Resolution No. R2023-37

Adopting new fare structure and rate on Link light rail

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meeting:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>Type of action:</th>
<th>Staff contact:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rider Experience and Operations Committee Board</td>
<td>12/07/2023</td>
<td>Recommend to Board</td>
<td>Russ Arnold, Deputy CEO, Chief Service Delivery Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12/15/2023</td>
<td>Final action</td>
<td>Alex Krieg, Director, Access, Integration and Station Area Planning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proposed action

(1) Adopts new rates of fare and fare structure for Link light rail service effective with the opening of 1 Line extension to Lynnwood City Center Station; and (2) supersedes the rates of fare established in Resolution No. R2023-05 with the rates of fare established by this action as shown in Attachment A.

Key features summary

- This action presents two options to the Sound Transit Board for a fare structure on Link light rail:
  - Option 1: Retain the distance-based fare rates on Link light rail.
  - Option 2: Adopt a flat-rate fare on Link light rail. *(Staff recommendation)*
- This action presents three flat fare options to the Sound Transit Board for rates of fare on Link light rail:
  - Option 1: Establish a $3.00 fare rate for adult passengers on Link light rail. *(Staff recommendation)*
  - Option 2: Establish a $3.25 fare rate for adult passengers on Link light rail. *(Staff recommendation)*
  - Option 3: Establish a $3.50 fare rate for adult passengers on Link light rail.
- Each of the flat-rate options simplifies fares on Link light rail by having one fare rate for all trips, eliminates the need for passengers to tap off when completing their trip (and the penalty of charging a passenger the highest fare from their originating station when they don’t tap off), and better supports the potential alignment with other transit fares in the region.
- Neither option would change the current $1.00 fare for the low-income adult (ORCA LIFT), senior, persons with disabilities passenger fare categories or the $0 youth fare.

Background

Sound Transit Board actions with regards to transit fares have helped promote regional fare coordination, and, over the last 12 years, have consistently simplified and aligned transit fares across Sound Transit modes and with other agencies.

In 1998, the Sound Transit Board adopted Motion No. M98-54 approving the fare integration framework and concept recommended by the 1997-98 Regional Fare Forum. This action recognized the importance of regional fare coordination and simplification to promote regional transit ridership even
before the implementation of Sound Transit service and set the stage for the regional Puget Pass and ORCA agreements to follow.

The Sound Transit Board initially established Link fares, through Resolution No. R2009-01, as distance-based fares for all passenger categories.

Acting in coordination with King County Metro, through Resolution No. R2010-11, the Board adopted flat fares for youth, seniors, and persons with disabilities on Link light rail and aligned these with Metro’s fares for these passenger categories effective January 1, 2011.

In 2014, the Sound Transit Board adopted Resolution No. R2014-28 which: (1) established a reduced ORCA LIFT fare for low-income adult passengers on Link light rail; and (2) increased the fare for full fare adult, senior, disabled and youth passengers by $0.25 effective March 1, 2015. Link fares for full-fare adult passengers have not changed since 2015.

In 2016, Sound Transit Board members and representatives of the six other ORCA agencies in the central Puget Sound region came together in a third Regional Fare Forum for the purpose of providing guidance on transit fare structures in the region. The 2016 Fare Forum recommended ORCA agencies take actions to simplify fares to make regional transit travel easier for customers and to simplify the design of the next generation ORCA system.

Consistent with these recommendations, the Sound Transit Board acted in 2018 to simplify ST Express bus fares by eliminating the zone fares for adult, ORCA LIFT, youth, senior, and persons with disabilities Disabled passenger categories, through Resolution No. R2018-05.

Subsequent Sound Transit Board actions have simplified fares for reduced fare riders by reducing and aligning fares for low-income adult, youth, senior, and persons with disabilities fare categories on Sounder with the fares on ST Express bus and Link light rail through Resolution No. R2020-28, establishing a $0 youth fare through Resolution No. R2022-20, and reducing the ORCA LIFT fare to $1.00 through Resolution No. R2023-05.

Also in 2022, through Resolution No. R2022-29, the Sound Transit Board adopted a flat fare for all passenger categories on Tacoma Link service, and aligned the fares for adult, senior, and persons with disabilities fare categories with Pierce Transit’s bus fares for those fare categories.

Sound Transit’s Fare Policy, Resolution No. R2014-27, established a policy principle that the purpose of fares was to generate revenue to cover a portion of Sound Transit’s operating expenses as part of the long-term financial plan and that fare levels are adjusted as needed to meet revenue requirements. The Fare Policy further established a minimum threshold farebox recovery ratio (fare revenue as a percentage of operating costs) for Link light rail of 40 percent. The Fare Policy further provided that the Sound Transit Board may consider a fare change proposal “when farebox recovery falls below these minimum levels.”

Link fares have not changed since 2015, while operating costs have increased as the system has expanded. During this period, Link ridership and fare revenue declined dramatically as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, even as Link ridership has recovered from the pandemic, farebox recovery remains far below the 40 percent farebox recovery target defined in the fare policy.

As a result, Link’s Net Operating Cost, which is operating expenses minus fare revenue, has increased from $37 million in 2015, to nearly $150 million in 2022. An increase in Link fares is necessary to provide revenue needed to help fund the operating cost of Link service and move towards the farebox recovery target established by the Board’s Fare Policy. Staff will continue engaging the Board on updating the Fare Policy in the first part of 2024, including as it relates to the farebox recovery target on Link.

Another principle established by the Board’s Fare Policy is that fares “are simple for customers to understand and transit employees and fare enforcement personnel to apply.” Establishing a flat fare on...
Link would eliminate the complexity of expanded station-to-station fares and the necessity for passengers to tap off when alighting to ensure they pay the appropriate fare.

**Fare Change Options**

Staff assessed the three options for increasing Link fare revenue shown in the table below. All three would increase Link farebox recovery compared with current fares. Each option would be similar to the flat fares that exist for the low-income adult, senior, and persons with disabilities fare categories on Link light rail.

**Current Link Fares and Flat Fare Options**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rider Group</th>
<th>Current fare*</th>
<th>Option 1 $3.00 flat fare</th>
<th>Option 2 $3.25 flat fare</th>
<th>Option 3 $3.50 flat fare</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>$2.25-$4.25</td>
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<td>Youth</td>
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<td>Senior &amp; Disabled</td>
<td>$1.00</td>
<td>$1.00</td>
<td>$1.00</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Depending on distance travelled, Link service footprint as of 2026

Considerations for Option 1 ($3.00 flat fare):

- This option would establish a $3.00 flat fare regardless of the trip distance. This would result in higher fares for short-distance trips, and lower fares for longer-distance trips when Link expands as well as for some longer trips on the existing system.
- A flat fare eliminates the need for passengers paying with ORCA to tap off to pay the correct fare and would be simpler to understand and budget for as well as speed ticket purchases at Link station ticket vending machines or when purchasing Transit GO mobile tickets.
- A $3.00 flat fare is the lowest option under consideration and would therefore be the smallest increase for existing Link passengers making trips that currently cost $2.25, $2.50, and $2.75.
- No partner transit agency currently charges a $3.00 fare and so this option would not align with other transit fares in the region.

Considerations for Option 2 ($3.25 flat fare):

- This option would establish a $3.25 flat fare regardless of the trip distance. This would result in higher fares for short-distance trips, and lower fares for longer-distance trips when Link expands as well as for a few longer trips on the existing system.
- A flat fare eliminates the need for passengers paying with ORCA to tap off to pay the correct fare and would be simpler to understand and budget for as well as speed ticket purchases at Link station ticket vending machines or when purchasing Transit GO mobile tickets.
- A $3.25 flat fare would result in higher relative fare increases for existing Link passengers making trips that currently cost $2.25, $2.50, and $2.75.
- A $3.25 flat fare would align with fares charged on ST Express regional bus and would create alignment between two of Sound Transit’s all-day regional modes of service.
Considerations for Option 3 ($3.50 flat fare):

- This option would establish a $3.50 flat fare regardless of the trip distance. This would result in higher fares for short-distance trips, and lower fares for longer-distance trips when Link expands.

- A flat fare eliminates the need for passengers paying with ORCA to tap off to pay the correct fare and would be simpler to understand and budget for as well as speed ticket purchases at Link station ticket vending machines or when purchasing Transit GO mobile tickets.

- A $3.50 flat fare would result in the highest relative fare increases for existing Link passengers making trips that currently cost $2.25, $2.50, and $2.75.

- A $3.50 flat fare would only align with fares on the Seattle Center Monorail.

**Fiscal information**

The Fall 2023 Finance Plan includes an assumption of a fare increase of $0.25 in 2025 to the distance-based fares currently in place. The Finance Plan also assumes a regular, four-year cadence of $0.25 fare increases and each of the flat fare options carries this assumption forward as well.

Option 1 ($3.00 flat fare) slightly underperforms by approximately $100 million in projected fare revenue assumed in Sound Transit's most recent Fall 2023 Finance Plan. It is expected to provide $4.1 billion in Link fare revenue through 2046 and $94.9 million in 2027. While this option results in slightly higher fare revenue in the near term, it is lower in the long term due to the increasing size of the system that would have seen higher fares with the maintenance of a distance-based fare structure. While underperforming the Fall 2023 Finance Plan, this option would outperform a scenario in which no fare change occurred.

Option 2 ($3.25 flat fare) is a $100 million increase from the Fall 2023 Finance Plan. It is expected to provide $4.4 billion in Link fare revenue through 2046 and $103.1 million in 2027.

Option 3 ($3.50 flat fare) is a $500 million increase from the Fall 2023 Finance Plan. It is expected to provide $4.7 billion in Link fare revenue through 2046 and $111.3 million in 2027.

Of note, however, none of these options are expected to result in farebox recovery consistent with current fare policy in the short or the long term. Both options are expected to result in a net operating cost of between $436 million and $452 million in 2027 on Link light rail.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Option 3: $3.50 flat fare</td>
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**Affordability impacts**

Option 1 shows a 0.4 percent reduction in debt capacity and a decrease in net debt service coverage by .02 when compared to the Fall 2023 Finance Plan.

Option 2 shows a 0.7 percent increase in debt capacity and an increase in net debt service coverage by .01 when compared to the Fall 2023 Finance Plan.

Option 3 shows a 1.7 percent increase in debt capacity and an increase in net debt service coverage by .05 when compared to the Fall 2023 Finance Plan.

**Title VI compliance**

In compliance with FTA regulations and Sound Transit policies, Sound Transit has performed a Title VI analysis of fare change impacts on low-income and minority populations. Based on this analysis, Sound Transit has determined that neither of the fare options would have a disparate impact on minority riders or a disproportionate impact on low-income riders.

Sound Transit will mitigate adverse effects on low-income riders by continuing to work with human service agencies in the region to identify eligible passengers and to enroll them in the ORCA LIFT program. In addition to the lower fare that ORCA LIFT will provide these passengers on all Sound Transit services, Sound Transit will be able to use grant funding to provide them with a financial incentive on their ORCA LIFT card that can be redeemed for transit fare payment on any transit agency participating in the ORCA fare payment system. ORCA cards will also enable passengers to receive transfer credits when making transfers between agencies.

Sound Transit will also work to mitigate potential adverse impacts on other riders by providing free ORCA cards to new riders and existing cash riders to enable them to use ORCA cards to pay their fares and take advantage of the inter-agency transfer benefits provided by ORCA fare payment. Sound Transit will distribute these cards through outreach events in the Link service area and through street teams during the weeks before and after the opening of Link extensions to Lynnwood, Redmond, and Federal Way.

The full analysis is available in the report “2023 Title VI Fare Equity Analysis of Link Fare Options.”
Public involvement

In the fall of 2023, staff implemented a public outreach effort to bring fare change options forward for community input. The goals of the public outreach effort were to:

- Inform the public of the fare change options and of the ways to provide feedback.
- Receive feedback from a diverse set of stakeholders, including traditionally under-represented and hard to reach communities, on their fare change preferences.

To achieve these goals, staff undertook outreach activities that ran from September 25 through October 22, 2023. Staff informed stakeholders, community and regional partners, passengers, and the public of the proposed fare changes and invited feedback through a variety of methods, listed below.

- Sound Transit website and online open house.
- On-board and station signage.
- Paid advertising in local and multicultural media.
- Social media.
- Press releases and earned media.
- Email and text updates to alert list subscribers.
- Staff ambassadors at regional transit centers, parking garages, and Link light rail stations.
- Focus groups on specific topics including one in-language Spanish focus group.
- Virtual information sessions with live interpretation in Spanish.
- Multi-lingual stakeholder toolkits offered, including fact sheets in 9 languages distributed to community stakeholders and regional partners.

Members of the public were encouraged to provide input and feedback on these options through a variety of channels:

- Phone, mail, and email.
- An online survey.
- A Public Hearing held on November 16, 2023.

Snapshot of the public engagement

- 11,000 online open house visitors.
- Over 4,800 online survey participants.
- Almost 600 email sign ups.

Public Feedback

- 50.14% of total respondents supported a distance-based fare structure.
- 52% of full-fare passengers supported a distance-based fare structure.
- 62% of respondents found a distance-based fare easy to understand; 90% found a flat fare easy to understand.
- 54% of respondents found a distance-based fare affordable; 41% found a flat fare affordable.
More detail on the outreach and results can be found in the “Link Light Rail 2023 Fare Change Public Engagement Report.”

**Time constraints**

The Federal Transit Administration requires Board review and acceptance of Title VI equity analyses of proposed fare changes conducted six months prior to the implementation of a fare change. This fare change is intended to take effect with the opening of the Lynnwood Link extension, scheduled for the fall of 2024, but potentially occurring in late summer 2024. A one-month delay in a Board decision may put this six-month lead time in jeopardy depending on the timing for opening the 1 Line extension to Lynnwood City Center Station.

**Prior Board/Committee actions**

Resolution No. R2023-05: (1) Adopted a $1.00 fare for ORCA LIFT riders on Sound Transit services, effective March 1, 2023 and (2) superseded the rates of fare established in Resolution No. R2022-29, with the rates of fare established by this action as shown in Attachment A.

Resolution No. R2022-29: (1) Adopted new fare rates and fare structure for Tacoma Link Fares effective with the opening of the Tacoma Link light rail extension in 2023, and (2) superseded the fare rates established in Resolution No. R2016-10, and Resolution No. R2020-28 as amended by Resolution No. R2022-20, with the rates established by this action as shown in Attachment A.

Resolution No. R2022-20: (1) Established a Zero Youth fare on Sound Transit services effective September 1, 2022 by superseding the fare rates established in Resolution No. R2020-28 for youth riders on all Sound Transit services with $0, as shown in Attachment A and (2) directed staff to develop a report of Youth ORCA ridership on an annual basis.

Resolution No. R2018-05: (1) Adopted new fare rates and fare structure for ST Express bus service, and (2) superseded the fare rates established in Resolution No. R2014-28 and amended by Resolution No. R2015-29 with the rates established by this action as shown in Attachment A.

Resolution No. R2014-28: (1) Selected an option to set fare rates for the low income adult fare category, and (2) superseded the fare rates established in Resolution No. R2007-06, Resolution No. R2010-11, and Resolution No. R2013-24 with the rates established by this action as shown in Attachment A.

Resolution No. R2014-27: Amended Resolution No. R2010-10 Attachment A--Fare Policy to establish “Low Income Adult” as a new Reduced Fare category.


Resolution No. R2009-01: Established a distance-based fare structure for use on Link light rail and adopted the corresponding fare level to be charged for riding Link light rail.

Resolution No. R99-2: Established fare policy and established pricing for fares related to Sound Transit public transportation services.

____________________

**Environmental review** – KH 11/20/23

**Legal review** – AJP 12/01/23
Resolution No. R2023-37

A RESOLUTION of the Board of the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (1) adopting new rates of fare and fare structure for Link light rail service effective with the opening of 1 Line extension to Lynnwood City Center Station; and (2) supersedes the rates of fare established in Resolution No. R2023-05 with the rates of fare established by this action as shown in Attachment A.

WHEREAS, the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority, commonly known as Sound Transit, was formed under chapters 81.104 and 81.112 of the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) for the Pierce, King, and Snohomish Counties region by action of their respective county councils pursuant to RCW 81.112.030; and

WHEREAS, Sound Transit is authorized to plan, construct, and permanently operate a high-capacity system of transportation infrastructure and services to meet regional public transportation needs in the Central Puget Sound region; and

WHEREAS, in general elections held within the Sound Transit district on November 5, 1996, November 4, 2008, and November 8, 2016, voters approved local funding to implement a regional high-capacity transportation system for the Central Puget Sound region; and

WHEREAS, RCW 81.112.080 grants a regional transit authority the power to establish fares; and

WHEREAS, Sound Transit is committed to meeting fare revenue requirements to wisely manage public funds in accordance with state law while fulfilling its mission; and

WHEREAS, the Sound Transit Board establishes fare structures and sets corresponding fare rates for light rail, commuter rail, and express bus services; and

WHEREAS, Sound Transit Board Resolution No. R2009-01 established a distance-based fare structure for use on Link light rail and initial pricing level to be charged to passengers; and

WHEREAS, Sound Transit Board Resolution No. R2010-11 adopted new rates and fare structures for Link light rail and simplified Link fares for youth, seniors, and persons with disabilities by reducing the distance surcharge to zero; and

WHEREAS, Sound Transit Board Resolution No. R2014-27 amended the Board’s Fare Policy to add a low-income adult fare category and Sound Transit Board Resolution No. R2014-28 established a low-income fare as well as increased the base fare on Link light rail and which became effective on March 1, 2015; and

WHEREAS, adult fares on Link light rail have not changed since 2015; and

WHEREAS, a process to increase fare on Link light rail was planned for 2020, but was subsequently postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic; and

WHEREAS, as the Link light rail system expands further north, east, and south, the distance-based fare table also becomes larger with nine (9) different fare rates with expansions to Lynnwood, Redmond, and Federal Way; and

WHEREAS, the Sound Transit Board requested staff to consider and analyze flat fares in addition to distance-based fares during the Link light rail fare change process that occurred throughout 2023; and
WHEREAS, Sound Transit is committed to providing opportunities for public involvement and conducting equity analyses of potential impacts to minority and low-income populations before considering fare changes and a Fare Equity Analysis has been reported to the Board with findings of no disparate impact for minority passengers and no disproportionate burden for low-income passengers of any of the fare rates under consideration; and

WHEREAS, public input received via public outreach events, email, the Sound Transit website, telephone, an online survey, and a public hearing has been reported to the Board.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority as follows:

Section 1: A $3.00 fare for adult passengers on Link light rail is adopted, effective with the opening of the 1 Line extension to Lynnwood City Center Station.

Section 2: The rates of fare established in Resolution No. R2023-05 are superseded with the rates of fares established by this action as shown in Attachment A.

Section 3: No later than the July 2024 Rider Experience & Operations Committee meeting, Sound Transit staff shall report to that Committee on 1) the feasibility of and realistic schedule for getting to fare capping on Sound Transit services that reflects input based on coordination with transit partners; 2) a status update on efforts to simplify reduced fare program administration, including potential changes that Sound Transit and regional partners should take to advance these efforts; and 3) whether to recommend convening a regional fare forum to address shared regional policy issues specific to #1 and #2 above or otherwise warranting a regional fare forum.

ADOPTED by the Board of the Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority at a regular meeting thereof held on ________________.

______________________________
Dow Constantine
Board Chair

Attest:

______________________________
Kathryn Flores
Board Administrator
Resolution No. R2023-37  
Attachment A: Revised Fare Rates

Replacing fare rates established in Resolution No. R2023-05

**Link Light Rail Fares** (Current as of December 1, 2023):

**Adul:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Northgate</th>
<th>Roosevelt</th>
<th>U-District</th>
<th>University of Washington</th>
<th>Capitol Hill</th>
<th>Westlake</th>
<th>University St.</th>
<th>Pioneer Square</th>
<th>International District</th>
<th>Stadium</th>
<th>Sodo</th>
<th>Beacon Hill</th>
<th>Mount Baker</th>
<th>Columbia City</th>
<th>Othello</th>
<th>Rainier Beach</th>
<th>Tukwila Intl. Blvd.</th>
<th>SeaTac / Airport</th>
<th>Angle Lake</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>$2.25</td>
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</table>

Adult fares calculated as $2.25 base fare plus $0.05 per mile, rounded to quarters for consistency.
Low-Income Adult: All one way Low Income Adult fares are $1.00
Youth: All Youth fares are $0
Seniors/Persons with Disability: All one way Link Fares for Seniors/Persons with a Disability are $1.00

Link Light Rail Fares (Effective upon the opening of the 1 Line Extension to Lynnwood City Center Station):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fare</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>$3.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Income Adult</td>
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<tr>
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Tacoma Link Fares (Current as of December 1, 2023):

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<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
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ST Express Bus Fares (Current as of December 1, 2023):

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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Income Adult</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
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<td>Seniors/Persons with Disability</td>
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### Sounder Commuter Rail Fares (Current as of December 1, 2023):

#### Sounder South (Lakewood-Seattle)

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Adult fares calculated as $3.05 base fare plus $0.055 per mile, rounded to quarters for consistency.

#### Sounder North (Everett-Seattle)

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<th>Adult</th>
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<th>Mukilteo</th>
<th>Edmonds</th>
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</table>

**Low Income Adult:** All one way Low Income Adult fares are $1.00  
**Youth:** All Youth fares are $0  
**Seniors/Persons with Disability:** All one way Link fares for Seniors/Persons with a Disability are $1.00