

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

King County Metro Transit's strategic plan is divided into three chapters:

**Introduction**, which provides background and context, summarizes the challenges facing Metro, and describes the strategic planning process; **Pathway to the Future**, which presents Metro's goals, objectives and strategies; and **Plan Performance Monitoring**, which describes how Metro will track progress.

## SECTION 1.1

### Background and context

#### The importance of public transportation in the Puget Sound region

Public transportation is vitally important to the Puget Sound region. In 2014, people in the region took about 172 million trips on the fixed-route transit services offered by King County Metro, Community Transit, Pierce Transit, and Sound Transit.

Metro carried 70 percent of these trips, with 121 million boardings in 2014, or about 400,000 passenger trips every weekday. Metro also provides an array of other products and services to meet a range of public transportation needs (see sidebar).

These services improve the quality of life in our region by providing mobility to those who need or choose to use them. Public transportation connects commuters to jobs. In 2014, 45 percent of work trips to downtown Seattle were made on transit. Students take the bus to schools and universities. People also use public transportation to reach shopping, services, and recreation. Transit offers travel options to those who cannot drive, and provides assurance to drivers that other mobility options exist should they need them.

Transit enhances the region's economic vitality not only by getting people to their jobs but also by freeing up roadway capacity, improving the movement of people and goods. Metro's service keeps more than 175,000 vehicles off our roads every weekday. Public transportation is an integral part of the regional growth strategy in the Puget Sound Regional Council's Vision 2040 and Transportation 2040 action plans. These plans rely on the expansion of public transportation to support growth by meeting the travel needs of a larger share of the region's projected population.

Public transportation also improves the region's air quality by reducing the number of miles people drive. Energy-efficient transit vehicles contribute to the decrease in transportation emissions. Metro service displaces approximately 600,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MTCO<sub>2</sub>e) each year.

Metro is committed to working closely with other transit providers to continually enhance our region's public transportation system and attract a growing number of riders.

#### Metro's mandate

The King County Department of Transportation's Metro Transit Division performs the "metropolitan public transportation function" authorized in the Revised Code of Washington 35.58. Metro is required to plan and operate transit services consistent with county, regional, state and federal policies. As a County agency, Metro complies



#### Metro products and services

Metro provides a wide range of services: about 190 bus routes including six RapidRide lines, Dial-A-Ride Transit (DART), and operation of the City of Seattle's streetcar system. These fixed-route services delivered 121 million passenger trips in 2014. Metro also operates Sound Transit's Link light rail and most ST Express buses in King County under contract.

For people with disabilities who cannot use Metro's regular buses, Metro offers Access service and supports the Community Access Transportation program.

Metro's commuter vanpool program had 1,450 vehicles in operation in 2014.

Metro also offers a growing suite of alternative services, such as ride-sharing programs and community vans, tailored to local needs.

In this plan, the terms "public transportation" or "Metro's products and services" encompass all of Metro's offerings.

with County law and procedures; the Metropolitan King County Council approves Metro's fund management policies and Metro's biennial budget.

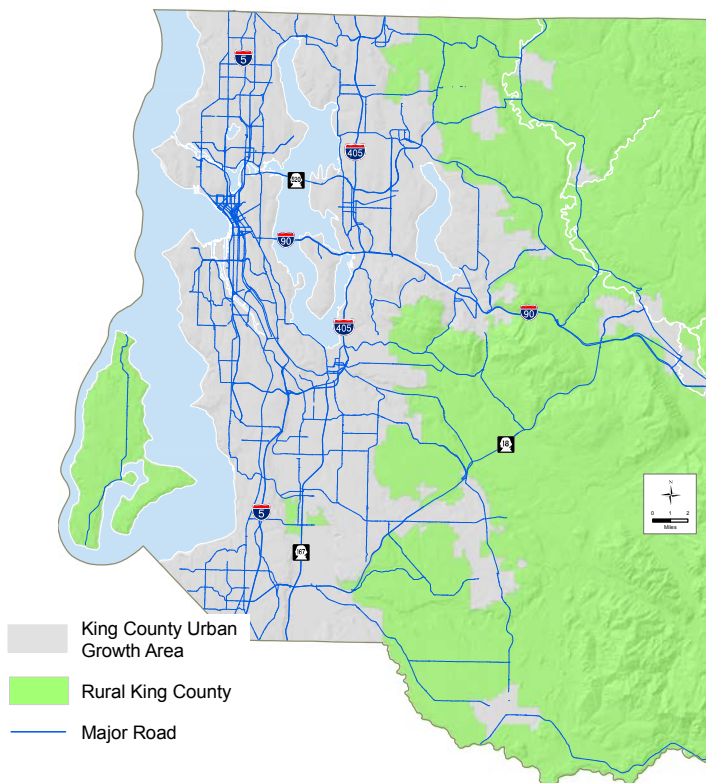
**Countywide planning and policies:** King County Countywide Planning Policies (CPPs) are established by King County and its cities and jurisdictions. These policies are consistent with state law, state agency guidance, decisions of the Growth Management Policy Council and the regional growth strategy outlined in Vision 2040. The CPPs provide a countywide vision and serve as a framework for each jurisdiction to develop its own comprehensive plan, which must be consistent with the overall vision for the future of King County. Metro's Strategic Plan for Public Transportation 2011-2021 is consistent with King County's Countywide Planning Policies, Comprehensive Plan, Strategic Climate Action Plan, Comprehensive Financial Management Policies, and adopted mission, vision, guiding principles and goals.



**Regional planning and policies:** State law (RCW 47.80.020) designates the four-county Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) for federal planning purposes. As the region's MPO, PSRC develops a regional plan and strategies to guide decisions about regional growth management and environmental, economic and transportation issues. As the region's RTPO, PSRC develops long-range transportation and development plans across multiple jurisdictions and allocates federal transportation funds for the region. Metro participates in the PSRC planning process and strives to meet the goals of the regional plans, Vision 2040 and Transportation 2040.

**Washington state planning and policies:** The 1990 Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) requires the state's largest and fastest-growing counties to conduct comprehensive land-use and transportation planning, to concentrate new growth in compact "urban growth areas," and to protect natural resources

FIGURE 1: Urban growth area, King County



and environmentally critical areas. King County's urban growth area is shown in Figure 1. The GMA requires King County to consider population and employment growth targets and land uses when determining the future demand for travel and whether such demand can be met by existing transportation facilities. Metro contributes to King County's compliance with the GMA by focusing public transportation services on urban growth areas.

**Federal planning and policies:** Metro complies with federal laws that require the public transportation system to be equitable, accessible, and just. Civil rights statutes, including Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (see sidebar, p.14), require that Metro provide public transportation in a manner that does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, or age. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 requires that Metro ensure equal opportunities and access for

people with disabilities. A 1994 executive order requires that all federal agencies include environmental justice in their missions. This means that Metro cannot disproportionately impact minority or low-income populations and must ensure full and fair participation by all potentially affected groups. Metro provides public transportation that adheres to these and other federal requirements.

## ■ SECTION 1.2

# Challenges and opportunities

Metro based this strategic plan in part on an assessment of the current environment and the opportunities and challenges we face both within and outside the organization; these are described below. The goals, objectives and strategies presented later in the plan address these challenges.

## Regional growth, land use and the economy

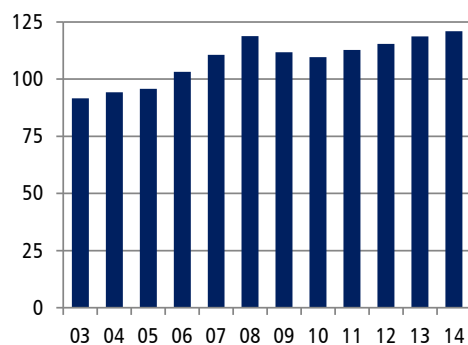
King County is the most populous county in the state and the 13th most populous county in the nation. It has a variety of geographic characteristics and diverse communities; land uses, densities and population vary greatly.

The most densely developed parts of the county, where most people live and work, have little room to expand existing transportation infrastructure. Building new highways, roads, and other infrastructure would be costly, disruptive of existing property uses, and technically challenging. Consequently, the regional growth plans call for more intensive use of existing infrastructure by increasing both the number of people using transit services and the proportion of overall regional trips made on transit.

**Regional population and economic growth:** Since 2011, when this strategic plan was first produced, King County’s population has grown by 5.6 percent to an estimated 2 million people in 2015. Practically every city in the county has seen population growth, and several cities have annexed large areas that previously were unincorporated. The number of jobs in the county has grown more than 10 percent since 2011, to about 1.3 million jobs, reflecting the local economy’s recovery from the Great Recession.

Transit ridership tends to fluctuate with changes in population and jobs, as well as fuel prices and other factors. As shown in Figure 2, Metro’s ridership grew steadily between 2003 and 2008, then dropped following the recession that began in 2008.

**FIGURE 2: Metro ridership 2003-2014**  
Annual boardings (millions)



Rider growth resumed in 2011 as the economy began to recover and population growth continued. Metro delivered 121 million passenger trips in 2014—a record high number.

In the broader Puget Sound region, the population is expected to surpass 4 million people in 2016 and then grow to nearly 5 million people by 2040 (2.4 million in King County). The region is expected to support 3 million jobs by 2040. More people and jobs (shown in

## Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

provides that “no person in the United States shall, on the ground of race, color or national origin be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.”

## The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA)

prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, state and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation.





## Centers

Centers are at the heart of the Puget Sound Regional Council's approach to growth management in Vision 2040. PSRC designates regional growth centers and manufacturing/industrial centers as places that will receive a significant proportion of population and employment growth compared to the rest of the urban area. Concentrating growth in centers allows cities to maximize the use of existing infrastructure, make more efficient investments in infrastructure, and minimize the environmental impact of growth. Consequently, centers receive priority in regional and local investments in the infrastructure and services that support growth.

**Regional growth centers** are focal points of more dense population and employment. Linking these centers with a highly efficient transportation system allows the region to reduce the rate of growth in vehicle miles traveled by expanding transportation choices.

**Manufacturing/industrial centers** are employment areas with concentrated manufacturing and industrial land uses that cannot be easily mixed with other activities. They should continue to accommodate a significant amount of regional employment, and good access to the region's transportation system will contribute to their success.

In addition to PSRC's designated centers, Metro has identified "transit activity centers" in King County.

These centers are served by and reflect the current transit network and are areas of the county that are important for Metro to serve to connect communities throughout the county. They are typically associated with higher levels of transit in their land-use context. Transit activity centers are further explained in the King County Metro Service Guidelines.

Regional growth, manufacturing/industrial, and transit activity centers are collectively referred to as "centers" in this strategic plan.



FIGURE 3: Regional growth, manufacturing/industrial, and transit activity centers

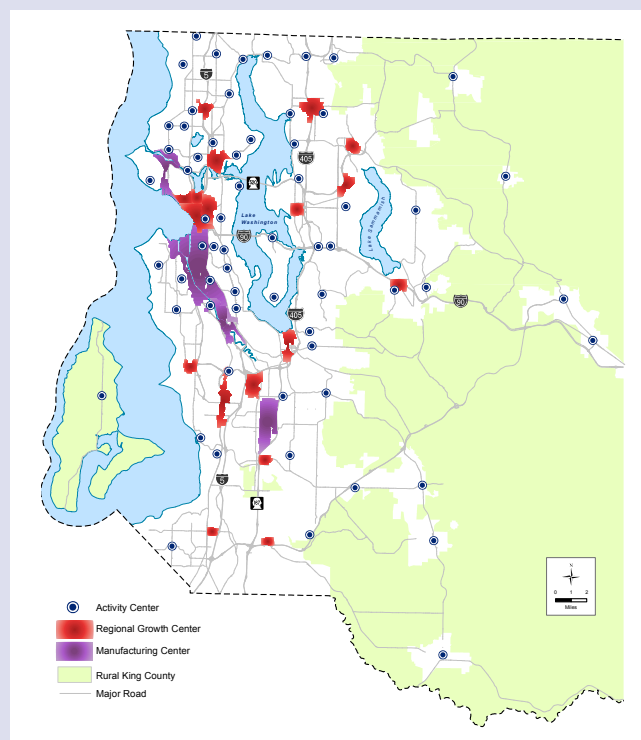


Figure 4) mean that Metro has an opportunity to serve a growing number of riders and major employment centers. Metro’s annual service is expected to grow by 2.3 million annual service hours, from about 3.5 million hours in 2015 to 5.8 million hours by 2040—an amount that is beyond Metro’s capacity to provide with current funding.

This growth will be focused in King County’s centers (see sidebar, p. 15). The centers referred to in Metro’s strategic plan are shown in Figure 3.

## Demographic changes

King County’s population is aging; people 65 and older now comprise more than 12 percent of the people who live here. Over the next 20 years, this age group will grow to about 18 percent of the population. An aging population may rely more on public transportation.

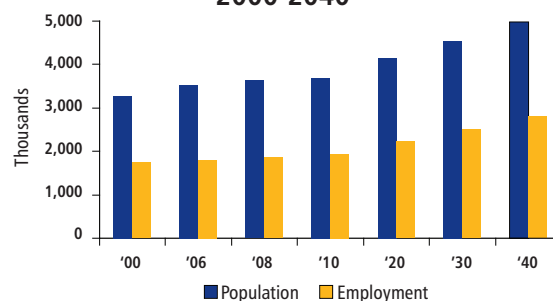
At the other end of the age scale, younger people are increasingly choosing transit. The share of driving trips in the Puget Sound region declined from 86 percent in 1999 to 82 percent in 2014, while the share of transit and nonmotorized trips increased. Between 2006 and 2014, the shift away from automobiles was most pronounced for 18-24 year olds, closely followed by 25-35 year olds.<sup>1</sup>

People with low incomes often rely heavily on transit, and while many King County residents are prospering, the percentage of people living in poverty or near-poverty has been growing. In 2013, about 12 percent or 240,000 people living in our county had incomes below the federal poverty level. Nearly 500,000 residents—a quarter of the county’s total population—had incomes less than twice the federal poverty level (currently about \$23,000 annually for a single person, or about \$48,000 for a family of four). A growing number of people in poverty live in suburban areas. According to King County’s 2014 Equity and Social Justice Annual Report, more than three in five county residents who are poor live outside of Seattle.

King County is also becoming more diverse. Immigrants from Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Africa, as well as native-born African Americans and Latinos, are making up a large part of our population growth. Overall, compared to White and Asian residents, Black and Latino residents have less education, higher unemployment, and lower incomes. Immigrants may have limited English proficiency. All of these conditions make public transportation critically important for enabling people to reach the jobs, education and services that can help reverse our society’s inequities.

Metro plays an essential role in providing mobility to people who, for a variety of reasons, have limited transportation options or are increasingly choosing transit. We continue striving to find innovative solutions, such as the introduction of the ORCA LIFT reduced fare for people with low incomes and the expansion of the Alternative Services Program.

FIGURE 4: Puget Sound region projected population and employment growth 2000-2040



Metro’s innovative ORCA LIFT program offers a reduced fare to people whose income is below 200 percent of the federal poverty level.

<sup>1</sup> PSRC 2014 Regional Travel Survey, [www.psrc.org/data/transportation/travel-surveys/2014-household](http://www.psrc.org/data/transportation/travel-surveys/2014-household)

## Customer service and satisfaction

Maintaining and improving customer satisfaction with Metro services is an ongoing process. Every experience a customer has on a Metro bus, at a Metro facility, or with Metro employees and information services affects perceptions about the quality of public transportation. Metro strives to make every customer's public transportation experience positive at every stage of a trip.

Metro continually gathers feedback about how well our services are meeting customer needs and expectations. We track customer correspondence and interactions and conduct an annual telephone survey of riders—including nonriders every two years.

Figure 5 illustrates the issues that have the most impact on customer satisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

FIGURE 5: What's important to Metro riders

LEVEL OF SERVICE	RANK IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE
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Another key to customer satisfaction is public involvement. Whenever we plan major changes to service, we conduct robust public engagement processes and use what we learn to shape our plans. Service change proposals are also guided by objective data and guidelines that help make the decision-making process transparent.

## Funding

Approximately 55 to 60 percent of Metro's funding comes from local sales tax. This source has grown increasingly important since 2000, when the Washington legislature eliminated the motor vehicle excise tax for transit, which had provided nearly one-third of Metro's revenue.

About 20 percent of Metro's revenue comes from fares. Other sources include federal and state grants—which can fluctuate significantly—and contributions from service partners, vanpool operations, investment income, and a small portion of county property tax.

Metro's heavy reliance on sales tax makes it challenging to provide sustainable bus service because revenue from this source is dependent on economic conditions. Since 2000, two economic downturns forced Metro to scale back planned service

<sup>2</sup> King County Metro Transit 2014 Rider Survey

expansions. In the six years following the 2008 recession, Metro took numerous actions to cut costs, increase revenue and preserve most service. Although service reductions were necessary in September 2014, improved economic conditions enabled the County Council to adopt a 2015-2016 budget that maintained service.

In 2015, following Seattle voters' approval of a transit funding ballot measure, the City of Seattle entered into a Community Mobility Contract with Metro to purchase approximately 270,000 additional hours of bus service annually, about 8 percent of the Metro system, through 2020. Other economic improvements enabled Metro to invest in additional service in suburban areas around the county.

These developments enable Metro to sustain and enhance service during the 2015-2016 biennium and for some years beyond. However, funding from the City of Seattle will expire unless extended by Seattle voters in 2020, future economic downturns will again cause sales tax revenues to drop, and even today demand for transit service exceeds Metro's funding capacity. For these reasons Metro and other transit agencies continue to need long-term, sustainable and sufficient funding to deliver the public transportation services our region expects.

### **The environment**

Metro strives to provide solutions to urgent environmental challenges: reduce greenhouse gas emissions, minimize energy consumption, shrink Metro's environmental footprint and improve the sustainability of transit operations.

King County's 2015 Strategic Climate Action Plan makes a strong commitment to taking action to prevent and respond to the impacts of climate change. It establishes the targets in the Countywide Planning Policies that were adopted by the King County Growth Management Planning Council in 2014. These targets are: reduce countywide sources of greenhouse emissions by 25 percent by 2020, 50 percent by 2030, and 80 percent by 2050; and reduce emissions from County operations by at least 15 percent by 2015, 25 percent by 2020, and 50 percent by 2030. (Targets are compared to a 2007 baseline.)

Transportation is the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions in King County, and our community must make major changes in how we live and travel if we are to significantly reduce emissions. Metro will play a leading role by providing transportation options that encourage transit ridership and help reduce the number of vehicle miles traveled. Fast, frequent RapidRide service and innovations like the Real-Time Rideshare app exemplify the strategies Metro will continue to pursue.

Metro can also support the development of compact, pedestrian-friendly communities that are easily served by transit by working closely with King County cities to coordinate development and transit plans.

The acquisition of hybrid buses and electric trolleys, and efforts to make Metro facilities more energy-efficient, advance King County's goal of reducing energy consumption. Metro is also testing zero-emission, battery-electric buses to determine how they will be used in Metro's fleet in the future.

Metro has developed a Sustainability Plan that calls for ongoing efforts to reduce energy use, greenhouse gas emissions, water use and waste and to increase transit ridership.

**90%**  
of customers  
Metro surveyed  
said they  
are satisfied  
with our service



Source: 2014 Rider Survey

## Access to transit

If people are going to use the public transportation system, they must be able to reach transit service and then get from transit service to their final destinations.

People's access depends on factors such as their proximity to bus stops or train stations, the quality of walking and biking pathways they can use to reach those places, the availability of parking spaces at park-and-rides, and the type and amount of transit service provided at the access point.



Metro will work with jurisdictions, public and private partners, transit agencies and the PSRC to identify where improvements are needed and actions that can be taken to address them. Partnerships among Metro, other transit agencies and local jurisdictions will be essential to improving transit access.

## Evolving transportation system

The Puget Sound region's transportation system is constantly changing and adapting to the mobility needs of its residents, presenting numerous opportunities and challenges for Metro.

Metro has long worked closely with other agencies to plan and provide efficient, integrated travel options that enhance public transportation in King County. Metro works particularly closely with Sound Transit to realize efficiencies, achieve savings, and deliver better transit service for the people of our region. We also partner with Pierce Transit, Community Transit, Kitsap Transit, Everett Transit, Washington State Ferries and the King County Water Taxi as well as the Washington State Department of Transportation, PSRC, local and regional jurisdictions, and businesses such as Microsoft that provide direct transit service to their employees. The focus is on customers—offering them information about various agencies' services in one place, coordinating schedules for convenient transfers between agencies and modes, making fare payment simple, and collaborating in other ways to create a seamless, easy-to-use transportation network. This form of integration is critical because so many people cross county lines as part of their work commutes.

Metro collaborates on some of the region's most important transportation projects to ensure that public transportation continues to play a vital role in the region's broader transportation system. These projects include:

- **Sound Transit's Link light rail:** Sound Transit extended Central Link light rail to Seattle's Capitol Hill and the University of Washington in 2016 and has funding to extend Link north to Lynnwood, east to Redmond/Overlake and south to Kent/Des Moines by 2023. The agency is developing plans to further expand. To optimize the public's investments in fast, high-capacity transit services, Metro will continue to work with Sound Transit and local jurisdictions to revise bus networks and supporting infrastructure in coordination with Link extensions. The goal is to improve the public transportation system's efficiency, effectiveness and ease of use.
- **Major highway projects:** Public transportation is an essential part of major transportation projects in the Puget Sound region. Metro provides public transportation service to mitigate the impacts of major projects—and is also affected by changes to the transportation infrastructure in the region. With financial support from partners, public transportation will continue to play a major role in the Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Replacement Project, the SR-520 Bridge Replacement Project, and other transportation infrastructure projects.



Metro also actively participates in regional fare coordination efforts and in ORCA, the regional fare payment system. The ORCA agencies are continually enhancing services and striving to extend the benefits of seamless fare payment to more people.

As the region's public transportation system evolves, Metro will actively engage with regional, local and state entities as well as businesses and communities to build an effective system. Development of Metro's long-range plan in 2015–2016 is a nexus for this process. This plan looks at projections about how communities in King County will change and defines what types of service will best serve the people who will live, work and visit those areas in the future. The collaborative plan development process has involved broad public outreach as well as an intensive process with local city staff members who served on a technical advisory committee.



## ■ SECTION 1.3

# Strategic plan development

Metro developed this strategic plan to define how we will meet the challenges and pursue the opportunities ahead.

Our plan builds on the foundation of King County’s mission, vision, guiding principles (see sidebar), and goals, which were adopted in 2010 and updated in 2015. It defines specific goals, objectives and strategies for meeting the County’s Mobility goal: Deliver a seamless, reliable network of transportation options to get people where they need to go, when they need to get there.

This plan and associated service guidelines also respond to the recommendations of two important task forces:

**Regional Transit Task Force.** King County formed the Regional Transit Task Force in March 2010 to consider a policy framework to guide service investments or—if necessary—reduction of the Metro system. The group was made up of community members who represented a diversity of interests and perspectives from across the county.

The task force was asked to identify short-term and long-term objectives for transit service investment, and to formulate a service implementation policy based on those objectives.

The task force unanimously approved seven recommendations reflecting the following themes:

- Metro should make its decision-making processes transparent to the public by adopting new performance measures and clear guidelines to be used in service allocation decisions.
- Metro should control costs and establish a sustainable financial structure that will work over time.
- Legislation should be pursued to ensure that Metro has a more sustainable financial base and can grow in the future.
- Productivity, social equity, and geographic value should be emphasized in service reduction and growth decisions.
- Metro should revise its mission statement and create a vision statement.

The task force also defined key system design factors (see sidebar on p. 22).

For the Regional Transit Task Force’s full report, visit [www.kingcounty.gov/transittaskforce](http://www.kingcounty.gov/transittaskforce).



### Guiding principles from King County’s strategic plan

**Financially sustainable**  
Aligning funding, policy and operational goals of King County government.

**Quality local government**  
Providing effective, efficient local governance and services to unincorporated areas.

**Equitable and fair**  
Addressing the root causes of inequities to provide for equal access to opportunities for all.

**Regionally collaborative**  
Engaging with partners, stakeholders, and public and private organizations to achieve goals.

### Transit system design factors

The Council asked the Regional Transit Task Force to consider six design factors; the task force added one more. The following summarizes the task force's definitions of these factors:

**Factor 1: Land use.** To support regional and local growth plans by concentrating transit service coverage and higher service levels in corridors where residential and job density is greatest.

**Factor 2: Social equity and environmental justice.** To support social equity and environmental justice by providing mobility options to those who have no or limited transportation options.

**Factor 3: Financial sustainability.** To support financial sustainability through transit that achieves higher ridership and fare revenues combined with lower costs per rider.

**Factor 4: Geographic value.** To support geographic value by facilitating service allocation decisions (both for reductions and growth) that are perceived as "fair" throughout the county. This

involves balancing access with productivity; maintaining some relationship between the tax revenue created in a subarea and the distribution of services; and providing access to job centers and other destinations that are essential to countywide economic vitality.

**Factor 5: Economic development.** To support economic development by achieving the largest number of work trips at all times of the day and all days of the week via transit.

**Factor 6: Productivity and efficiency.** To support productivity and efficiency by focusing on a system that results in high productivity and service efficiency based on performance measures for different types of transit services.

**Factor 7: Environmental sustainability.** To support environmental sustainability by reducing greenhouse gas emissions by reducing vehicle travel, reducing congestion, and supporting compact development.

**Service Guidelines Task Force.** In 2015, after Metro had used the adopted service guidelines for several years, the County Council formed a Service Guidelines Task Force to further analyze how transit service is evaluated and allocated and to consider changes in the guidelines.

The task force developed consensus recommendations that are incorporated into both this plan and Metro's service guidelines. In brief, the recommendations were:

- Modify the way transit corridors are evaluated to better reflect productivity, social equity and geographic value.



- Change the definition of “low income” used in setting target service levels from 100 percent of the federal poverty level to 200 percent of the federal poverty level, in line with Metro’s ORCA LIFT program.
- Modify the definition of Metro’s service types so that comparable services are measured against one another.
- Expand alternative services as a way to meet diverse needs.
- Establish a minimum service level of every 60 minutes for corridors and routes.
- Provide greater protection for peak-only services in the event of major service reductions.
- Improve Metro’s planning process, focusing more attention on information about where riders start and end their trips, for example, and let local governments know in advance about potential changes.
- Give more consideration to the relative impacts to all parts of the county when making service reductions.
- Describe more fully the different factors Metro considers when making investments.
- Expand partnerships between Metro, communities, and private entities.
- Seek new resources to support growth of the transit system, while continuing to focus on efficiency and accountability.

### The path ahead

Some elements of this plan—the mission, vision, goals and objectives—are expected to be realized over many years. The strategies are expected to be realized in a shorter time frame. The plan will be reviewed periodically as circumstances warrant, and plan elements may be modified, added or substituted if needed.

Although this plan is intended to inform the biennial budget process, funding constraints may limit Metro’s ability to implement every strategy in the plan in any given year. Many of the goals and objectives represent ideals that Metro will continually strive to achieve, and which are likely to be included in subsequent plans.





