was two decades ago when we first voted on it.

Light rail critics often cite innovations like self-driving cars in their push to rethink how we spend our money. But visions of a driverless future rendering transit obsolete are, at this point, little more than a World's Fair-like fantasy.

In a dense area with even more people moving in and space maxed out, transit will always play a

role, said Jarrett Walker, a Portland-based transit consultant.

“Technology never changes facts of geometry,” he said.

Whether that transit includes bus over light rail?

“There is no systemic rule about that,” he said.

By the numbers

Shown are the times it would take to travel from Lynnwood to Boeing and to Everett Station under four different options for ST3, as well as the costs for each compared to the draft plan under review, and when rail would arrive:

All rail, Boeing and Everett via Highway 99: 19 min, 31 min, \$0, 2041

All rail, Boeing and Everett via I-5: 19 min, 31 min, -\$298M, 2041

Rail up I-5, bus rapid transit west: 29 min, 25 min, -\$937M, 2032

Rail up I-5, rail spur to Boeing: 26 min, 25 min, -\$758M, between 2032 and 2041

Source: Sound Transit; all numbers are estimates.

More info

More information and a survey are at soundtransit3.org.

An open house meeting is set for 5:30-7:30 p.m. April 25 at Everett Station, 3201 Smith Ave.