

Metro Service Guidelines Task Force

Meeting Summary

June 3, 2015, 3:00 – 6:00 PM

Bellevue City Hall, Room 1E-108

Task Force members present: Paul Bachtel, Nancy Backus, Amy Biggs, Vic Bishop, Josh Brown, Fred Butler, John Chelminiak, Suzette Cooke, Dorene Cornwell, Lauren Craig, Chris Eggen, Mahnaz Eshetu, Jim Ferrell, Hilary Franz, George Frasier, Patrick Green, Josh Kavanagh, Matt Koltnow, Matt Larson, Gordon McHenry, Lynn Moody, Tom Rasmussen, Carla Saulter, Edna Shim, Jim Stanton; *Ex-Officio members:* Kevin Desmond, Mike Harbour; *Facilitator:* John Howell (Cedar River Group)

Members not present: Tim Burgess, David Freiboth, Scott Kubly, John Marchione, Shefali Ranganathan, Jon Scholes

Presenters: Victor Obeso (Deputy General Manager, Planning and Customer Services, King County Metro), Chris O’Claire (Manager, Strategy & Performance, King County Metro)

Welcome and Meeting Objectives

John Howell welcomed task force members and said that the discussion at the last meeting was excellent in bringing forward ideas that address the task force’s charge. The task force has two more meetings this summer after this one, then a final meeting in the fall. The agenda for this meeting was focused on two items in the task force’s charge that had not yet been explored—alternative services and partnerships—along with further discussion on service types. Mr. Howell said he would bring to the next meeting (on June 16) some draft recommendations based on the task force’s discussions, with the plan to finalize the recommendations at the task force’s July 7 meeting. At the follow-up meeting in the fall, Metro will explain how it plans to implement the task force’s recommendations.

Based on the task force’s charge, the questions to be addressed regarding alternative services were: Is Metro’s new investment in alternative services the right direction? Is the approach addressing alternative services effectively? Regarding service types, the questions were: How should service be measured and evaluated? Have the decisions about service reductions and service expansion shown a good balance between the factors of productivity, geographic value and social equity? Regarding partnerships, the questions were: Is Metro’s effort to form partnerships to purchase transit services the right direction? Are there changes Metro should make?

Review of Ideas Emerging from the May 21 Meeting

Mr. Howell introduced his write-up of the ideas from the last task force meeting (see handout, “Ideas Emerging from May 21 Task Force Meeting”). These included ideas for changing service types or service guidelines, major themes from the discussion of values tradeoffs, and other ideas. Task force members offered the following comments and suggestions:

- Under service types, add something about non-Seattle urban centers and urban center to urban center mobility. While this topic is included under Other Ideas (bullets 2 and 3), it needs to be called out more.
- Add that everyone in the county needs to see value in the transit system to support a ballot measure. While this idea is included under Other Ideas (bullet 1), it needs to be clearer.

Mr. Howell will revise the document and weave it into the draft recommendations he will bring to the next task force meeting.

Alternative Services

Chris O’Claire provided an overview of Metro’s approach to alternative services, the expansion in the last two years, and the alternative services currently offered and planned (see presentation slides, “Service Guidelines Task Force: Alternative services and service types).

In response to task force members’ questions, Ms. O’Claire provided the following additional information:

- **Metrics:** In the 2014 Service Guidelines Report, Metro included a chapter on the Alternative Services Performance and Progress report, which evaluated the Snoqualmie Valley Shuttle compared with the former fixed-route services that served the area on a variety of metrics. Metro currently uses the same performance metrics for Dial-a-Ride Transit service as it does for fixed route services: rides per platform hour and passenger miles per platform mile. Farebox recovery is not included.
- **Operating costs:** For vanpool, the operating costs currently are 100 percent paid by employers. This cost recovery ratio was passed by the County Council and has been in place for some years. The target for farebox recovery for fixed routes is 25 percent, based on operating costs.
- **Seeding new markets:** An example of how alternative services can seed new markets is the example mentioned in the prior meeting of Hopelink providing van service to North Seattle Community College, which was successful and grew to warrant a fixed route.
- **Community shuttle evaluation:** So far only one community shuttle has been evaluated. It was evaluated against the fixed route that formerly served the area. See the description in the *2014 Service Guidelines Report*.
- **Developing new services:** Metro works closely with the local community of an area to understand their mobility needs and to develop appropriate alternative services. For example, they worked with Snoqualmie Valley residents for a year to develop the current service.
- **Service areas for alternative services:** While the service areas shown on the map as shaded ovals or circles do not connect rides with other areas of the county, the alternative services are set up to include transit hubs to connect with fixed route services. The service areas are defined in conversation with the local community.

In the discussion, task force members offered the following comments and ideas:

Uses of alternative services

- There were a number of suggestions for uses of alternative services:

- To enhance mobility between centers, or in rural areas or where service does not exist. Encourage smaller cities/areas to work together to use alternative services to connect them, as Snoqualmie did in developing a spine in the valley.
- For off-peak transportation to/from work sites. Encourage employers who are not large enough to form vanpools on their own to collaborate on funding services for off-peak work sites.
- To serve transit-dependent, low-income and minority riders when fixed route services are not productive. Alternatives could also help people with disabilities and young adults reach job sites.
- Expand the use of vanpools. Use the vehicles for social services transportation in the off-peak hours when they now sit at work sites and homes. The employer and social service agency could share the maintenance costs. Allow employer shuttles to carry other residents who travel between the locations the shuttle covers.
- Several task force members said that Metro has done a good job developing alternative services to meet mobility needs after fixed route services were reduced. The variety of types of alternative services is good, as is Metro's use of these services as an innovation fund to try new ways to improve mobility.

Evaluation of alternative services

- Task force members suggested different ways of evaluating alternative services, including:
 - Evaluate them as part of the whole system to balance productivity, geographic value and social equity.
 - Do separate evaluations of the alternative services where there is an expectation of cost recovery (vanpools) and the services that are for geographic value or social equity.
 - Do separate evaluations of alternative services for which the end state is to build into a fixed route and of the services for which the end state is to serve low-density areas.
- Several task force members thought that measurement of cost per rider does not work for alternative services. A different metric, such as the cost per hour, could be used. An alternative service, such as the shuttle between North Bend and Issaquah Highlands, is not cost effective itself but is cost effective compared to serving the area with a fixed route.

Value people see in Metro's services

- A number of task force members said that Metro needs to address the fact that some residents do not feel they get value out of the services for the taxes they pay. There were also suggestions to make residents aware of all the alternative services Metro provides, and that the vanpool and shuttles are part of Metro's services.

Service Types

Victor Obeso reviewed the two primary service types Metro currently uses (Seattle Core and Non-Seattle Core) and the possible changes the task force discussed at the last meeting that would add two new types (Express and Demand Response). He provided slides showing the impacts and trade-offs of

making these changes (see presentation slides, “Service Types,” and handout, “Review of Route Performance and Operational Data by Service Types”).

In response to task force members’ questions, Mr. Obeso provided the following additional information:

- **Changes in service emphasis graphic:** The service emphasis graphic is an attempt to show the trade-offs in making choices about the different configuration of service types. The chart is not something Metro uses to guide service decisions, just an illustration to help in understanding the choices.
- **Effect in a reduction:** In a reduction scenario, service cuts would first be focused on the bottom performing 25 percent of each service type. Making Express and Demand Response services into separate service types would likely mean that cuts would be limited to the bottom 25 percent of these specific types of service. Restructures would also be considered. The cuts would still be weighted by geographic value and social equity, but would be in four buckets instead of two.
- **Service types used in other cities:** The service types Metro uses are common in the transit industry. However, there is a wide variety in the service types used by U.S. transit agencies of a similar size to King County, ranging from about one measure to 20.
- **Performance review:** Metro looks annually at crowding and performance against the guidelines, and makes adjustments. The last Service Guidelines Report came out in October 2014 and is available in the Accountability Center on Metro’s website. If a route is underperforming, one of the actions Metro can take is to look at possible alternative services. Metro can also reduce, restructure or delete low-performing routes.
- **Effect of guidelines:** The guidelines are a guide but do not tell the County Executive and County Council what to do. The guidelines do not direct Metro to change the system, but rather guide how to make reductions when needed and where new money should go when it is available.

Mr. Howell asked if task force members thought that adding new service types for Express and Demand Response services would address their concerns about the current service types. In the discussion, task force members offered the following comments and requests:

Measures

- There was interest in looking at other measures besides the two Metro uses, especially for Non-Seattle Core service and alternative services.
- Several task force members said that measuring productivity from the bus barn puts the Non-Seattle Core services at a disadvantage.

Service types

- Several members said they liked separating out the Express and Demand Response services so that comparisons would be against similar services. Separating these out also would help clarify their value in terms of geographic value and social equity, and would help Metro address growth regions.
- Several members said they were “cautiously optimistic” about separating out the Express service and Demand Response services, but would like to do better at serving transit-dependent riders and providing connectivity across the county.

- Several task force members said they did not support a separate Express service category or focusing more on peak service, since that emphasis would reduce the all-day network, mobility and the hours of service overall.
- A number of task force members spoke to the importance of providing mobility to transit-dependent riders. This includes both those who need peak travel service to commute and those who need all-day service to get to 24/7 jobs and to doctor's appointments and shopping.
- A number of task force members spoke to the importance of providing connectivity among activity centers throughout the county.
- There was concern about maintaining productivity if there were too many service types.
- Many task force members said that the two current service categories do not define the needs well.
- Several task force members noted that since funds are limited, there are trade-offs in any method of defining service.
- Other suggestions to redefine or change the Seattle Core, Non-Seattle Core service types were:
 - Use urban, suburban, rural as the types.
 - Include suburban center to suburban center.
 - Look at urban core service for all the larger urban areas (Seattle, Bellevue, Redmond, Renton) using PSRC definitions of urban centers.
 - Consider the differences in looking at service by design and by function, as shown on the sheet comparing transit systems in other cities.

Requests

- How would last fall's reductions play out if Express had been a separate service type?
- How many of the Express routes are suburban to suburban?

Closing

Mr. Howell summarized the conversation by saying that there was not yet consensus on the ideas for service types suggested at the last meeting that were presented at this meeting. Some task force members suggested a few tweaks, others suggested changing the service types more dramatically. There were also requests that the staff do some work to show what the impacts of service guideline alternatives might be.

He noted that this task force was created because after the 2014 service reductions some communities did not feel the balance between productivity, geographic value, and social equity resulted in fair decisions. The concept of adding two new service types was an attempt to re-balance the scales somewhat to address two service types that were particularly hard hit by the 2014 reductions: express service and alternative services. He observed that the proposed changes to service types drew reactions at the meeting from other stakeholders who were concerned about potential future impacts on their services.

Since there was not enough time in the meeting to discuss partnerships, that topic will be on the agenda for the next task force meeting, which will be on Tuesday, June 16, from 3:00 to 5:00 at Bellevue City Hall.

Chris O'Claire said that Metro will be hosting long-range planning workshops jointly with Sound Transit in June. She had a flyer members could send to their contacts.