



Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Fall 2019 Outreach Summary

Overview

Ridership on Sounder South commuter rail is increasing, and we expect this to continue as more people move to the region. To help meet this growing demand, voters approved the Sounder South Capacity Expansion program in 2016 as part of Sound Transit 3.

As part of this program, Sound Transit will expand capacity so more people can ride Sounder between Lakewood and Seattle. Improvements may include:

- Longer trains and platforms (to carry up to 40% more people).
- Station improvements to accommodate longer trains and more riders.
- Additional daily trips (contingent on negotiations with Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) Railway).

When prioritizing among the three types of potential improvements, there are significant constraints for Sound Transit to consider, including the need to reach agreement on any additional trips with BNSF Railway, which owns most of the tracks used by Sounder; the need to coordinate Sounder trips with freight and Amtrak service; and already limited space on the tracks and platforms.

In September 2019, Sound Transit hosted an online open house and 11 drop-in sessions to share initial analysis on possible Sounder South improvements and information on system constraints and trade-offs and gather community feedback on priorities.

Overall, more than 4,100 people participated, resulting in over 2,500 responses to the online survey. The survey and events were publicized through a mailing to over 22,000 local residents and businesses, promotion on social media, posters and signs at the stations, and other methods.

Outreach by the numbers



Over 2,500 responses to the online survey



Over 400 people visited drop-in sessions at each of the 9 Sounder Stations and the Puyallup and Lakewood Farmers Markets



Over 4,100 users visited the online open house from Sept. 10 – 24



More than 22,000 postcards mailed to homes and businesses along the Sounder South corridor



Approximately 2,500 postcards with links to the online open house distributed to Sounder users during the drop-in sessions



2 rider alerts and 1 project email sent to over 29,000 recipients



5,000+ people reached with more than 600 engagements on Twitter and Facebook

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

The following summary includes common themes from the community feedback, followed by a Frequently Asked Questions section with responses from Sound Transit on key topics. The community feedback—in conjunction with other factors, including results of the technical analysis, corridor constraints and project budget—will help inform Sound Transit's *Sounder South Strategic Development and Implementation Plan*, which is a system plan identifying capital investments and implementation priorities. The Sound Transit Board is scheduled to adopt the plan in the first quarter of 2020.

Summary of feedback

Visitors to the online open house and drop-in sessions were asked for feedback about their priorities for expanding Sounder South capacity and what changes could make riding Sounder a better option for them. Participants shared comments in person and completed more than 2,500 online surveys. Approximately 75% of respondents were current daily or weekly riders, and approximately 25% were infrequent riders or non-riders.

Common themes from the feedback include:

1. Strong desire for consistent, on-time service.
2. Interest in adding more trips.
3. Support for longer trains to serve more riders.
4. Requests for improved circulation and amenities at stations.

Read below for more detail on these themes and sample quotes from the survey respondents.

Strong desire for consistent, on-time service

Participants were asked to rank the importance of six service features. Overall **consistent, on-time service** was the number one priority response, by riders and non-riders alike. This was followed by **more frequent service during peak commute times**, which was generally prioritized higher by current riders than infrequent or non-riders.

These top two priorities from respondents have trade-offs: increasing the frequency of service by running trains every 15 minutes during peak periods, rather than every 20 minutes as done today, may lead to a decline in reliability and higher potential for service delays, due to train congestion on the tracks and other factors.

Close together in third and fourth place were more choices for when to ride: a later evening train and getting a seat on the train. In fifth and sixth place were more choices for when to ride: an earlier afternoon train and more choices for when to ride: a later morning train. More choices for when to ride were of greater importance to infrequent and non-riders.

"Ensuring trains arrive on time and manage delays better. I understand they may be out of control due to freight or medical emergencies, but issues like train maintenance also on top can be frustrating for riders."



Drop-in participants talked to Sound Transit staff at each station about proposed Sounder South improvements.



Sound Transit staff were available at each of the drop-in sessions to answer questions and listen to comments.

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Interest in adding more trips

Survey respondents were interested in more Sounder trips each day. In an open-ended question (“Do you have comments about Sound Transit potentially running 1-3 more weekday trains?”) with over 1,600 responses, **91% of respondents reacted positively to Sound Transit potentially running more trains.**

Additionally, in a question noting funding constraints, participants were asked what Sound Transit should prioritize when it comes to expanding Sounder South service: more choices for when to ride or ensuring there are enough seats to meet demand during peak travel times. **More respondents preferred more choices for when to ride compared to enough seats during peak travel times.**

- Non-riders showed a stronger preference for more choices for when to ride compared to enough seats.
- People of color and people with lower incomes (earning less than \$60,000 annually) also showed a slightly stronger preference for more choices for when to ride.

“Greater service span is important to allow a greater variety of trips to be made by train and will also serve to increase peak ridership. If I know I can get home in the early afternoon to pick up a child from school, I may be more likely to ride at the peak morning commute.”

Support for longer trains to serve more riders

Respondents were also supportive of Sound Transit potentially running longer trains and extending platforms at the stations. In an open-ended question (“Do you have comments about Sound Transit potentially running longer trains at the Sounder stations? Consider longer platforms and more people.”) with over 1,100 responses, **more than 70% reacted positively to Sound Transit potentially running longer trains.**

Positive responses included comments about the need to alleviate crowding during peak periods, better accommodating riders with accessibility needs, providing more seats for the elderly and pregnant women, eliminating people standing/sitting on the stairs when trains are crowded and better access for bicyclists. Of the negative responses, themes included concerns about how longer trains would impact crowding at King Street Station, preference for more service, and perceived high costs to lengthen trains and extend platforms.

“I think [running longer trains is] a great idea since the trains are often PACKED on my way home at 5:45 [PM].”

Requests for improved circulation and amenities at stations

Participants were asked to share what would improve their experience getting on and off the train, considering more riders and potentially longer trains in the future. Of the 1,200 people who provided comments, the top theme was **requests for station amenities**, such as additional ORCA card readers, more shelters and more visible schedule information. Second, a third of commenters asked for **improved station circulation**, such as wider platforms, additional platform access points, and more elevators, stairs or pedestrian bridges.

Participants who answered this question were able to note if their comment was station specific. King Street Station had the most comments, with respondents especially interested in improved station circulation and better connections to the International District / Chinatown light rail station and other downtown destinations.

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Other feedback themes

Other questions on the survey explored why people do or don't ride Sounder today, and what might make them more likely to ride. Survey respondents also had questions and comments about a variety of Sounder issues. See the Frequently Asked Questions section for common questions and Sound Transit responses.

Reasons for riding/not riding Sounder today

Regular riders (approximately 75% of survey respondents) were given the opportunity to share up to three reasons why they choose to ride Sounder. Over 65% of these respondents noted that Sounder is the fastest or most reliable option to get them to their destination. Other top responses were that they prefer riding the train over other transit options (51%), the train schedule aligns with their work schedule (38%), and Sounder stations are convenient to their work or final destination (34%).

Infrequent and non-riders (approximately 25% of respondents) were given the opportunity to share why they don't ride Sounder more often. The most common response was that the current train schedule does not meet their needs, followed by station locations not being convenient to their work or final destination, and lack of reliable parking.

What would make you more likely to ride Sounder?

Participants were asked what would make them more likely to ride Sounder based on a number of planned or potential changes to service and stations. A majority of respondents identified three of the changes as compelling enough to make them more likely to ride:

- If train service is expanded throughout the day (82% responded "more likely to ride")
- If trains run more frequently during peak hours (72%)
- If there are fast, reliable bus connections to stations (58%)

The other five items resulted in a minority of respondents saying the change would make them more likely to ride:

- If I have a better walking or biking connection to the station (37% responded "more likely to ride")
- When additional parking garages open at Kent and Auburn stations (29%)
- When new parking garages open at Puyallup and Sumner stations (26%)
- When/if solo driver parking permits are available at my station (26%)
- When new Sounder stations open in Tillicum and DuPont (13%)

As some of these options have relevance to riders in only some locations, the lower number of positive responses is not surprising. Of the eight options posed, only "when solo driver parking permits are available" received a noticeable negative response, with 11% of respondents saying they would be "less likely to ride."

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Respondent characteristics

The goal of the outreach was to reach a variety of audiences, including current and potential riders and people who live or work near the Sounder stations.

Approximately 75% of survey respondents were current weekly or daily riders. We heard from at least 110 riders from each station with an average of 415 respondents per station (see chart for distribution). In addition to current riders, Sound Transit collected over 425 surveys from non-riders and infrequent riders.

In self-reported demographics, survey participants were predominantly white (76% white, 8% Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% mixed race, and 4% African

American) and of relatively high income (44% more than \$120,000 and only 15% less than \$60,000). Compared to demographics for Sounder ridership, survey respondents were less racially diverse than riders as a whole and appear to have higher incomes.

Next steps

Sound Transit is drafting a *Strategic Development and Implementation Plan* for expanding capacity on Sounder South. This plan will include priorities for specific improvements along with a timeline for implementation. Because of limited funding, Sound Transit has tough choices to make in prioritizing options. It is possible that not every potential improvement for Sounder will be implemented, and the improvements that are selected will be rolled out over time. In particular, adding trips is not something under Sound Transit's sole control and will require negotiations with BNSF Railway, which owns most of the tracks used by Sounder.

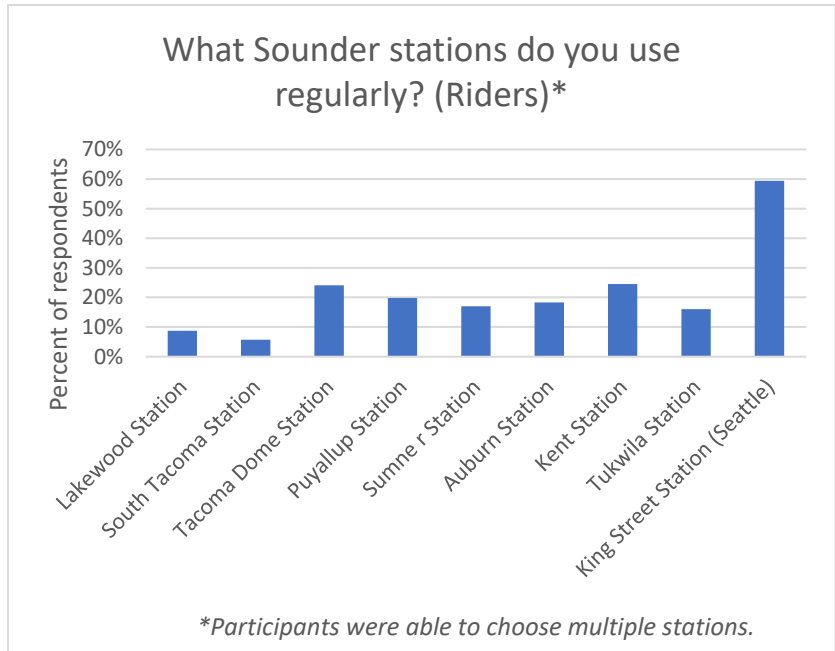
More outreach is planned in January 2020 to share the draft plan. Once a final plan has been adopted by the Sound Transit Board, work will begin on the program elements, such as longer trains, platform extensions and negotiations with BNSF. Sound Transit will conduct an environmental review to measure and mitigate potential impacts, and the improvements will be implemented on a rolling basis through 2036.

Project schedule



To stay informed about the project:

- Contact Melanie Mayock, Community Outreach Specialist: melanie.mayock@soundtransit.org or 206-689-4877
- Visit the project website or sign up for project updates by email: <https://www.soundtransit.org/system-expansion/sounder-south-capacity-expansion>



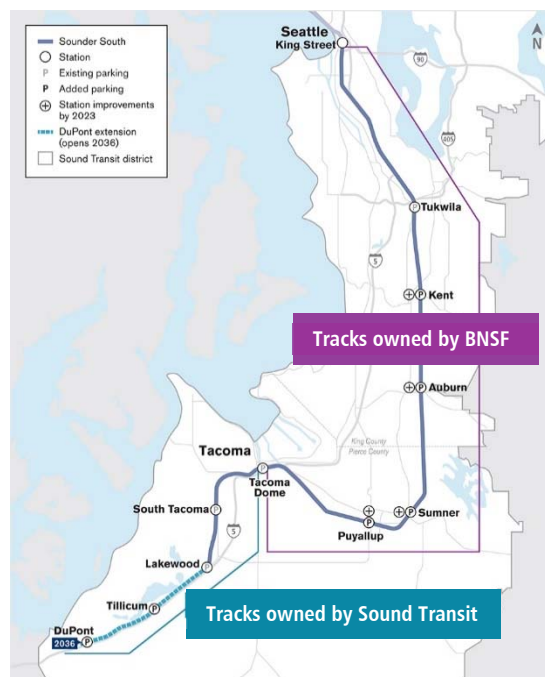
Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Frequently asked questions and Sound Transit responses

Why doesn't Sounder run more often?

Unlike other Sound Transit options, Sounder South has key constraints that are unique to its corridor. One of the main constraints between Tacoma and Seattle is that the railroad tracks that Sounder operates on are owned by BNSF Railway. Before adding trips, Sound Transit and BNSF carefully analyze freight and other uses of BNSF's tracks to determine potential opportunities to expand service.

After analysis, Sound Transit negotiates with BNSF for access to the tracks for new trips. Because the tracks are already crowded, adding service can have several costs: purchasing track time from BNSF; improving railroad tracks and signals to mitigate train congestion; purchasing more rail cars; and providing additional storage for more cars. Sound Transit generally gives priority to trips that are expected to carry the most riders.



What is Sound Transit doing about parking?

Sound Transit is building new garages at the Puyallup, Sumner, Kent and Auburn stations, adding more than 2,150 stalls by 2024.

What might change at the stations?

Sound Transit will identify station changes to accommodate longer trains and more riders depending on which options for adding capacity are selected. We will prioritize building longer platforms or better distributing passengers along the length of the train to ensure passengers can easily reach the train and find a seat. Each station is unique, so changes at one station may not be made across all stations. King Street Station will likely be prioritized for improvements, as it is the most heavily used station today and already faces challenges from overcrowding.

What is Sound Transit doing to make Sounder service more reliable?

Survey respondents indicated that reliable travel time is a priority for Sounder riders, and a big reason many people ride Sounder today. Safety and reliability are the top priorities for Sound Transit as well, and these priorities drive our maintenance work. On-time arrivals are defined by an industry standard as within five minutes of the scheduled arrival. How does Sounder measure up? We currently rank #2 for on-time performance among our peers in this type of service. In 2018, 93% of Sounder trips arrived on time, and as of Nov. 1, 2019, 96% of trips in 2019 arrived on time.¹

While we strive for reliability, delays do sometimes happen, and trains are even canceled on rare occasions. Service disruptions may occur for a variety of reasons, such as interference from freight or passenger trains, track work, construction programs, emergency services, weather or mechanical issues. Read more below about how we're working to minimize delays caused by mechanical issues.

¹ Note that on-time performance statistics do not include canceled trains. As of Dec. 5, 2019, there were 61 canceled trains in 2019. Of these, 35 were due to mechanical reasons, 21 due to emergency services, three due to Positive Train Control, and two for inclement weather.

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Mechanical issues

Sound Transit has a robust system for keeping the complex systems in locomotives well maintained. As part of our maintenance program, we are in the process of replacing locomotive control systems, which is expected to reduce mechanical issues. In addition, Sounder locomotives are inspected daily and there are inspections and routine maintenance performed at regular intervals. We contract with BNSF to staff our trains, and the crew has a direct hotline to communicate with the top locomotive experts at Amtrak to provide advice anytime a Sounder train is having a problem. We carefully monitor all delays and all mechanical failures to determine the root cause and solution.

Options during disruptions

Although the majority of delays are brief (under 10 minutes), on rare occasions, trains face major delays or are canceled. Although these situations are rare, we know these delays have a big impact on our riders. In these situations, Sound Transit strives to provide other travel options for riders, either relying on existing bus routes or running special buses. The challenge with deploying unscheduled buses to replace train capacity is that few buses are available during peak periods, as the Sounder commute period is also the peak commute time for buses. But we work diligently with our transit agency partners, using pre-arranged agreements to provide bus back-up service to any station within less than an hour of the disruption. Sound Transit is also examining options for speeding up communications to customers when there is a service disruption.

Are there plans to improve Wi-Fi on board Sounder?

Improving Wi-Fi on-board trains is a challenge, due to limits on bandwidth and the number of people attempting to use Wi-Fi at the same time. There are not currently opportunities to improve the service on board, but Wi-Fi at King Street Station may improve in the future.

Are there plans to add more tables and outlets on Sounder trains?

Sound Transit is scheduled to begin a five-year overhaul project of all Sounder train cars beginning in 2020. We are planning to include one or two additional USB outlets at all locations where there are currently plug outlets, making it possible for up to four devices to be plugged in at each outlet location. We are not considering retrofitting existing vehicles to add additional tables in Sounder rail cars, as this would require major changes to infrastructure (including the train wall) and would also likely result in fewer passenger seats.

Can Sound Transit add ORCA readers on board?

ORCA readers are placed on Sounder platforms rather than on board because this allows for faster boarding, allowing riders to pay before the train arrives rather than queuing to pay upon train arrival. In addition, placing fare readers on platforms simplifies fare enforcement. New ORCA cards and readers will be coming in the next few years, and the readers are expected to operate faster, reducing wait times. In addition, potential future extensions of platforms may provide an opportunity to install more ORCA readers on platforms, reducing lines.

Are there plans for additional bicycle storage on Sounder?

Bicycle storage is a consideration as we plan for both overhauling rail cars and purchasing new ones. However, there are trade-offs involved in providing additional space for bicycles, including seating capacity, ADA access and restrooms.

How is Sound Transit ensuring proper rider etiquette, such as not crowding near doors?

There is now an audio message that follows the safety messaging on trains instructing riders not to queue at the door inside the train. We also publish a "Ride Guide" that provides a section on ridership etiquette. The conductors are trained in this etiquette and instruct passengers when necessary.

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Would Sound Transit consider providing food or coffee on trains?

There are currently no plans to institute food or beverage service on Sounder trains. Constraints include space configuration, capacity issues on some already full trains and operational concerns.

Will Sound Transit bring back the quiet car?

There are no plans to reinstitute a “quiet car” on Sounder. Maintaining low noise levels is difficult to enforce. It is also not possible to ensure access to the quiet car for passengers with disabilities while not requiring them to use that car.