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Sound Transit audit should examine inequity and transparency problems

News of a state performance audit of Sound Transit was greeted positively in Federal Way, where officials and taxpayers have been trying to find out where their money is going. After learning of the planned audit, Federal Way Mayor Skip Priest wrote to State Auditor Brian Sonntag to articulate his city's concerns.

"This isn't solely a Federal Way issue. The entire Puget Sound region depends on the development of efficient, cost-effective mass transit," said Mayor Priest. "Sound Transit's broken promises and failures in South King County suggest that light rail has veered off course."

On January 5, *The Seattle Times* reported that the State Auditor's office is preparing to initiate a comprehensive performance audit of the regional transit agency. The Mayor's letter asks that the audit look at several specific issues that bear on the agency's performance, including:

- Did the agency realize prior to the 2008 Sound Transit 2 vote that the Federal Way light rail link was not feasible?
- Between 2008 and May 2011, as the agency considered how to respond to declining revenue forecasts, did Sound Transit follow a transparent and open process to communicate with the City of Federal Way regarding the alternatives it was considering and to solicit feedback on those alternatives?
- Is the agency's "sub-area equity" policy used in a transparent, consistent and equitable manner?
- In light of a reported \$4 billion decline in forecasted revenues, has the agency made appropriate steps to reduce its administrative and operating costs. As an example, are the employee compensation practices appropriate when more than a quarter of its 450 employees make more than \$100,000 a year and annual COLAs are repackaged as performance pay that every employee receives?

"The inequity being built into the light rail system is nothing for our region to be proud of," said City Council member Dini Duclos, former CEO of the Multi-Service Center, a prominent South King County social services agency. "Sound Transit takes \$13.5 million a year out of Federal Way. Yet, the closest our working class community will get to the light rail they are paying for, is when the overcrowded ST Express bus they ride passes the train in Seattle."

Duclos noted that due to the confusing Sound Transit 2 ballot language, most voters didn't realize they were approving a permanent transit tax. After retiring debt from its bond sales, the agency will roll that tax authority over to ongoing operations and maintenance expenditures.

Voters approved a light rail extension to Federal Way in the 2008 Sound Transit 2 ballot measure. The agency appears to have begun re-evaluating its proposal sometime around the election, but it wasn't until May 2011 that Sound Transit notified Federal Way that it had been eliminated from the regional rail plan. The City Council passed a resolution May 27, 2011 opposing that decision. Sound Transit subsequently informed city officials that light rail would only reach Federal Way if a future Sound Transit 3 ballot were approved.

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