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Guest columnists

If light rail starts south, it can't abandon the north

By Mike Vaska and Bob Watt

Special to The Times

This region has been staring a decision about light rail in the eye for 30 years. Now is not the time to blink, but it is time to change some things.

To complete a light-rail line north, we may first have to build south. That's what Sound Transit's Board will be asked to decide this week. Instead of first building north from downtown to the University District — as has been planned for the past several years — the board will be asked to approve building light rail south toward the airport.

Whether citizens should support this about-face depends on whether Sound Transit gives reasonable assurances that it will deliver the complete plan promised to the voters: a light-rail line that runs both north and south, and that improves transit service in a congested downtown Seattle.

There are two main reasons for the crisis that has Sound Transit looking to the south to begin building light rail. First, costs for the Capitol Hill tunnel spiraled as unanticipated problems increased already huge engineering challenges. Costs went up as tunnels got deeper. For example, the listing of chinook salmon as an endangered species — an event not anticipated when the public approved the light-rail plan in 1996 — resulted in a deeper tunnel under the Ship Canal and 25-story-deep stations in the University District.

Second, a lack of budget discipline — on the part of the board and the staff — resulted in other cost increases. This "scope creep" has become a fiscal Grinch that threatens the entire project. Future mitigation decisions and other enhancements should receive extraordinary scrutiny before the board approves them.

The delay resulting from these problems has pushed to the brink our chances for \$500 million in federal funding earmarked for the light-rail project. A decision to build south first should let us keep our \$500 million in federal funds. Building south is also consistent with the Sound Move plan adopted by the voters, which recognized it might take longer to solve the engineering challenges to go north.

But despite these prospects, no south-going plan should be adopted unless reasonable assurances are made that a north-going route promised the voters will be completed. The Sound Transit Board must make the following commitments:

- South line budget - The south line budget preserves approximately \$1 billion (when combined with assumed federal funding) to go north. This should be enough to build a reconfigured north line. It will

not be enough, however if scope creep on the south line consumes funds for the north.

Sound Transit must commit to avoid scope creep that would reduce or eliminate these funds. It can do so by adopting a detailed budget that includes a description of project scope, and sticking to that budget. Project reserves and contingencies should be used for unexpected cost increases, not increased project scope. To lessen the chance of scope creep, changes in the budget or use of reserves and contingencies should be "major decisions" subject to a super-majority vote by the board.

- North line route - A north line would carry three times the riders of the south line, even at about one-third of its length. It would add freeway-like capacity to move people across the Ship Canal and connect the University District and downtown Seattle.

But to build north, Sound Transit must find a cheaper route than through Capitol Hill. Sound Transit should focus its efforts on a less costly route, such as South Lake Union.

Development of an alternative to the Capitol Hill route is consistent with the Sound Move Plan approved by the voters. A citizens' committee formed under the voter-approved plan identified South Lake Union as the best alternative. Preliminary work by Sound Transit suggests a route can be developed with robust ridership and several hundred million dollars in savings.

An alternative route should provide for an interim terminus north of the University District in a location suitable to serve as a connection point for bus riders. The University District is too congested to serve as this collection point. Sound Transit should not begin building the north line until it has a funded plan to reach this north terminus.

- Tunnel joint operations - The Sound Move plan provided that busses and light rail would coexist in the downtown transit tunnel. Sound Transit abandoned this pledge after the election. It now has developed a joint operations plan as part of its south alignment.

Converting the tunnel for light-rail use only makes sense if it improves transit in downtown Seattle. According to Sound Transit's own study, this improvement will only happen if the north line is built. Therefore, converting the tunnel is acceptable only so long as beforehand, Sound Transit has adopted a plan to go north and construction has been scheduled to commence.

- Citizens' oversight - The plan approved by the voters called for the highest degree of public accountability and committed to a Citizens' Oversight Committee (COP) to monitor Sound Transit's performance. To date, COP has accurately warned of Sound Transit's impending crisis. However, it has been relegated largely to commenting on Sound Transit decisions after they have been made.

To provide effective oversight — and to help prevent scope creep — COP must be given authority to review and comment on key Sound Transit budget decisions before they are made. If COP had concerns about budget changes or agreements with local governments, they should be subject to the Sound Transit Board's supermajority vote requirement.

In addition, Sound Transit should agree to performance audits monitored by COP. These performance audits will ensure that the public's funds are spent wisely.

These reforms may not be all that is needed to ensure the Sound Transit Board can deliver on the promises made to the voters. But they can be put in place now, and they are a good start.

Our region has talked about building a rail-transit system for more than four decades — since the late 1950s. As we have talked, costs have risen, the available federal funds have fallen, and traffic has gotten worse. For the first time during these four decades, we are on the threshold of actually building a light-rail system.

Sound Transit should move forward, but only if in so doing it sows the seeds of solutions to the major outstanding issues. It can sow those seeds by committing to a north line, and to the discipline necessary to deliver it.

Mike Vaska, an attorney who lives in Issaquah, is chair of the Sound Transit Committee for the Greater Seattle Chamber Commerce. He was a co-chair of the successful 1996 campaign in which the voters approved the Sound Transit Plan. Bob Watt is president of the Greater Seattle Chamber of Commerce.

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