



# Sounder South Capacity Expansion

December, 2019

## Frequently asked questions

### 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.

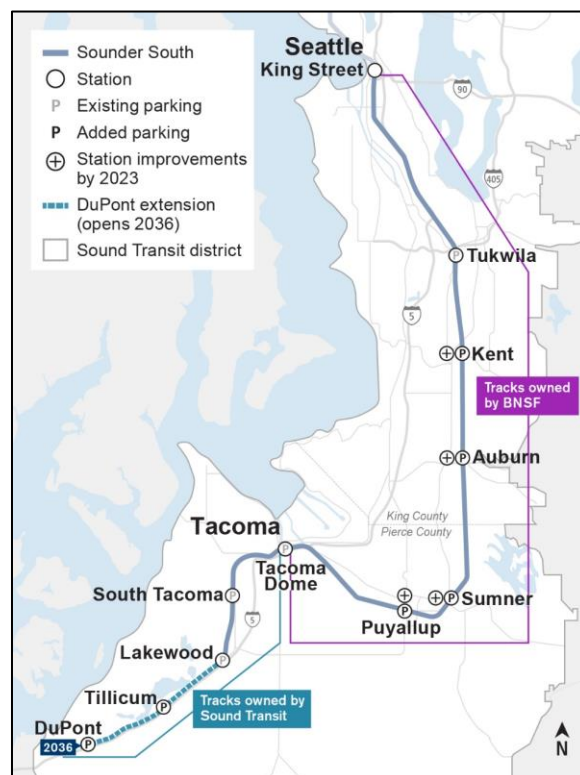
### What might change at the stations?

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.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 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.



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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.

## **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.

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## **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.

## **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.

## **Contact Us**

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## ***Get updates***

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