

Winter 2020 Outreach Summary

Overview

The Sounder South Capacity Expansion program is a voter-approved plan to serve more riders on the popular commuter rail service between Lakewood and Seattle as population and employment in the corridor continue to grow. The first step is creating a strategy to serve growing ridership from now through 2041.

After conducting technical analysis and gathering public feedback, Sound Transit released the [Draft Strategic Development and Implementation Plan](#) in January 2020. The draft plan describes two proposed strategies to respond to expected ridership growth: 1) running longer trains and 2) potentially adding weekday trips, pending negotiations with BNSF Railway. In addition, Sound Transit will work with cities served by Sounder South and other partners to build targeted access improvements to provide convenient, safe access for customers to the platforms, including at King Street Station.

Sound Transit hosted an online open house from Jan. 23 – Feb. 6, 2020, to seek public feedback on the draft plan. Overall, more than 3,600 people visited the online open house, with more than 600 people completing the survey to share their feedback (including 10 responses in Spanish). In addition, Sound Transit received eight letters from cities and agencies along the project corridor regarding the draft plan.

The online open house was publicized through posters and signs at the stations, social media, advertisements in regional online and print newspapers, and emails to the project newsletter and rider alert system. Project information was available in Spanish and Vietnamese, in addition to English.

The following summary includes themes from the online survey and Sound Transit responses to several frequently asked questions. Sound Transit will finalize the Strategic Development and Implementation Plan in spring 2020 before beginning planning and environmental review for the individual elements of the plan.

Outreach by the numbers

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Over 3,600 users visited the online open house from Jan. 23 – Feb. 6
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Over 600 people completed the online survey
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2 project email updates were sent to over 2,300 recipients
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1 rider alert to over 29,000 recipients, plus flyers on trains and banners at all 9 Sounder South stations
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59,000+ people reached via social media ads in English, Spanish and Vietnamese with more than 1,260 engagements
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Print and online advertisements in 5 publications (2 in Spanish, 2 in Vietnamese, 1 in English)

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Summary of feedback

The primary question on the survey asked, "What do you think about the draft Strategic Development and Implementation Plan? Please focus your comments on suggested changes or additions." Over 600 people responded. The two main strategies in the plan, longer trains and more trips, were referenced in roughly 36% and 58% of all comments, respectively. Over 75% of responses included support for one or both strategies, while approximately 18% included criticism of some kind. Key issues raised in critical comments included the need for additional parking, critique of project timelines and requests for greater focus on train reliability. See below for more detail on comments about the two primary strategies and other themes, along with some representative quotes.

"Both aspects of the plan (more trips and longer trains) are good and very much needed, especially as the population continues to grow. Longer trains would have a bigger benefit in the long term. Please also consider making more parking at the stations a priority."

"I like the idea of longer trains (more cars) and more frequent trips. I believe both are needed to accommodate the public needs...but these changes need to be enacted sooner rather than later."

Strategy one: longer trains

Of the approximately 36% of comments that referenced longer trains, most stated support for the strategy, with several noting crowded platforms and the standing room only conditions on some trains today. Others voiced specific support for the optional interim 8-car strategy while longer platforms are built at each station. Some respondents voiced support for prioritizing more trips over longer trains (see response in FAQ section below). Reasons included:

- A belief that more trips would be easier, faster or less expensive to implement.
- Concerns that longer trains would lead to more congested platforms, particularly at King Street Station.

"Would like to see the addition of more train cars as the trains are very full and afternoon cars are often standing room only."

Strategy two: more trips

Of the approximately 58% of comments that referenced more weekday trips, most were in support and included suggestions for when the trips should be added. Though the draft plan indicates Sound Transit will seek to add new trips during the periods of highest demand, which are the peak morning and evening commute periods, evening service was the most frequently mentioned by commenters. (Due to track capacity and maintenance needs, BNSF has indicated they do not support an evening passenger trip on their tracks; see details in FAQ section below.) Also mentioned (in decreasing order) were midday, morning, weekends and peak commute periods, with a few mentions of reverse-commute trips. Several comments recognized the uncertainty of negotiating new trips with BNSF, which owns most of the tracks used by Sounder South.

"More trips would be great. At least one earlier in the morning and one later. The same for the afternoon. One earlier and one later. It would be nice to be able to head south earlier than 230"

"Adding an extra train after 6:30 pm can help people who work late evening."

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Other topics

Other comment themes focused on suggested additions to the plan and other Sound Transit topics, including:

- **Parking** (mentioned by one in five people): There is a strong desire to increase parking capacity at Sounder South stations in conjunction with investments to expand train capacity.
- **Timeline for implementation:** Many respondents supported steps to expand capacity as soon as possible, especially during peak commute periods, or questioned how long it will take to implement the strategies of the plan.
- **Schedule reliability and delays:** Similar to feedback received during outreach in fall 2019, multiple participants emphasized the need for consistent, on-time service as part of any service expansion plan.
- **Station improvements:** Most commenters on this topic emphasized the need for platform and station circulation improvements at King Street Station. Others requested more station amenities, such as shelters and real-time arrival signage.
- **Transit connections to Sounder South stations:** Many participants commented on current bus or other transit options to connect to Sounder South stations. Additionally, there is a desire to better align other transit schedules with the Sounder South schedule.
- **Other Sound Transit projects:** A handful of comments provided feedback on other nearby Sound Transit projects, including station parking and access projects at Kent, Auburn, Puyallup and Sumner stations, the Federal Way and Tacoma Dome Link extensions, and the DuPont Sounder Extension. Comments ranged from hopes for faster timelines, requests for coordination between projects and reflections on ridership projections.

See responses in FAQ section below.

Respondent characteristics

The survey asked respondents how often they currently ride Sounder South and their zip code. Approximately 80% of the 600 survey respondents were current weekly or daily Sounder riders, while about 20% were from non-riders and infrequent riders.

The majority of respondents (58%) were from Pierce County, with an additional 36% from King County and 5% from Thurston County. There were respondents from all nine cities with Sounder South stations (including Seattle's King Street Station), with higher response rates (more than 10%) from cities with higher daily Sounder boardings, including Puyallup, Tacoma and Kent.

Ten responses (about 1.7%) were in Spanish. Five of the comments were generally supportive of the plan, while four requested more emphasis on additional trips, including evenings and weekends. No responses were received in Vietnamese.

Next steps

Sound Transit is scheduled to complete the Strategic Development and Implementation Plan in spring 2020. Sound Transit will roll out capacity improvements associated with the plan over time, subject to agreement with BNSF. Work will begin on project development of the program elements, such as longer trains and platform extensions, and we will begin BNSF negotiations for more trips. Sound Transit will conduct an environmental review to measure and mitigate potential impacts for each project, and the improvements are expected to be implemented on a rolling basis through 2036.

The potential timeline and next steps for each program element include:

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

- Purchasing rail cars: Sound Transit has begun the process to purchase cars for longer trains.
- Platform extensions: engineering and environmental review to extend platforms at every station is expected to begin later this year.
- BNSF negotiations: expected to take place through 2021.
- King Street Station: study of platform level improvements will begin later this year. See more information in FAQ below.
- Other station access improvements: timing is to be determined.

In addition, we anticipate beginning planning for access improvements at South Tacoma and Lakewood stations this spring.

To stay informed:

- 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/sounder-capacity>

Frequently asked questions and Sound Transit responses

What is Sound Transit doing about parking?

Sound Transit is building new garages at the Puyallup, Sumner, Kent and Auburn stations, adding more than 2,000 stalls by 2024, and will study the potential for additional parking at other stations. Specifically:

- Construction is expected to begin this summer on the Puyallup garage (opening in 2022) and next year on the Sumner garage (opening in 2023).
- For the Kent and Auburn garages, we recently completed conceptual engineering and environmental review, and we expect to begin procurement of design-build contractors later this year.
- We will study the potential for additional parking as part of the Lakewood and South Tacoma Access Improvement projects, which will kick-off later this year.
- The ST3 Plan provides funding for parking at the future DuPont and Tillicum stations.

Why will it take so long to implement longer trains?

We estimate that we can get 8-car trains into service in 2024; this is due to the lead time required for purchasing and manufacturing the additional rail cars. We began procurement to purchase new cars earlier this year.

We expect that 10-car trains can be implemented by 2028. This requires several steps:

- Lengthening platforms at all Sounder South stations (which requires environmental review before procurement and then construction).
- Purchasing and manufacturing of additional rail cars.
- Making improvements to King Street Station to accommodate more passengers.

Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Is adding more trips easier than running longer trains?

Adding additional weekday trips is one of the two strategies detailed in the plan. This strategy depends largely on reaching agreement through negotiations with BNSF Railway, which owns most of the tracks used by Sounder. Following the completion of negotiations with BNSF, it will take several years to plan and implement potential track investments to accommodate one or more additional trips. In addition, potential new trips depend on expanding storage space and procuring more rail cars.

Is Sound Transit considering adding an evening trip?

At this time, we are not planning to pursue an evening trip. BNSF has indicated they would not support an evening passenger train, as it would significantly reduce their ability to operate freight trains and perform maintenance. Given the potential high cost of each Sounder trip, we have prioritized new potential trips at times they are expected to carry the most riders. Ridership projections show an evening train is likely to carry far fewer riders than a train during morning and afternoon commute times.

What about weekend service?

For similar reasons, Sound Transit is not considering adding regular Sounder service on weekends. However, we frequently run weekend trains for special events such as Mariners, Seahawks, Sounders FC and Dragons games. Remember, you don't have to attend the game to take the train. [Learn more about Sounder special event service.](#)

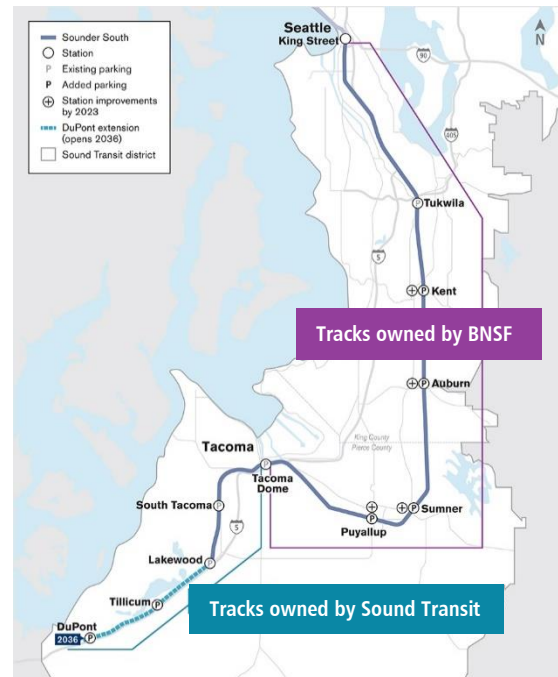
What is Sound Transit doing to make Sounder service more reliable?

Safety and reliability are top priorities for Sound Transit, and these priorities drive our maintenance work. 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. We are making a sizable investment in maintenance by building the Sounder Maintenance Base in Lakewood (opening in 2024) and bringing maintenance activities in-house to utilize the latest maintenance practices and increase reliability.

Although major delays and cancellations are rare, we know these have a big impact on our riders. In these situations, we strive 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 most buses are in service during peak periods. We are also examining options for speeding up communications to customers when there is a service disruption.

What are the next steps for King Street Station?

As discussed in the draft plan, improvements are needed at King Street Station to accommodate larger pedestrian flows from longer trains in the future. Sound Transit will begin studying options for improving passenger flow at the station platform area later this year. This will include a small extension of the platform to the south and could include options for a new elevator or stairs. In addition, related Sound Transit studies will be exploring opportunities for improvements to pedestrian connectivity in the vicinity of the station. Stay tuned for more information about King Street Station and opportunities for public involvement in the next year.



Sounder South Capacity Expansion

Will more service be added to South Tacoma and Lakewood stations?

The reason some Sounder trips today do not serve these two stations is limited track space and crew hours. Depending on the outcome of negotiations with BNSF, it is possible that an additional trip to these two stations could be added by 2026.

Can Sounder service be extended to Olympia?

Under state law, Sound Transit services, including Sounder commuter rail, operate only within the [Sound Transit district](#), which does not include Olympia. Sounder service will be extended south from Lakewood adding new stations at Tillicum and DuPont by 2036. Intercity Transit provides bus service on route 612 connecting Olympia and Lacey with the Lakewood and Tacoma Dome Sounder stations.

What about improvements to bus service to Sounder stations?

Sound Transit works closely with our partners at King County Metro and Pierce Transit to coordinate bus-to-Sounder connections. Examples of recent or planned improvements by Sound Transit or our partners include:

- In fall 2020, King County Metro is planning to restructure their bus service in the Renton, Kent and Auburn areas in preparation for the new RapidRide I Line connecting the three cities. Associated changes include streamlined service between Lake Meridian Park & Ride with Kent Station on Routes 162 and 168.
- Pierce Transit added one round trip in spring 2018 to Route 497 connecting Lakeland Hills to Auburn Station to meet every peak Sounder train.
- Sound Transit recently added service on Route 580 connecting Puyallup Station to the Red Lot to address overcrowding.