

Sound Transit Community Oversight Panel Hybrid Meeting Summary

September 10, 2025

COP Members Present: Tina Pierce, Scott Lampe, Linda Dorris, Mark Lewington, Paul Thompson, James Peyton, Tom Norcott, Charlotte Murry, Donia Zaheri

COP Members Absent: Trevor Reed, Zak Osborne, Lorenzo Frazier

Others Present: Adam Montee, Katie Flores

2024 Passenger Experience Survey Results

- Rebeca de Buen Kalman – Project Manager, Data & Research
- Marcus Clark – Director, Passenger Services

Staff advised that the passenger experience survey was, functionally, a customer satisfaction survey. The survey is a measure of subjective experience, not facts, but it is important in that it informs staff about how the passengers are experiencing the system. The survey measures in four categories, Passenger characteristics, overall performance, foundational categories like safe, dependable (see service dashboard for those) and drivers for performance. The survey has been conducted annually in the fall. The 2025 survey will be conducted in November

Staff reviewed overall sentiment toward Sound Transit measured by two questions. First was an overall grade, measured between 0 and 4.5. The agency's score was 3.2, which was on par with past years. The second was likelihood to recommend. This metric is measured on a scale of 1 to 10, and the agency received a 8.2 rating. This was higher than the fall of 2023, but lower than previous years.

The foundational categories are reviewed compared to an "average". A category being above average, generally, indicates that the agency is performing well according to passengers. A category scoring below average, similarly, indicates that the public believes the agency is not performing to its standards.

Categories performing above average included dependable service, available service, and day-to-day passenger information. Below average categories included perception of personal safety on vehicles and at stations, maintenance and cleanliness of vehicles and stations, and passenger information during unplanned disruptions.

Staff advised that it used the data gathered in the survey to inform work to improve rider experience, and reviewed the steps being taken based on the results of the survey. In response to concerns about personal safety and security, staff were taking a series of measures to address passenger concerns about unpredictable behavior, exposure to drugs, and verbal harassment at stations and on vehicles. First among those was to increase King County Sheriff presence on the system. Security officers and Sheriff deputies would also begin to be deploy special patrols in areas with more reported incidents. Finally, staff was engaging the public with a "see something, say something" campaign to encourage riders to report any concerning activity by text, phone, or email.

Already in place are four security contracts to ensure adequate security officer staffing and coverage a rapid response team called Field Activity Specialist Team (FAST) to coordinate responses between security and law enforcement personnel, and a partnership with King County Mental Health to employ response teams which support security and connect vulnerable individuals to services.

To address the concerns about facility maintenance and cleanliness, staff are deploying a new cleaning program with refined schedules, frequency and quality assurance measures, as well as refining the preventative maintenance program and employing a rotational annual state of good repair program to replace aging or damaged fixtures. Regarding vehicle cleanliness, the program which cleans vehicles when they reach the end of the line has been expanded, and the successful seat cover pilot was recently completed with installation across all vehicles to begin soon.

To address concerns about communication around unplanned service disruptions, passenger information coordinators are located in the Link Control Center for better coordination with Link controllers. Additionally, enhancements to the digital passenger information are taking place through the Passenger Information Management System improvements, and continued training for communications specialists is taking place.

A member asked if measures were developed by the agency, or if they were comparable to peer agencies. They also asked how the “average” was determined. Staff advised that the agency doesn’t use benchmarks similar to peer agencies. The average was developed by comparing a given category’s score against all data. The scale uses statements, and respondents can answer according to their experience.

A member asked why yearly data was only shown beginning in 2020, noting that the Covid 19 pandemic could have impacted results. Staff advised that they use those years because the same questions were asked throughout, keeping the data consistent, as opposed to years prior to 2020 when a different contractor was used and different questions were asked. The same member asked if the actions to address the survey were based on 2024 data. Staff confirmed that it was based on 2024 data.

A member asked if there were efforts taken to survey the wider region, instead of just passengers. Staff advised that this survey was intended to only survey passengers.

A member noted that the two different scales, performance and likelihood to recommend, were difficult to understand because they were different.

A member noted that the intent of this survey was to gather data and improve, but the ratings have not improved much over time. Did staff do any deeper research into why the ratings didn’t improve? Staff acknowledged that was the case, and that it was not something they investigated deeply, but noted that it was an idea worth pursuing in future surveys.

A member asked if the characteristics of the passengers have changed over time. They also asked what differences regarding responses changed over time. Staff advised that they didn’t track that particular type of data. Staff would return with that information.

A member asked how many responses were submitted. Staff advised that around 20,000 responses were submitted. The member also asked how soon improvements were implemented, and how those improvements were supposed to be captured if it took a while to implement them. Staff advised that they look at not just survey data, but rider complaints, which are not date-limited, like the survey is.

A member asked how rider characteristics align with other data, like larger regional demographic data? Staff advised that an origin-destination survey was conducted in 2024, which was a larger, more randomized survey to understand, among other things, the demographic make-up of who rides the system. Staff would be able to use that data to compare the respondents of the passenger experience survey in 2025.

Adoption of Previous Meeting Summary

A member suggested one correction. There was a motion to adopt the August notes, seconded, and approved. Charlotte Murry abstained.

Agency Resiliency Update

- Shankar Rajaram – Acting: Executive Director-Core Infrastructure & Asset

Staff would review the steps the agency has taken since June to improve the system's resiliency and reduce unplanned service disruptions.

Three systems had the most profound impacts on service disruptions: traction power, the rails, and light rail vehicles. Staff took a full inventory of the assets to understand the health of the traction power system. They hired external consultants who conducted a gap analysis intended improve maintenance log practices and training. They also revised the rail-to-ground setting to eliminate disruptions due to false grounding alarms.

Regarding the systems rail assets, instead of working from one end of the system to the other, staff prioritized projects based on wear report findings. A database was also established to track progress on rail maintenance. Finally, staff resolved light rail vehicle braking systems, which led to many disruptions. 90 percent of the vehicle fleet had been upgraded as of the time of the meeting.

In 2024, unplanned service disruptions accounted for 38 out-of-service hours per month. In Q1, 2025, that amount had lowered to 16 hours per month. Q2, 2025 lowered to 15 hours per month, with July itself reporting only 14 hours per month. Staff recognized that while the reduction in unplanned system downtime was encouraging, two to three percent of planned operating time being down was not acceptable, and the ongoing work to improve resiliency will hopefully see even more reductions.

Staff noticed that there were several disruptions closer to extension openings. While an extension is designed to operate with the existing system, they are still built five to 10 years apart. A new extension and its connections to the system are not tested until the last year before it is opened, and full system stress cannot be tested until it is truly open to the public. Staff reviewed a graph which plotted service disruptions occurring around new extension openings. Over time, more recent extensions have been trending positively with fewer disruptions. While staff expect disruptions to occur with every new extension, they are using lessons learned to reduce them as much as possible.

Staff reviewed instances of service disruptions caused by assets at the root of most disruptions: traction power, the signal system providing train separation and traffic control, and the light rail vehicles. The greatest reduction in service disruption hours per month came from improvements to the traction power system. However, incidents in May and July drove the metric for Q2 2025 and July 2025, specifically, above Q1 2025 performance. Performance in signaling issues was greatly improved through the first half of the year, but a stray current issue leading to a false alarm in July led to more disrupted hours than the previous two quarters. Staff were working to reduce the occurrence of false alarms. Finally, the improvement to light rail vehicle braking systems explained earlier in the presentation led to an improvement in hours of disruption.

Root causes of recent major service deliveries in July and August were still under investigation, but were likely symptomatic of the broader resilience issues the program was working to address. Near-term interventions were underway wherever possible while staff were also working to enact longer-term efforts

to make improvements more durable. In the near term, the agency was improving responses in efficacy and speed by improving field technician training and maintenance instructions. In the long term, staff were in early efforts to build preventative measures into the agency's capital infrastructure and management practices.

Of the 80 recommendations from the resiliency study, nine have been completed. It is anticipated that 32 more near-term recommendations will be completed by the 2026 World Cup. 39 longer-term corrections will likely take between 4 to 5 years.

A member asked if the panel could receive the resiliency study. Staff would provide it after the meeting.

Communications network improvements would focus on fiber network replacement. Maintenance improvements were tied to roles and responsibilities between Sound Transit and its partners, who maintain the system. That work was underway. Tunnel power distribution was related to traction power, but staff acknowledged that the system is at the mercy of the utility system's infrastructure. Maintenance recommendations relate to the system as a whole and would require coordination between Sound Transit and its operating partners. Tunnel power distribution recommendations included systems to ensure key safety systems remain powered during larger power outages. Projects were underway to replace obsolete equipment and were scheduled to be completed by 2028.

Staff were rapidly pursuing near-term solutions to triage issues in the top five report focus areas. Developing modern communication networks was a challenge because of how quickly the life cycle of a system was shortening. Staff was developing strategies to plan for those shorter life cycles. Traction power system controls would be standardized to eliminate false alarms. Maintenance procedures would be improved with work between the agency and its maintenance partner, King County Metro. Similar to communication networks, the signaling system was dealing with obsolete equipment. Remote monitoring was being installed to reduce response times to failures, while longer term obsolescence plans and modernization plans were being developed.

In the past, the agency was more focused on capital expansion. More recently, agency leadership was dedicated to focusing on the agency as a whole, including service delivery. This is especially relevant now that the system has grown so quickly in such a short time.

A member asked where staff were seeing the most challenges in the short-term corrections and what staff were doing about those challenges. Staff advised that collecting asset information is a monumental task. As an example, light rail vehicles are assets which get much attention, and they are under warranty for a period of time after delivery. When it comes to infrastructure, though, there are different standards. Traction power was a challenge because between 20-30% of the disruptions occur at the utility source, which relies on regional utilities to strengthen their systems. Training was another challenge, because some systems in use are obsolete, but useful. Carrying over institutional knowledge was difficult because newer technicians may not have been trained on legacy systems.

A member asked if, when staff return, they could bring asset data points which were more comparable. Staff clarified that the data used was a monthly average, so the time spans were comparable.

A member noted that the data in the presentation was only for 2024 and 2025, they asked if there was data gathered about disruptions that occurred before 2024. Staff advised that disruptions were much more frequent around system service expansions, where the system is more stressed. Staff also advised that it would try to get data on previous years.

A member asked if the intergovernmental agreement with King County Metro had been amended in accordance with the recommendations in the resilience study. Staff advised that it was in progress but not completed.

A member asked the average length of a service disruption. Staff advised that disruptions could last for a couple of minutes, or up to several hours. The hope was that while average time was lowering, the actual number of acute disruptions would fall as well, with more work continuing. The member asked what an “acute” disruption was. Staff advised that it was more a term of art, but any disruption lasting more than 5 minutes would be considered a true service disruption. The member asked if the time of disruptions was coming down. Staff advised that it could not fully answer that question, as maintenance practices were being implemented. They would have a better understanding in around a year. The member asked how the agency was prioritizing among the different recommendation areas. Staff advised that a priority review board was created to allow for a formalized process of prioritizing projects. At the same time, a task force was reviewing technical aspects, which can inform staff of projects which can be more easily addressed.

A member asked if staff were following prioritization recommendations outlined in the resiliency report. Staff advised that those recommendations were the starting point. As staff continued work, it would better understand the status of the various areas and re-prioritize based on conditions.

A member asked if some examples of replacing obsolete infrastructure, as outlined in slide 12, could be given. Staff would follow up after the meeting.

Enterprise Initiative – Program Affordability

- Alex Krieg – Deputy Executive Director-Enterprise Planning

Staff noted that this information was provided to the Board at its August meeting, and he would likely be back in front of the panel multiple times as board-dictated deadlines occurred. The current presentation would share updated information on cost growth observed in the capital program, service delivery needs, and financing costs. Finally, staff reminded members of the Enterprise Initiative, noting how it differed from program realignments in the past.

Staff reviewed what the Long-Range Financial Plan (LRFP) was and provided a brief snapshot of the current plan’s overall sources and uses. A 30-year plan would naturally face volatility over the course of that timeframe, but there was still financial capacity to address the current challenges faced.

Staff reviewed the difference between current-year (2025) dollars as opposed to year-of-expenditure dollars. When a project is brought to the Board, it is used in current-year dollars, but the LRFP realizes projects in year-of-expenditure amounts.

Unmitigated, the agency was experiencing cost pressures over the LRFP of 20-25% above the fall 2024 LRFP before any cost savings opportunities were applied. Cost growth on the capital program is approximately \$14-20 billion more in 2025 dollars, or \$22-\$30 billion more in year-of-expenditure dollars. Service delivery assumptions were also facing cost pressures of up to approximately \$5 billion in year-of-expenditure dollars. The need for increased financing would also see cost pressures from financing costs, resulting in \$4-\$5 billion more in year-of-expenditures in that area as well.

A member asked how the cost growth was reflected through the lens of subarea equity. Staff advised that Subarea Equity was an agency policy, and so any changes to the program would need to abide by that. They also noted that the Ballard Link Extension was actually two projects, the second downtown tunnel was shared across all subareas while the segment after the tunnel was dedicated only to the North King

County. Staff also advised that the Enterprise Initiative was an all encompassing effort, and amending all policies was on the table, although subarea equity was embedded within the agency such that it would be surprising to see that changed in any significant way.

The projects included in the capital program cost growth were the major ST3 projects like West Seattle Link, Ballard Link, Tacoma Dome Link, Everett Link, Tacoma Community College Link, and South Kirkland-Issaquah Link. The Capital Delivery Department was working on a Board-directed Capital Delivery Cost Savings Workplan. The Board would have more control over the large projects before they are baselined as opposed to those already in the construction phase, like BRT.

Staff reviewed the cost growth since ST3 was passed. In the 2021 realignment, cost growth was primarily driven by right of way costs and construction costs. After that realignment, continued inflation, as well as pressures from tariffs and new cost estimating methods revealed even higher cost growth. Not all projects were experiencing the same cost pressures, however. Staff would be bringing project-level cost projections to the Board in the following weeks. As an example of external cost pressures, Highway construction costs increased by over 71% since the end of 2020, and in early 2024, costs were rising at an annualized rate of nearly 10%. Engineering services saw similar price increases, rising approximately twice as fast in the four years following 2020 compared to the four years before.

As directed by the Board in Motion No. M2024-59, staff was developing cost savings opportunities across the capital program. Four tiers were created with increasing difficulties and are referred to as levers. Lever 1 included opportunities that can be implemented at the project level, like design optimizations. Lever 2 included opportunities that could be advanced with cooperation between departments. Both of these levers could be enacted without the need for Board action. Lever 3 included opportunities which would require coordination with jurisdictional partners and Board action, such as scope reduction. Lever 4 was the most impactful, including opportunities like phasing projects and would also require action from the Board and engagement with external partners.

A member asked if the size of the bars on slide 12 were reflective of the magnitude of savings. Staff advised that the bars were conceptually reflective, but not directly. Another member asked if tariffs were reflected in the work plan. Staff advised that some tariff risks were captured, in light rail vehicle acquisition, for example.

Cost Pressures with respect to service delivery are approximately \$5 billion in year of expenditure over the LRFP. Major drivers include new and replacement light rail vehicles, resiliency investments, and higher operating and maintenance costs.

Light Rail Vehicle cost pressures were driven by general inflation and tariffs. The assessment of LRVs was informed by both industry engagement and a recent purchase of 10 additional Series 2 LRVs. The potential need of more LRV's than initially anticipated also drove cost pressures.

Many feasibility studies are underway with regards to system resilience. An example is adding crossover tracks in the downtown Seattle transit tunnel to ease future service disruptions. Current cost pressures only reflect the potential up-front costs, but not any potential life-cycle cost savings after implementation.

The agency gathered a great deal of data from the several expansion openings since 2021. That data revealed that continued system expansion would likely require additional staff resources to operate the system. Better quantified information was needed to address these challenges. Fleet needs, and future operating costs would be informed by this work.

The final consideration was the agency's revenues and financing. Revenues are difficult for the Board to control, as much of that is determined by external factors. Inputs from macroeconomic forecasting tools inform LRFP revenues in the form of tax revenue projections and inflation forecasts. Based on the latest projections, staff estimated \$4-\$5 billion in year-of-expenditure dollars of financial capacity and revenue deterioration due to lower sales revenue forecasts, fare revenues related to changing ridership patterns, and higher financing costs.

A member asked if staff had third party review for the vast sums considered in the LRFP. Staff advised that economists and banking professionals, among others across the capital program and service delivery fields are engaged to support staff's projections.

LRFP is officially updated annually in the fall in concurrence with the agency's budget and transit improvement plan. Fare revenues were projected to be lower, however that is an input the Board can influence more than most other revenue sources. A member pointed out that fares were only 4% of revenues, and staff agreed that it was a relatively marginal factor.

Higher costs lead to the need for additional borrowing, leading to higher debt service costs. Unfortunately, interest rates remain higher than in the pre-COVID era when the agency was able to lock in low rates. The agency's cash balance is strong, but that may begin to become exhausted by the beginning of the 2030s when major construction on ST3 projects begins. S&PP and Moody's both recently affirmed the agency's strong credit ratings, but with that comes tradeoffs the Board must consider.

Much of the enterprise initiative work would review how the agency can optimize debt capacity, like grant revenue opportunities and partnerships that could provide additional revenues or expense sharing. The work would also model risks associated with changing financial controls to balance risk management and optimal debt capacity.

Staff would continue to work with and inform the Board through its committees' areas of responsibility. A second Board retreat was in development as well. Through the end of 2025, much of the work would better understand the position the agency is in and how the Board can address the cost pressures. The following year would see the Board make the decisions informed by work happening now.

A member noted that they asked CEO Constantine how the agency would influence more ridership. He pushed back saying that more people are riding. Staff noted that ridership trends were differing compared to what projections assumed prior to the pandemic. Many people rely on transit; however, staff can certainly take steps to increase ridership even more.

A member asked who makes the ultimate decision on which projects advance in certain ways. Staff advised that the Board of Directors is the decision maker when it comes to project scope or sequencing. They asked staff to develop a framework with which they can make those decisions.

A member noted that the presentation provided to the Board was not made public until after the Board already adopted its principles. Staff acknowledged the timing and noted that the presentation's timing was more a factor of ensuring the information was accurate.

A member asked how benefits of this process could be characterized. Staff noted that ridership was a benefit. Staff would also look at the ST3 system plan to identify performance metrics along with the Long Range Plan adopted by the Board in 2014, which emphasized completing the spine, among others.

Nominations for Community Oversight Panel Vice Chair and election

Mark Lewington was nominated for the Vice Chair position, which he accepted. No additional nominations were submitted. Charlotte Murry was already nominated for the Chair position in September. It was moved and seconded to appoint Charlotte Murry as Chair and Mark Lewington as Vice Chair. The motion passed unanimously.

Member Reports

A member noted their disappointment with the first presentation's lack of data regarding the passenger experience survey.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, October 8, 2025, 5:30 – 8:15 PM

- 2026 Service Plan
- Sounder and ST Express NTD Review
- Audit Program and Annual Performance Audit Topic