

Free Youth Fare Change - Public Engagement Report

June 2022

Introduction

This report summarizes the engagement efforts that were undertaken to provide Sound Transit staff with feedback on a proposed change to free youth fares. It includes a complete list of the outreach methods and examples of the tools used, as well as a summary of the results of the outreach. The report will be included as part of the staff presentation that will be provided to Sound Transit's Board of Directors for their review and adoption in July 2022. If approved by the Board, free youth fares would begin on September 1st, 2022.

Background

In March 2022, the Washington State Legislature passed the Move Ahead Washington transportation package. This package uses grants to incentivize all Washington state transit agencies to adopt a free fare policy for riders under 19 years old.

In July 2022, the Sound Transit board will consider an action that makes fares free for passengers 18 and under on all Sound Transit modes. Our goal is to implement this change by September 1st, 2022, before the start of the school year.

How does this affect our bottom line?

Providing free fares for youth is estimated to reduce fare revenue by about \$148 million over Sound Transit's financial plan through the year 2046. In 2019, about 6% of Sound Transit riders were youth.

How will this work?

This change will be implemented in partnership with other regional transit agencies to create a seamless experience for riders. Youth will be encouraged to use an ORCA card when riding. No youth will be turned away or penalized if they do not have an ORCA card, and no personal information will be collected. Regional ORCA partners are currently analyzing the best methods to distribute ORCA cards to youth.

Sound Transit does not anticipate a significant change in overall ridership, but other transit agencies with similar programs have seen many positive changes for youth riders:

- An increase in affordability for youth and families who use transit
- Increased youth access to activities outside of school, such as medical appointments, after-school activities, or jobs
- Increased use by youth-related programs, such as using transit for school field trips
- Increase in graduation rates for students with free fares
- Normalizing the use of transit

Snapshot of the public engagement

- 38 people responded via email
- 2 people attended in-person for the hybrid public hearing
- More than 7,500 social media impressions
- 359 visits to the project web pages
- At least 3 earned media mentions from the press release

- Youth riders continue to ride into adulthood and encourage others, such as friends and family members, to do the same

Public Outreach Effort

The goal of the public outreach effort was to solicit feedback from the public regarding this proposed fare change.

To achieve these goals, Sound Transit:

- Created three methods of providing public input from June 2nd to June 26th, 2022
 - Email
 - Voicemail
 - Public hearing on June 16th, 2022
- Published a webpage and blog post providing background information and soliciting feedback
 - These were optimized to be used with in-browser translation tools in an effort to increase access
- Published a press release on June 8th, 2022
- Published a notice about the public hearing in the Daily Journal of Commerce and the Sound Transit website
- Posted on Sound Transit social media channels
- Alerted key partners and stakeholders of the public input period

Organic social media

Sound Transit’s Twitter and Facebook social media accounts were used to post information about the fare change and engagement period. The fare change proposal was also featured on the agency’s blog, The Platform.

- Twitter
- Sound Transit Facebook page
- The Platform blog

Press releases

A press release was issued on June 8th, 2022. This included information on the fare change, the public input period, and the public hearing.

Engagement methods

Sound Transit provided several methods for the public to submit their feedback and comments. Due to COVID-19, multiple non-contact ways of providing feedback were offered to stakeholders and the public:

- Project specific email address: fares@soundtransit.org
- Hybrid public hearing
- Project specific voicemail with TTY information



Notification and engagement metrics

Type	Detail	Reach
Notifications		
Press release	The press release included information on the fare change, the public input period, and the public hearing.	-500 media contacts and partner agencies notified -At least three earned media mentions (Patch, The Urbanist, and Lynnwood Today) -Over 13,000 email subscribers notified
Organic social media	Twitter, Facebook, Platform blog post	-Twitter: 5,000 impressions, 3 likes, 5 retweets, 3 comments -Facebook: reached 2,500 people, 17 likes, 2 shares -Blog: 142 page views
Sound Transit webpage	A dedicated webpage on the Fares section of the website with information about the fare change and public input options	-359 total page views
Legal notice for public hearing	Public notice printed in the Daily Journal of Commence	
Stakeholder briefings	Live or in-person conversations between GCR or Community Engagement staff and stakeholder groups.	
Engagement		
Email	Received at fares@soundtransit.org	38 emails received
Public hearing	Hybrid meeting to receive in live comments from the public	0 applicable comments received
Voicemail	Dedicated voicemail box to receive comments about this proposed change	0 comments received

Engagement Results

Written comment

38 written comments were received via the project email address:

- **33 supported the proposed policy change to free youth fares**
- 4 were against making fares free for youth
- 1 expressed concern over the safety of the system

The complete written comments are included below as Appendix A

Public hearing

No applicable comments were given at the public hearing.

Voicemail

No comments were received by voicemail.

Summary and Highlights

The comments in support contained several themes:

- This would increase affordability and access for youth and families
- Youth and families can spend their money on other necessities
- This would help decrease driving and increase environmental sustainability
- Several youth programs expressed their support because this would help their students and the youth programs would use transit more for field trips
- Free youth fare would make transit a more competitive option for families (compared to driving)
- Several comments opposed the barrier of using ORCA cards
- Fares should be free for everyone

The against comments all generally aligned that everyone should be paying fares in order to increase the safety and fiscal responsibility of the system.

Several comments also expressed concern over the safety of the system.

Appendix A

Comments in support of free youth fares:

<p>Hello,</p> <p>My name is Mary Kimball. I live in Edmonds, WA. I support making transit fares free for riders 18 and under. It's a great way to make mass transit more accessible.</p> <p>-Mary</p>
<p>I am in support of free youth fares, especially not requiring Orca cards, or turning away youth that don't have one. With child poverty as high as it is, keeping them from transit is a grave burden. The Sound Transit board's behavior to youth and people in general during the 2020 protests was dismissive and undemocratic. That it took you two years to get to this point isn't really a win.</p> <p>No need to stop there. Get rid of fares, cards, enforcement by making transit free for all. We already pay for it.</p>
<p>Comment: yes please! Besides the cost benefit for youth and families, this will provide younger people a great opportunity and introduction to alternatives to having a car. All the pros: more riders, more transit, fewer cars, less reliance on automobiles, less pollution. I hope this will also lead to better infrastructure throughout this region for alternatives to cars like dedicated bike lines, dedicated bus lanes, more train options, congestion pricing, and more housing near these non-car options.</p> <p>Thank you for your time.</p>
<p>Love this idea! Please make it happen.</p> <p>Denise Hotchkiss</p>

Hello -

Thank you for this opportunity to write to you and share our excitement about the implementation of policy change for free fares for passengers 18 years and younger!!! The young people we serve at Communities In Schools would benefit greatly from this change and I know youth across our region and state will benefit similarly.

This past year, our students put together a youth transportation survey which they had 100+ students at Clover Park High School complete. The results of that survey were clear - our students are missing out on educational, employment, enrichment and many other opportunities because they could not afford public transportation! We are so in favor of this change and look forward to connecting Lakewood kids with the information they need to be successful public transit users this coming school year!

Thank you!

Kerri Pedrick, MSW
Executive Director
Pronouns: she/her/hers
Communities In Schools of Lakewood

Hello,

I am in full support of making transit fares free for youth. I have lived in other PNW cities with similar policies (Portland has reduced fares for youth, Eugene has fare free for youth), which have had great success. Providing affordable transportation options for youth is so important in operationalizing equity in the Seattle region.

In addition, I am also in support of not turning away youth from transit who do not have an ORCA card on their person nor have personal information collected. I am excited to hear that the county is taking steps to provide ORCA cards to youth across the region (which I'm sure gives youth a feeling of freedom in their pockets), but I agree that it shouldn't be a barrier.

Thank you for your time,

John Larson-Friend, M.A. (He/Him/His)
Transportation Program Coordinator, City of Issaquah Vice Chair, Young Professionals in Transportation Seattle

All mass transit, except the ferries, should be free to all, all the time.

Free for everyone.

No fares, transfers, orca cards, payments of any kind from anyone.

We pay enough through our car tabs.

All mass transit, light rail, and busses should be free for anyone ,anytime.

You can put in donation boxes at the stations and on the busses and trains if you want.

Thank you for your consideration;

Bill Phipps

Yes, I think "Youth Fares" should be free!! Mobility will be enhanced and Fewer Young drivers on the Streets {Risk Management}.

Seniors should also be free. Fewer Older Drivers on the streets.

Mike Miller
425-773-2081

Hello,

I am providing my opinion on free youth fares for sound transit. This is an excellent idea. I run an afterschool program for low income kids, and this would make their lives so much easier. We could provide programming for so many more students because bus fare would not be a barrier. It would also allow us to take field trips to expose the kids to more places, things and culture in King County. Please reach out to me with any questions or comments.

Thank you,

Rachael Parks

Youth Engagement Specialist
Neighborhood House Firwood Circle

Hello - Offering support for this idea/program! This will help on many levels and I am all for it.

I am wondering (hoping) there will be a special youth bus card they can use until their 19th birthday so you can track the success and routes it's most used:)

Kind Regards,
Colleen Tracy
Edmonds Resident

Yes!! Please institute free youth fares and/or renew cooperation with Edmonds School District to provide free bus passes. We need youth to grow into the next generation of public transit users and strengthen the ridership profile.
This also means more focus on routes around schools (especially middle and high schools, Lynnwood High School in particular) as well as youth clubs and athletic fields to incentivize use with convenient access schedules.
This is a great!

Birgit Albiker-Osterhaug

YES! great idea to offer free service for under 19 y/o. If I was a teacher I would have my class traveling all over ...museums, parks, events....

Hello!

As a mother of three, the proposal for free kids fares speaks to our family! We could use and appreciate the economic incentive to ride public transportation more often. The cost savings, given astronomical fuel prices, would make it a more obvious choice for us.

We are always trying to balance the time/cost benefit of using public transportation. When our kids were younger, it was often easier to trade cost for the convenience of choosing to drive. But now, the kids are older, gas costs more and summer is coming!

On an additional note, our summer bucket list includes my son's suggestion to go to a Mariners' game via the train. We are enthusiastic transit riders and this proposal would go a long way to build a future generation of active transit riders.

Thank you for your consideration,
Julie Shiohita
Tacoma, WA
Sent from my iPhone

I totally support this initiative. How will affect those paying a fare?
Debbie

Yes, please do that. And free fares for seniors 70 and older. Every country I've been to has had free fares on public transport for youth in school and seniors. We, the richest country in the world, can do the same. Thanks for getting the ball rolling.

Theresa Anderson

As a public transit employee who has worked for multiple ORCA-participating agencies, this is a great program for our region's youth!

Please support free transit with as few barriers as possible. The desire for tracking via ORCA taps is understandable, but there needs to be clear communication that is optional so youth clearly know they can just hop on and hop off, with ease and without fear.

Thank you,
Luke Distelhorst

Free fares for youth would be great. And actually mean something if you brain surgeons would actually enforce the fares you do charge.

Hello,

I'm emailing in response to a Lynnwood Today article advising that Sound Transit is requesting feedback regarding a proposal to provide free fares to youths aged 18 and under. In principal I think it's a great idea to instill a habit of ridership, and reduce carbon emissions. In fact, I think fares should be lower for everyone. However I do question the possible unforeseen results of allowing youth to ride for free, specifically having groups of kids riding Sound Transit because it's free and they have nothing better to do, so they might as well go downtown, or wherever, and they end up disrupting working commuters who have paid full price for their seats. I also question your riders' perception of overall transit safety, the cost to the tax payers, the increased costs in security (drivers aren't security officers), and how Sound Transit will address increased ridership (i.e.: are you getting more buses?). This isn't just a grumpy old person's cynical view of possible negative results; see the following articles: <https://www.metroplanning.org/news/7214/Talking-Transit-Crime-and-Transportation> , https://www.transittalent.com/articles/index.cfm?story=Tucson_Bus_Crime_5-9-2022. To be fair, I also found plenty of articles extolling the positive effects of free ridership.

Ultimately, my answer is yes, I support it, but I would like to know what Sound Transit has planned to address the results (both positive and negative) of such a plan. I would request Sound Transit consider the following options: 1 - Implement the 18 and under free fare policy with a plan to reassess in two years time to make amendments if necessary. Or, 2 - charge a severely reduced fare to youth aged 18 and under, like a dollar (to help with overall costs and attempt to limit ridership to people who need it). Or, 3 - offer free fare passes to youth with an active student ID, and a severely reduced fare to all other 18 and under youth.

Maybe I'm over thinking this but I do think your regular ridership would at least like to know what Sound Transit's plans are to address all possible consequences of this decision.

Thank you, Amy Bernstein

YES! This is an excellent move. Please advance with it.

-K.B. 98112

I support free fares for youth 19 and under.

Thank you for considering this policy change.

Leah

I fully endorse this concept. Should we enter the economic downturn being forecasted, I think free transportation for kids between home and school will become for too many a choice of transportation or food. It will also make transportation available when household income reduces—as it already is by inflation reduces purchasing power.

I think it is a great idea. Most bus riding youth come from low income/disadvantaged families and neighborhoods.

Thank you.

I think it should be free for everyone under 18, anyone that is currently on the low income list and ideally free for everyone. Raise taxes whatever just make it free so people don't need to buy cars.

Brandon

Hi,

I'm writing in response to Sound Transit's June 2 blog post, in which readers were encouraged to share their thoughts on free youth fares.

While I do think it would be a big improvement from the status quo, fares should ultimately be free for everyone without conditions around age, income, etc. Given the choice between free fares for children and no free fares for anyone, I'll support free fares for children. But we'd be better off eliminating fare collection entirely and collecting that revenue (which is only a small fraction of Sound Transit's operating cost) via other means. As a homeowner near a Link station, I would HAPPILY accept a property tax levy in exchange for complete elimination of fares. It's simpler, more equitable, and ultimately saves us the considerable expense of a fare collection infrastructure.

Thanks,

Kevin

The only way we are going to shift away from a car-centric culture is to normalize public transportation, and the fastest way to do that is to make it accessible to young people. Historically, car ownership has been a signpost of adulthood, synonymous with freedom. The reality is that it places an unfair burden on young and low income people. Once a car becomes the standard in one's life, a person is beholden to the debt of purchasing, the maintenance and gas, parking/garage costs, and the exorbitant insurance rates that comes with owning a car. And if the car has to be replaced, the cycle simply continues. Thousands of dollars per year simply to get a person from point A to point B.

Instead, young people can save all that money and put it towards more important things like travel, education, home ownership, etc. The freedom of not having a car is realized because starting at a young age, they will already be experts with public transportation and be on track with their peers in Europe, the UK, and Japan where children routinely navigate independently throughout their cities and countries.

Public transportation should be free for all, but barring that, the least we can do is make it free for our youngest members of society.

Thank you for reading.

Tara

Dear Sound Transit;

Joe Kunzler here, Mr Go Sound Transit.

Asking you please implement the kids-ride-free youth fare. Riding Sound Transit is FUN; quite frankly, when most neighboring transits are going to kids ride free, it's time for Sound Transit to join this effort to build back better.

Furthermore, kids-ride-free removes a critical regressive penalty on working families from taking transit. When a family wants to travel and finds the costs of transit in money and time too burdensome, they'll take their vehicle instead of promoting transit ridership and protecting climate.

Finally, I have to say having a hearing about this at a time when most working people could not attend was an embarrassment. Your next hearing should be at 6 PM or later. Please hear from DIVERSE viewpoints, but especially from working families & disabled people - and not public comment trolls!

Thank you, and please let the kiddos ride free to create the next generation of 12s for transit!

GO SOUND TRANSIT!

Joe A. Kunzler

Dearest Sound Transit. Please allow riders 18 & under to ride for free. As an Orca Lift card holder myself, I have benefitted from having discounted fares and it has helped immensely. Tyler Morse

Sound Transit asks public to weigh in on proposed free youth fares:

My 7th grade cadette Girl Scout recorded this video to share her thoughts on why Sound Transit youth fares should be reduced or free.

<https://vimeo.com/721818178>

I too support free transportation fares for youth. It encourages families to take public transit which helps reduce cars on the road. It helps normalize taking public transit for our next generation and teaches responsibility, by having a card, without the financial burden of fare costs.

Thank you,

Vonita Francisco

Emily's Mom & Mountlake Terrace Resident

[Below is a transcript of the video linked above]

"I believe that Sound Transit should lower its fares for everyone under the age of 18 because then people like 15 year olds or 16 year olds might have a job and they would need to save their money for things they would need like school things and it would make the trip to school easier if they don't have someone to drive them. And it would make family trips easier if someone has three kids then it would cost less. Thank you, Emily"

Definitely in favor!

I think this should even be extended to low-income (2-3x poverty level , not just people at poverty level) people, especially veterans who have given so much to the country. Transportation limitation is a huge obstacle for people struggling financially and trying to move ahead ... going to interviews, jobs, Dr appointments etc.

This will also encourage use of transit and better for the environment.

Maybe there can be a line item for all transportation (including boats) licenses. Folks can opt out so they don't complain that it's a tax. There will be a certain amount who will agree and add to some revenue?

Thank you for helping low-income folks and making ours a better community !

Theresa Cheng DDS
Founder, Everyone for Veterans

Yes, youth passengers should ride for free. It will provide enhanced access to services for at risk youth and support parents who are struggling with the current economic challenges.

Thank you
Betsi Thompson

Yes, it would definitely allow more kids to attend after-school activities. Thank you.

Ray Denison

Good afternoon! I strongly support waiving transit fares for people aged 18 and younger. Experiencing everything this city has to offer should be a vital part of growing up here, and this policy can help raise lifetime transit riders.

Cheers,

Ethan Macey-Cushman

Please make transit free for youth! This is an equity issue and will open up many new opportunities for all of our youth!

Kate Ayers

Comments against free youth fares:

<p>You're teaching them to be freeloading liberals</p>
<p>Your PR is clearly one sided for the free fares. The homeless have taken over free buses and treated the space as such. Why would youth be any different? Youth could be free with an adult but that's not what you are proposing. My input: definitely no EL Edmonds Wa</p>
<p>Fares should not be waived for those under 18. We have experienced what happens when fares are waived. People take advantage and use transit for more than what it is intended for i.e. drug use, napping, shelter from inclement weather etc. That is not, nor should it be transits responsibility.</p> <p>Fares should be mandatory for everyone except toddlers. Free stuff is not always good and, believe it or not, fares keep us safer and teach youngsters how to manage their money and responsibility.</p> <p>One exception we believe would be acceptable: free fares for students k—12 who use transit to get to school. This should be available to them during the school year and not after 5 pm or before 6 am.</p> <p>Reduced fares for Seniors (65+) and K - 12 could be considered.</p> <p>Scott Victor Edmonds, WA</p>
<p>I say no. We can't afford to keep paying higher taxes etc for free stuff. Inflation is killing us and now we want more on top of that. Free youth fares are not free. Someone always has to pay and it's the middle class that gets the bill. No.</p>

Other comment:

<p>While this might be helpful to many urban families, Sound Transit is known to be unsafe for adults riders and many avoid that opportunity because of the theft and violence on buses and at stations. There would be no way I would send my child on a bus ride. I am not alone on that observation.</p>
