

dilution of any citizen's right to vote." Dwyer ruled for the plaintiffs and gave city and county officials until April 1992 to adopt a new governance structure to assure electoral parity.

A special committee of 21 County and municipal officials began to meet to work out a compromise. After 10 months, they agreed on merging Metro and the County under an expanded County Council with 13 members. Their plan preserved municipal representation on special advisory committees whose endorsement would be required to initiate key policy actions on growth management and metropolitan services. It also required approval of any new comprehensive plan by municipal officials representing three-fourths of King County's population, which gave Seattle an effective veto over any plan it disliked. Finally, the merger plan transferred Metro's transit and water quality divisions intact and maintained them as discrete departments of King County government.

Some wondered who was swallowing whom under this proposal. The plan also called for a referendum on partisan elections to be placed on the ballot along with the county reorganization. This was a key condition for city officials, all of whom are elected in non-partisan races. The idea drew immediate and ardent opposition from the Democratic and Republican Party organizations in King County. For them it was 1952 all over again.

The balance between the merger and partisanship issues was upset when a majority of the County Council failed to support the partisanship referendum while approving the merger proposition and related amendment of the County Charter. Brain Derdowski, a newly elected Republican from the 3rd District, cast the deciding vote to the surprise of many. Derdowski is a leader of the "Sensible Growth Alliance" and participated in the County-Metro negotiations, so his support had been assumed.

City officials cried "treachery." Some, like Seattle Mayor Norm Rice, actively opposed the merger; others sat on their hands during the ensuing campaign. Meanwhile, past Metro officials such as Richard Page and Chuck Collins argued against merger. Despite these obstacles, the charter amendment and merger proposition both passed by narrow margins (52 and 51 percent respectively) on November 5, 1991, but the victory was fleeting for merger supporters. In an ironic flip-flop, 56 percent of Seattle voters favored merger but the proposition could only muster 47 percent approval outside the city limits, which killed the merger. It proved especially unpopular among residents of unincorporated areas -- the same people ostensibly disenfranchised by the Metro Council's composition.

Officials scrambled to work out a solution before Dwyer's deadline. Ideas were floated for new state law establishing a smaller 21-member Metro Council that would better reflect the County's population distribution, or for diluting the power of elected Metro Council members with more appointed members, or for creating a brand new regional agency to operate transit. Suburban cities pressed appeals against Dwyer's original ruling while King County filed a suit to challenge the dual-majority requirement as yet another breach of one-person, one-vote. Judge Dwyer rejected the latter suit in May 1992, and he warned local officials to get busy. If a new form of Metro governance were not approved by the Legislature or the voters by April 15, 1993, he would rule that only the votes of County officials sitting on the Metro Council would count in setting policy and directing the agency.

On August 12, 1992, a second "King County Regional Governance Summit" of elected officials produced a revised merger plan. This followed the outlines of the 1991 proposal (sans the divisive partisanship issue) but added new provisions to allow cities to sponsor regional legislation and to give citizens of unincorporated areas the right of initiative and referendum. The word "Metropolitan" was also appended to the name of County Council.

Local elected officials united behind the new plan, but without much enthusiasm, and opponents resigned themselves to accept a voter-approved merger as better than one imposed by the Courts. As Richard Page put it at the time, "People were tired."

On November 3, 1992, the County Charter amendment expanding the County Council to 13 members and assuming all of Metro's active and latent functions passed easily, 353,641 yes to 263,637 no. On the actual merger proposition, Seattle voters again proved more enthusiastic, casting 146,001 votes in favor to 85,788 against, compared to citizens in the balance of the County who favored the merger by a scant majority of 212,962 votes to 192,357.

But it was enough. The long march to create a unified and modern government for all of King County had reached its destination four decades after it began. The voters finally approved the sort of County government Jim Ellis envisioned in 1952 for no better reason than to be rid of the issue. Few reformers celebrated the achievement.

"Metro was attacked because it made the big decisions. King County is respected because it doesn't," Aubrey Davis comments with bitter sarcasm. Davis and others believe that the loss of

the problem-solving focus offered by the deliberation of local officials in a federated context will prove greater than any gain in County-wide scope and accountability. He and other Metro defenders especially dread the impact of party politics in shaping County Council decisions on transit and water quality.

Others are not so gloomy. Phyllis Lamphere, a long-time member of the Seattle City Council and Metro Council, sees a "golden opportunity to achieve a metropolitan area government" at long last. In this, the consolidation of "Metropolitan King County" is itself a first step, for the real boundaries of metropolitan Puget Sound extend far beyond the county line.

King County and Metro will tie the knot officially on January 1, 1994, but they will maintain separate bedrooms for two more years. Metro Water Quality and Metro Transit will operate within a separate Metropolitan Services Department of County government at least until 1996.

After that date, perhaps the merger will truly be consummated.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Metro Transit's second and final decade witnessed important innovations and investments. The system pioneered new transit strategies and services to reach suburban riders, implemented aggressive marketing campaigns, entered the Ridesharing and Vanpooling business, built new park-and-ride lots and transit centers, and negotiated far-reaching agreements with major employers and suburban jurisdictions to promote alternatives to automobile commuting. At the same time, Metro invested more than half a billion dollars in the world's first bus tunnel and North America's first dual-propulsion coaches to move tens of thousands of commuters and transit-dependent riders in and out of the central business district each day.

The initial surge in ridership from 1973 to 1980 demonstrated that there was a huge, unmet demand for transit. Why, then, was ridership so disappointing in the 1980s? Several factors can be blamed.

Foremost, the distribution of population and employment in King County shifted dramatically during the 1970s and 1980s. Seattle's population and employment base outside of downtown stagnated while the suburbs boomed with new low-density subdivisions and widely

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scattered office and manufacturing parks. This pattern of development was not amenable to traditional transit services, and the alternatives were labor-intensive and costly. Meanwhile, the state failed build to most of the HOV lifelines essential the success of an all-bus system.

Metro worked hard to meet this challenge, but it inherited a Seattle-centric system and it had no choice but to focus most of its capital and service on meeting the existing pattern of demand. Many critics have faulted Metro for this, but in the absence of new funds, the alternative would have meant the abandonment of tens of thousands of traditional passengers and it would have risked the strangulation of the region's economic heart. It is difficult to imagine that such a course would have been acceptable to anyone.

Metro's progress during the 1980s was hobbled by forces beyond its control. Despite these constraints, the Achilles' heel of Metro proved to be its own success.

Former Metro Executive Director Dick Page echoes many of the agency's partisans by asserting that when it assumed responsibility for transit in 1972, "Metro came of age. It moved from under the streets to run the most visible public service." Unfortunately, Metro's system of governance never adapted to the new standards of accountability demanded by such a high political profile. Former Metro Council Gary Zimmerman observes, "An argument could be made that taking on Transit was the beginning of the end. Metro ceased being a wholesale utility selling service to other governments, and became a retailer selling service directly to the people."

Starting in 1994, Metro will have a new board, a 13-member Metropolitan County Council and a County Executive elected directly by the citizenry. What they will do with Metro's 4,700 employees and crucial water quality and transit services remains to be seen, but don't be surprised if the Metro tail wags the County dog. Certainly, if the County fails to employ these new functions, along with its new powers for growth management, to bring order at long last to the metropolitan area, you can expect a new generation of reformers to seek to divorce transit and water quality from the County government. These things seem to move in cycles.

And so does transportation policy. After two decades of denial and debate, the region is moving again to embrace rail transit as the key to its future. In the process, plans are being laid which would create a new regional transit agency which would cross county lines and transcend local politics. Were an engineer from Stone & Webster suddenly transported forward a century in time to 1993, he would probably experience an electric tingle of recognition.

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Routes

Part V: Still Waiting for the Interurban

Growth Management, Regional Transit, and the Revival of Rail, 1982 -- ?

It took a little over a decade for rail to re-enter the transit policy debate. Some might argue it never left. Despite the skepticism of federal authorities and Metro's best efforts to make an all-bus system work, most assumed that some form of rail lay ahead for the region. It was only a question of when.

This proved to be a big question, and the tug-of-war between the advocates of sooner and of later stretched on through most of the decade. Along the way, a number of deadlines were set, each progressively nearer to the present as accelerating sprawl and decelerating traffic pushed the region towards a commitment.

Familiar antagonists faced off over the routes and schedule for rail transit: Seattle and suburban cities, King County and Metro, UMTA and the region, pragmatists and visionaries, pro-growthers and slow-growthers. The COG provided the primary arena for their combat, but the organization was torn apart in the process. It finally collapsed and was succeeded by a reconstituted Puget Sound Regional Council in 1990.

At the same time, the State Legislature underwent a remarkable conversion. In the same 1990 session, it empowered urban counties to manage growth and gave them the political and financial tools to build a truly regional transit system. Like the cavalry in a B-movie, the new legislation arrived at the last possible moment to rescue the beleaguered Puget Sound region.

Metro Transit's own plans and organizational structure were also affected by the twists and turns of the rail debate. As Metro faced certain assimilation by King County Government, the Transit Division hitched its future to the possible creation of a new, larger Regional Transit Authority.

As this is being written, there is substantial momentum for a regional commitment to rail, but also substantial opposition. Pierce, Snohomish and King Counties have voted to form a

Regional Transit Authority to implement a \$9.2 billion system plan, but the vote was close in King County and the entire state faces a tax revolt which could chill the climate for any major public investment for years to come. The new RTA has two years to submit a final plan and supporting taxes to the citizens of western Pierce, Snohomish and King Counties.

Many obstacles remain, foremost being the region's habit of talking its plans to death. The leaders, interests and citizens of metropolitan Seattle will have to undergo a dramatic transformation to achieve a politically durable consensus on rail in so short a time. They would have to abandon the civic ritual of endless debate and second-guessing and get serious about actually doing something. They would have to realize at long last that the cost of inaction really does exceed the price of action.

If history is any guide, it is a long haul to the fast track.

Railroaded?

In March 1981, the Puget Sound Council of Governments conducted a special study to explore the feasibility of "light rail" transit in the region ("light" refers to the passenger capacity of rail vehicles, not their weight). It concluded that growing traffic and transit volumes had made a rail approach workable, and the 1982 Long-Range Transportation Plan acknowledged the need to plan for "high capacity" transit in the region's busiest corridors. Of these, the stretch between Seattle and Lynnwood was clearly in the greatest need of immediate action, so the COG launched a "North Corridor Project" study with Metro Transit to evaluate alternative routes and technologies.

Not surprisingly, the project's steering committee, chaired by Jeanette Williams, quickly zeroed in on I-5 as the best right-of-way and light rail as the best technology. By 1983, PSCOG seemed ready to recommend construction of a \$1 billion system, but then Eastside representatives complained that they were being "railroaded" into a plan that offered them nothing. Bob Neir, Kirkland County Councilmember and chair of the Metro Transit Committee, felt the push for rail was dangerously premature and threatened to upset the delicate compromises supporting the downtown transit tunnel. He recalls, "They thought they were on a fast track, but they weren't. I had to slow them down."

At the behest of the suburbs, high capacity service options in the I-90 corridor and south to Federal Way were added to the Regional Transportation Plan, and Neir replaced Williams as chair

of an expanded "Multi-Corridor Project" study.

While this effort progressed, PSCOG faced an acute crisis as federal funding evaporated in the glare of Ronald Reagan's "New Federalism" and it lost its power of "A-95" review to compel local compliance with regional policies when federal grants were involved. Unlike Nixon's reforms of the same name, the new administration favored states over regions. COG director Mart Kask was forced to slash his staff by nearly half to 33. With no hope of alternative support, Kask decided that 14 years was enough and tendered his resignation effective June 1985. Despite all the interjurisdictional disputes and the repeated deferral of meaningful growth controls and mass transit, Kask believed "regionalism will come back because it has to."

This faith was shared by his successor, Curt Smelser who had toiled in the regional vineyards of Oregon and Eastern Washington for 16 years. He arrived in time for a new suburban brouhaha, led this time by Bellevue which howled in protest over new COG dues increases and an alleged anti-Eastside planning bias (Bellevue particularly resented the COG's opposition to its building its own dam on the Snoqualmie River). Everett joined Bellevue in threatening to secede, but no city actually did. It was a "shot across their bow," in the words of Bellevue Mayor Cary Bozeman.

Smelser got the message, and he began a long quest for new legislative authority and funding to hold the COG together and renew its mission. "I knew this animal wasn't going to work. The futility of the COG structure was obvious from the outset," Smelser explains. "Any regional council has three basic ingredients: the biggest county, the biggest city, and the suburbs. The coalitions vary, but it's always two against one." The dynamics of the COG were being driven "by the burbs, who felt neglected, and King County, a huge government in search of a mission. So it decided that it was the regional government."

Meanwhile, after two years of study, the Multi-Corridor Project ended in 1986 by ranking the original north corridor as the first priority followed by I-90 and I-5 south to Federal Way. At the same time, the Multi-Corridor Study postponed actually inaugurating rail service to the year 2020 and it recommended against any serious planning before 1993. The delay was necessary, says Bob Neir, because "we had to get smart and think through the next steps." These included finishing the tunnel and letting it work for a few years, the state's progress on HOV lanes, and Metro's decisions to locate the Northgate Transit Center and the North Operating Base on I-5 in expectation of their ultimate conversion to rail. Neir added, "We were also uncertain about future

land use and densities" needed to support rail. Also in 1986, Neir raised the idea of operating "commuter rail" service on existing commercial rail tracks between Seattle and Tacoma and/or Everett.

This incremental approach alarmed Seattle officials and COG staff who wanted to expedite rail. They involved pro-rail interests from outside King County to further expand the corridor study the following year. The Snohomish County Transit Authority (Sno-Trans, a planning and funding agency; transit service in the county is provided by Everett Transit and Community Transit) entered a new agreement with the COG and Metro for a "North Extension" (NEXT) study and Pierce Transit joined in to conduct a similar examination of Tacoma-Seattle (TAC-SEA) linkages. The process picked up more steam in 1988 when the State Rail Development Commission, chaired by Penny Peabody, recommended new mechanisms and funding authority for a regional transit system.

Another boost came in June 1988 from a public opinion survey commissioned by the COG. It revealed a broad consensus among citizens, business leaders and elected officials for a new rail system as the region's highest transportation priority. New members of the County Council such as Cynthia Sullivan, Ron Sims and Greg Nickels forced an "advisory" issue onto the November 8, 1988, ballot which asked, "Should public funding and development of a rail transit system to serve the residents of King County be accelerated so that service in King County can begin before the year 2000?" Voters answered yes by a margin of 391,161 to 180,152. Although this proposition did not deal with cost, taxes or other details, its 68 percent majority revealed broad public sympathy. Curt Smelser credits "the tremendous energy created by the positive views of the citizenry" for allowing the COG to overwhelm its rail skeptics and get planning out of neutral.

The COG had already gotten the message. In October, its annual Assembly shifted gears and amended the Regional Transit Plan to accelerate "planning for rail, on a schedule enabling operation of an initial phase by 2000." The Assembly designated the I-5 corridor from Sea-Tac International Airport to Northgate and the I-90 corridor from Seattle to Bellevue as the top priorities for "High Capacity Transportation" improvements.

Also on September 29, the COG approved a full lobbying drive to win state legislation to create local taxing authority to fund a rail system and other regional transportation investments. Despite vocal citizen and business support, this effort ended up as political road kill when Governor Gardner challenged the Legislature to a game of chicken over tax reform during the 1989

session.

It was one more frustration in a long chain, but all of that was about to change in ways and with consequences no one imagined.

Swept Away

Nearly twenty years after Ed Sands pioneered the idea of a growth policy plan, King County still did not have a binding document and had left most of the county zoned for one residence per acre. County Executive John Spellman's planning director, Karen Lane, recalls that the County was dragged into a new land use review in the late 1970s by, of all things, mounting complaints over stray pets. "In order to decide where dogs could and could not run free, the County had to decide what was rural, suburban and urban." King County began to draft a general framework and initiated detailed zoning for several sub-county "communities."

When John Spellman moved to the governor's mansion in 1981, finishing the new plan fell to his successor, former Seattle City Councilmember Randy Revelle. In 1985, the County approved a "Comprehensive Development Guide" which finally made some hard choices over the future pattern of land use. The new plan drew boundaries to confine development to existing urban areas and preserve the rural character of the balance of the County, the base zoning for which was scaled back to one residence per five acres.

While the Plan built some real fences around future growth, it sidestepped local conflicts over development by directing the preparation of detailed "Community Plans" which would prescribe the zoning for various sub-areas and "Functional Plans" for transportation, open space and other county-wide systems and resources. Anticipation -- or dread -- of these plans set off a developer stampede which overwhelmed and bankrupted the County's Building and Land Use Development division ("BALD" has since been reorganized). This in turn sparked a citizens revolt in many outlying areas which became formalized as the Sensible Growth Alliance. The fights over Community Plans helped Brian Derdowski win a seat on the County Council in 1989 and tipped the political equation toward a more restrictive stance on growth.

Earlier that same year, Seattle voters displayed their own anti-growth sentiments by approving the downtown "CAP," and a slate of "Vision Seattle" candidates threatened to dump several veteran members of the City Council. Slow-growth advocates and environmentalists also

formed a state-wide coalition to win passage of a "Balanced Growth Enabling Act" in the 1990 Legislature or, if nothing was done, take the issue to the state voters through an initiative campaign. Governor Gardner responded to these mounting pressures by appointing a "Growth Strategies Commission" in August 1989 to recommend alternative law to manage urban development.

The Governor tapped Richard Ford, former director of the Port of Seattle, to chair the new Commission. Ford had just completed a tour of duty as chair of the "PSCOG Review Task Force" which marked the beginning of the end of the COG as then constituted.

Old and new feuds over transportation and land use led King County to threaten once again to withdraw from Council. To ward off this secession, Smelser convinced the COG's current president, who was, ironically, King County Executive Tim Hill, to commission an independent, top-to-bottom review of the Council's mission, functions and organization in January 1989. Ford's committee reported back in July with a proposal to scrap the COG in favor of a leaner council armed by a new state enabling act to use regional transportation planning as an instrument of growth management. In October, the COG Assembly approved development of a "framework" for a new organization to succeed itself.

Amid all of this turmoil, the COG staff and officials pursued consensus on a growth policy framework for the four-county region. Dubbed "Vision 2020," this effort represented a blending of the COG's historically distinct planning processes to update the Regional Transportation Plan and its Regional Growth Strategy. Planning began in 1988 and it featured a massive public information and involvement campaign. The COG published hundreds of thousands of colorful tabloids describing a menu of five "growth/transportation alternatives" ranging from more of the same to a highly restrictive scheme limiting virtually all growth to the region's six established "metropolitan centers" (Seattle, Tacoma, Everett, Bellevue, Renton and Bainbridge) linked by rail transit.

As these choices were being weighed through an extensive public information and involvement campaign, an astounding thing happened in Olympia. Literally in the last hours of the Legislative session on April 1, 1990, House Speaker Joe King rammed through a new "Growth Management Act" (House Bill 2929). After decades of debate, Washington State, or at least its most urbanized counties, had the power -- and the obligation -- to adopt detailed comprehensive plans by 1994 which could dictate the land use choices of individual municipalities.

While the law "punted" many details to the Growth Strategies Commission for more work, it established the containment of sprawl and protection of open areas as a state priority, permitted local jurisdictions to levy "impact fees" to charge developers in advance for additional public costs created by their projects, and authorized creation of a "Regional Transportation Planning Organization" for the Puget Sound basin. The same Legislative session raised gas taxes by a nickel a gallon and companion law laid the foundation for the present Regional Transit Project (see below).

It was as if an ancient dam had given way and decades of pent-up pressure suddenly released. Even King confessed surprise at his own achievement. Although he had made growth management his top priority, he was not optimistic about winning concurrence from a Republican Senate for a meaningful land use law, a conservative bete noire, "but once we got people to the table, it came together."

Without minimizing Joe King's estimable legislative skills, he had an important ally: the state business community's fear that far more restrictive growth management law might be passed by initiative if the legislature did not act. King felt he had gained enough of what Balanced Growth advocates were seeking that they should drop plans for their initiative. They replied that the Legislature had left counties too much latitude to produce meaningless plans, and pressed ahead. Both sides claimed betrayal. Initiative 547 set a new state record for the speed and number of signatures by which it was validated during 1990, but then, in one of the historic flip-flops of a notoriously fickle state electorate, voters rejected it by more than two to one in November.

Shortly before that election, the COG's annual Assembly met on October 25, 1990 and approved a "preferred alternative" for Vision 2020. The adopted growth strategy focused growth in Seattle and a dozen or so "metropolitan" and "sub-regional" centers. To serve these, the COG also endorsed construction of 130-mile rail transit system to be built in phases at a total cost of \$3 billion to \$5 billion. The new plan also included 300 miles of new HOV lanes, a fleet of cross-sound passenger ferries, \$8.5 billion in highway and arterial improvements; 20,000 new park-and-ride spaces, \$200 million for bicycle, pedestrian and ridesharing improvements; and an aggressive new program of auto disincentives and transit inducements to manage transportation demand.

It was the COG's finest hour, and its last hurrah.

The organization was already scheduled to go out of business before July 1, 1991, and a committee chaired by County Councilmember Bruce Laing had completed a blueprint for the COG's successor. The deadline slipped due to the inevitable jockeying of local interests. The new constitution was massaged by a special task force co-chaired by Seattle Mayor Norm Rice and Pierce County Councilmember Barbara Skinner, and a final interlocal agreement was accepted by the key jurisdictions in August. This provided for a ruling Executive Committee of 21 members casting 19 votes weighted to reflect the distribution of the region's population and evenly balanced between representatives of cities and counties. The new agreement also preserved Vision 2020 as the region's guiding policy.

On September 30, 1991, the Puget Sound Regional Council was officially blessed by representatives from 55 jurisdictions, who elected Seattle City Councilmember Jim Street as the first president of the PSRC. Mary McCumber hired on as executive director on January 1, 1992, and the Council was in business.

Getting to the Station

Metro was no mere spectator in these dramatic events. As the COG's budget dwindled, Metro became the region's dominant transportation planner (although the COG retained the ultimate authority over federal funds as the Metropolitan Planning Organization).

Metro's planners realized early on that the transportation system would stagnate, if not ultimately collapse, unless it could provide for higher capacity on its primary north-south routes through Seattle. Most elected officials also recognized that they could not contain sprawl without providing for higher densities in the main urban corridors. Because the capacity of existing highway system, which was shared by both cars and buses, was already virtually exhausted during peak hours, the need for an alternative way to move large numbers of commuters was obvious. Thus, a consensus emerged on the need for new transit rights of way, which transcended secondary issues of vehicle technology or specific routes.

Metro was a key player in the debates over the North and Multi-Corridor studies. When these finally yielded a commitment to new transit rights-of-way, Metro planning gained a focus it had lacked since 1980. This was reinforced by broad citizen support for a rail system expressed during the "Metro Futures" planning cycle in 1987. By the time work began on a detailed "Metro 2000" transit plan in 1988, the tentativeness of MetroTRANSITION had given way to growing

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confidence in the rightness of rail, although this faith would be couched in the euphemism of "high capacity transportation" for several more years.

The Metro Council signalled this in September 1988 by adopting a resolution accelerating planning for a high-capacity system. The following March, Transit planners began to narrow options for preliminary segments and technologies for such a system employing either exclusive "busways" or rail, augmented by ridesharing and other "transportation system management" strategies. Metro 2000 developed and tested two bus-rideshare system alternatives in addition to rail.

In addition to these systems, in 1988 Metro entered into on-going discussions with Burlington Northern about using its freight tracks from Seattle to Tacoma for a "Dome to Dome" commuter train service, a la the Long Island and New Haven lines which have long served New York City. This line would terminate at King Street Station, which George Benson has promoted as a regional transit center, and permit easy transfer to Metro buses and the Waterfront Streetcar. Union Pacific has also expressed interest in leasing its tracks for such service, and Burlington Northern has suggested possible commuter rail service from Seattle to Everett.

On an even faster track, the State Rail Commission began in 1988 to investigate the adequacy of state systems for freight and for regional and interurban passenger services under the chairmanship of King County Councilmember Bruce Laing. Based on its report, the Legislature approved a new High Speed Rail Commission, chaired by Penny Peabody, to explore new technologies, including magnetic levitation, or "maglev," and more conventional "bullet trains." The Commission ultimately supported a route from Vancouver, Washington to Vancouver, British Columbia, but rejected service from Seattle to Moses Lake, where a new regional airport might be developed. This idea was prompted by the fact that Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is nearing its operating capacity. The issue has inspired a rancorous debate over Port of Seattle plans to build a reserve foul-weather runway at Sea-Tac and options for development of regional terminals at Paine Field or McCord Air Force Base, or an entirely new international airport.

Transit planners ventured into old waters when the Port of Seattle studied reviving Lake Washington ferry service in the late 1980s. The State Ferry System re-introduced passenger ferry service on Puget Sound in 1990. Snohomish County's Community Transit began talks with private contractors in August 1992 to organize a new "Mosquito Fleet" of passenger ferries to shuttle among Everett, Mukilteo, Whidbey Island, Edmonds, and Seattle.

As these various ideas bubbled, the Metro Council took another step toward rail on February 18, 1989, when it approved a \$15 million study of the requirements for beginning a phased implementation of the Multi-Corridor Project's proposed 101-mile light rail system in priority corridors. This action elicited protests from Bellevue business interests who feared that Metro was preparing to siphon off regional tax dollars chiefly for the benefit of the downtown and Northend (shades of the tunnel debate). Critics began attacking the whole idea of a rail and cited cost overruns and lower-than-projected riderships experienced by other cities' rail systems. These complaints were the opening shots in the barrage of words and statistics which continues to pound the Regional Transit Project.

Regional planners had their supporters as well, and none was more eloquent than *The Seattle Time's* long-time commuter columnist, Peyton Whitely. On October 28, 1990, he published a long reflection on the region's needs and problems.

Whitely calculated that Seattle area residents spend \$10 billion every year on their cars. "So don't tell me about cost-effectiveness. It's not important. Anything is more cost-effective than what we have." To rail critics, he replied --

"It's easy to argue that such systems don't work, that people don't ride them, that the risk is too great, that they'll be boondoggles. Maybe, but I'll tell you something that's certain.

"In the next 10 years, we're going to spend about \$100 billion on our car-based system. WPPSS, our failed nuke-plant projects, only cost \$8 billion.

"Spending that money will accomplish nothing. There will be virtually no new roads in this area. Our commuting times will be longer. The invisible erosion of our freedoms will continue. If someone passed a law saying you couldn't drive from Everett to Southcenter for three hours every morning, there'd be recall elections.

"Yet that's what's happened... nearly invisibly, your freedom, your mobility, has been taken from you, a few minutes a year, year after year.

"We can continue to waste that money. Or we can take part of it and risk it on building something permanent, something that has a chance of making a significant difference.

"Too big a risk? Too bad. Courage counts."

Reveille for Rail

Adoption of the Growth Management Act (as amended in 1991 by ESHB 1025) and the High Capacity Transportation Act (HB 1825) on March 3, 1990, created a whole new ball game. The latter and subsequent amendments (HB 2151 adopted on April 17, 1991, and ESHB 2610 adopted one year later) also brewed up a confusing new alphabet soup.

Briefly, the HCT laws authorize a "Joint Regional Policy Committee" (JRPC) comprising elected officials from each of the region's major transit systems and the director of the State Department of Transportation. The JRPC sets policy for Regional Transit Project (RTP), a special, interjurisdictional staff which actually prepares the Regional Transit System Plan (RTSP). The Committee also draws the boundaries for a Regional Transit District (RTD) embracing the communities served by the new system and the taxpayers who would be asked to shoulder its costs.

The new law also created an Expert Review Panel appointed by the Governor to provide an independent evaluation of the adequacy, financing and ridership projections of the RTP. Creation of this additional review was prompted by a report prepared in 1989 for UMTA by Don Pickerell, which faulted rail planners for habitually overstating ridership projections and understating costs. The ERP included independent economic and planning experts to guard RTP calculations against such "compound optimism." Governor Gardner appointed an old Metro hand, Aubrey Davis, to keep an eye on RTP number-crunching.

Once the final plan passes muster with ERP and JRPC, King, Snohomish and Pierce Counties have the choice of joining a Regional Transit Authority (RTA) which puts the plan and any necessary taxes on the ballot within the Transit District. At least two counties must sign on for the process to proceed.

Transit District revenue options include raising the local sales tax by as much as 0.9 percent, raising motor vehicle excise taxes by as much as 0.8 percent, and imposing a "head tax" on employers. Unlike Forward Thrust, which needed a 60 percent super-majority to finance public bonds, approval of such tax increases require only a simple majority within the Transit District.

Thus, the HCTA begat the JRPC, which begat the RTP, which is in the process of begetting the RTSP. Once blessed by the ERP, the RTSP can beget the RTA if at least two

counties are willing. The RTA then presents the RTSP and necessary taxes to the voters inside the RTD. It should also be noted that the RTA would directly control only the multi-county system; local transit authorities such as King County-Metro would retain management of their bus services, although they would benefit from RTA investments in HOV lanes, transit facilities and vehicles and receive operating subsidies to expand both services and rideshare incentives.

Several additional pieces of legislation helped set the stage for Rapid Transit System design and financing. The Federal 1990 Clean Air Act and the 1991 State "Commute Trip Reduction" law put the onus on employers to stop subsidizing parking and start actively promoting transit and ridesharing. The most dramatic shift in national policy came in 1991 with passage of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, or ISTEA.

Hailed by U.S. Senator Daniel Moynihan as the "the first transportation legislation of the post-interstate era," ISTEA marked yet another "New Federalism," or perhaps a return to an older version, by granting Metropolitan Planning Organizations such as the Puget Sound Regional Council greater flexibility in budgeting a projected \$151 billion of federal transportation aid through 1996. Given the federal deficit, it remains to be seen if such sums are actually appropriated by Congress, but ISTEA has dissolved the old policy and funding barriers separating highways, transit and rideshare programs.

As these pieces fell into place, Puget Sound transit agencies quickly set about organizing a Joint Regional Policy Committee. Snohomish County's three agencies, Sno-Trans, Community Transit and Everett Transit, signalled their desire to join the JRPC in April 1990, followed soon after by Pierce Transit, and they all signed interlocal agreements with Metro in August 1990. Snohomish County Councilmember Bill Brubaker, Bonney Lake City Councilmember Ric Silva, State Department of Transportation Secretary Duane Berentson joined Seattle City Councilmember Paul Kraabel (later succeeded by Fred Jarrett) as co-chairs. The JRPC quickly adopted Vision 2020 as their core policy framework and organized an interagency planning staff to prepare the Regional Transit Project. Dave Kalberer, who directed the Downtown Seattle Transit Project, was named RTP manager. Kraabel, with the assistance of Penny Peabody and Fred Jarrett, successfully lobbied for HCT amendments which gave the JRPC more flexibility to design a "system plan" as the basis for creation of the final Regional Transit Authority.

Metro Transit all but folded its long-range planning into the RTP. The new effort seemed to obviate the need to update the ten-year transit plan, and the horizon of the Metro 2000 process

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for county bus and rideshare services was pushed out to the year 2020 to coincide with the RTP. It soon became difficult to pinpoint where Metro planning ended and regional planning began. Similarly, the RTP became the lead engine pulling the Puget Sound Regional Council's transportation planning. Indeed, the region's entire transportation future has been hitched to the success or failure of the RTP. (The prospect of merger with King County later led Metro to retreat from this intermingling of local and regional planning because of transportation requirements imposed on the County by the Growth Management Act.)

Of course, the train had left the station long before the RTP began its work. The Multi-Corridor Project and its Snohomish and Pierce County extensions had preformed much of the primary right-of-way and capacity analysis. Many of the same individuals who had wrestled with these earlier decisions were now staff or policy-makers for the RTP, and they were eager to get abuilding. Metro Council chair Penny Peabody and Seattle City Councilmember Paul Kraabel pressed for an RTA election in the fall of 1991, but these ambitions jumped the track when Judge Dwyer ruled Metro's governance unconstitutional in September 1990.

The following month, RTP made its public debut with a round of community meetings to solicit public comment on problems, goals and alternative solutions. Project environmental "scoping" sessions were held around the region in February 1991, and the staff began generating alternatives for public comment during "forums" in October 1991. A questionnaire was also mailed to a regional sample of 2,400 households.

The JRPC was guided by earlier COG studies which projected that the region's population would grow by 52 percent to nearly 4 million in 2020. The traffic generated by this growth is expected to increase by 78 percent. This greater increase is fueled by several factors. First, even with new growth controls, most population and employment will locate in low-density suburbs outside of established urban centers. Second, the rise of the two-income family has put far more cars on the road per household, and actually lowered the average number of people per car per trip. Third, ample free parking and relatively cheap gasoline have blunted the impact of behavioral disincentives such as freeway congestion on auto use.

Thanks to these forces, analysts forecast that by 2020, the peak afternoon commute would stretch to five "rush" hours, and average freeway speeds would slow to a gastropodic 14 miles per hour. Beyond the irritation which would result from this devolution of transportation convenience, this regional slowdown extracts other prices. As Metro Transit Planner Bob Flor put it 1989,

"People perceive that driving alone is free, but congestion is the price we pay for that belief. That price ultimately translates into real economic costs like energy consumption, air and water pollution, lost productivity, and higher consumer prices." The JRPC calculated that these impacts would cost the region \$3 billion a year by 2020.

As the JRPC began its work, Texas A&M University released its latest annual rating of highway congestion. The study found Seattle-area to be the fourth worst in the nation, behind only Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. Seattle's traffic flow had deteriorated in a single year from sixth place with a rating of 0.95 (1.0 equals highway capacity) to 1.17. By comparison, LA's rating is 1.52.

It was clearly time to get moving.

Freeway Decongestant or Bypass Operation?

Even before the creation of the JRPC, regional planners concluded that there was no solution to congestion, only palliatives. In the late 1980s, COG studies indicated that construction of 18 new highway lanes, which can carry 22,000 peak hour trips, would result in congestion getting *only five* times worse by the year 2020, instead of ten times worse. Since there was neither land (18 lanes adds up to the width of a football field, not counting landscaped buffers and ramps) nor money (a billion-plus dollars per lane) nor political inclination (not in my back yard), an alternative was necessary to avoid gridlock during most of the typical workday in 2020.

This conclusion made new capacity the driving force behind the entire RTP and what some perceive as its predilection, if not prejudice, toward rail over other options. The system does not seek to remedy existing or anticipated congestion, nor is it structured to achieve explicit ridership goals or shares of the transportation market. Rather, the RTP's *raison d'etre* is to *preserve mobility* despite the persistence or worsening of automobile congestion, by giving as many people as possible a convenient and reliable alternative to the automobile.

For the first time, transportation planners could rely on the adoption of compatible land use controls to support their goals. Under the impetus and strictures of the State Growth Management Act, the jurisdictions of King County built on Vision 2020 to draw firm "urban boundaries" around the perimeter of existing suburbs, and Seattle Mayor Norm Rice pledged to develop a city

comprehensive plan which would absorb "more than Seattle's fair share of regional growth." King County adopted its core growth management policies in July 1992, and more detailed plans should be adopted during 1993.

To promote densification, transportation planners necessarily favor systems which can carry the greatest possible number of riders during peak hours. This goal also vectors the location of new transit capacity to serve those areas with existing or projected high residential populations and employment in support of growth management goals -- not lower density areas where dispersed destinations generate large volumes of automobile traffic. As former Metro Council Transit Committee chair Bob Neir puts it, "Transit has to go where the people are."

Facing these realities and forecasts, the JRPC established four general goals for a new regional transit system: ensure the ability to move around the region, preserve communities and open space, improve the region's economic vitality, and preserve environmental quality. To serve these goals, it concluded that transit would have to be able to serve 25 percent of all regional travel by 2020, including 40 percent of all work trips and half of all work trips to major communities. These are ambitious goals, and they require the capacity to carry large numbers of passengers during peak hours between dense neighborhoods and major employment centers.

System planning and environmental analysis narrowed the possible range of actions to three "Build" options, each of which adds capacity to the baseline "No-Build" scenario. This anticipates no new actions beyond modest expansions in existing transit services and completion of those improvements already planned. The "Transportation System Management," or TSM, option adds significant bus, ridershare and HOV improvements and incentives and disincentives to auto commuting.

The "Transitway/TSM" option expands on the TSM by building barriers to segregate bus travel on HOV lanes on I-5, I-90, and I-405 from other freeway traffic. The option also adds new transit rights-of-way for buses off the main highways.

Finally, the "Rail/TSM" option builds a 126-mile "rapid rail transit system" in the I-5 corridor from Tacoma to Everett, with a loop around Lake Washington from Burien to Renton, then north along 405 and back to I-5 at Lynnwood. This ring is bisected by rail in I-90 as far east as Issaquah, and a spur off 405 follows SR520 to Redmond. Additionally, the option provides "commuter rail" service on 40 miles of existing freight trackage between downtown Seattle and

Tacoma via the Kent Valley.

By "rapid rail" the planners denote tracked vehicles moving in their own exclusive rights-of-way, i.e., tunnels, elevated viaducts and tracks parallel with existing freeways. In order to maintain high operating speeds (averaging 40 miles per hour and 70 m.p.h. on longer stretches between stations) and to assure reliable service, the RTP's rail cars would never share freeways or surface streets with other traffic. Portland's MAX system, for example, must slow to 15 m.p.h. when leaves its right-of-way and enters downtown streets. Its operation in mixed traffic makes it "light rail" by definition.

Although RTP planners have deliberately avoided specifying any type of rolling stock, it is assumed that this system would use vehicles capable of carrying 140 passengers per car linked intrains of up to four cars. The RTP's commuter rail element would use conventional passenger cars pulled by a diesel locomotive over standard-gauge track. In all, the option calls for a fleet of 387 light rail vehicles, 50 commuter rail cars, and 11 locomotives operating by 2020. Local transit fleets would also grow from 1,800 buses and trolleys to 2,356, not to mention 3,140 vanpools and 680 special shuttle vehicles.

The Rail/TSM option represents a maximum system for purposes of economic and environmental review, but even so, the JRPC had to make some tough decisions along the route. In linking downtown Seattle with the University District, for example, the Committee decided against laying tracks on the I-5 Express Lanes in favor of a rail tunnel beneath Capitol Hill. Unfortunately, the tunnel would conjure unpleasant memories of the downtown disruption of the 1980s and provide a lightning rod for criticism of the plan's scope and cost. This was yet to come, and the JRPC reasoned that tunneling would allow the line to serve higher density neighborhoods without commandeering already crowded freeway lanes for the trains.

The last point touches on a key philosophy in the rail option: add transit capacity without sacrificing existing highway capacity. While most of the system parallels major freeways inside their established rights-of-way, the only freeway lanes the rail option actually uses are the two which have been reserved for transit on I-90 since adoption of the 3-2T-3 design in 1979.

The logic of capacity-building necessarily favored transitways or rail from the outset. Either right-of-way possesses the hypothetical ability of moving up to 22,000 people an hour in one direction. The number of buses needed to achieve this capacity via transitways, however,

would choke access ramps and overflow the downtown Seattle tunnel, and they would displace carpools and vans from HOV and express lanes. When these factors are calculated, the effective operating capacity of transitways drops by more than half to 9,400 passengers per hour.

To actually carry 22,000 passengers per hour, the rail system would need to run four-car, 560-passenger trains every 90 seconds. This would create daunting logistical hurdles in designing 78 stations and coordinating feeder bus and vanpool services but it is feasible, and planners do not anticipate that the system would "max out" for many years.

And so, to no one's surprise, rail emerged from the analysis as the only technology capable of truly augmenting the existing transportation system with significant new capacity. Rail was not prescribed as a freeway decongestant -- there is no such thing -- but as an arterial bypass which would allow the most people to escape gridlock. Now the Joint Regional Policy Committee had to convince the public to pay for the operation.

The Great Debate Begins

Rail is not cheap to build or operate. The capital cost for the Rail/TSM option pencils out at \$11.5 billion, more than twice the cost of the Transitway/TSM option. The annual operating cost for rail would also cost \$492 million, nearly one-fifth more than a rubber-wheel system.

Midway through its work, the JRPC received good news from Washington, D.C. In November 1991, Congress appropriated \$300 million to assist development of the RTP and \$25 million for "Dome-to-Dome" commuter rail. Congressman Jim McDermott credited U.S. Senator Brock Adams for "doing most of the heavy lifting on this." The region had expected far less initial federal support, and JRPC co-chair Fred Jarrett confessed, "I'm blown away."

Despite the prospect of significant federal aid (the RTP hopes for \$2 billion in all), local taxpayers would still have to bear the brunt of the system cost. The JRPC wrestled during the summer of 1992 to trim the proposal. Progress was not fast enough for State Representative Ruth Fisher, a Tacoma Democrat who led the fight for high capacity transit legislation. "I think it's time for them to get off the dime and make some of the hard decisions," she told the press in May 1992.

The JRPC took her advice. On September 18, 1992, the Committee announced its

"recommended" system. The plan scaled the Rail/TSM model back to 88 miles of rapid rail track served by 320 vehicles and 52 stations, at a capital cost of \$6.2 billion. It allocated \$1.2 billion for TSM and dedicated 22 percent of RTA revenue to fund up to \$2 billion for local transit expansions. The total budget, including operating subsidies, came to about \$9.3 billion through the year 2020.

The JRPC drew a Transit District which ran down the eastern shore of Puget Sound from Marysville to Parkland, with jogs and bulges to capture the major suburbs east of Lake Washington. Within this area, the new RTA would raise sales and MVET taxes sufficiently to generate the equivalent of 0.9 percent sales tax, which the Committee calculated would cost the average family about \$140 a year. The JRPC also made a commitment to price rail fares high enough to recover 40 percent of operating costs. The plan made some tough calls, and a Metro staffer would later tell the *P-I*, "It's like making sausage. You don't want to watch."

In unveiling the plan, Auburn Mayor Bob Roegner predicted, "Finally, we are either going to come to grips with mass transit or we are going to sit in freeway traffic the rest of our lives," JRPC co-chair Fred Jarrett was more circumspect. He told the Eastside's *Journal American*, "Now we're in the playoffs. Isn't that where the emotion and intensity really start?"

Right on cue, the mayors of Bothell and Renton blasted the plan for shorting their cities. The JRPC plan had eliminated the eastern arc of the Lake Washington loop from Renton to Bothell. Because this suburban route was not expected to attract significant passengers before 2020, the decision pared \$2 billion from the capital budget while making only a small dent in the total ridership projected for the Rail/TSM option.

Renton Mayor Earl Clymer was particularly bitter: "Renton is getting zip. Why should we pay for it without getting any benefit?" This reaction highlighted a central political paradox: how do you convince people who might not receive direct rail service to raise their own taxes to pay for it? The RTP bumped into the limits of regional altruism, and it hadn't even left the station.

To promote public interest and participation in meetings on the Draft RTP system environmental impact statement, which was issued on October 12, the JRPC's ad agency, Elgin Syferd DDB Needham, launched a campaign featuring "Avoidance Man." This hypothetical citizen doesn't want to hear the bad news about congestion or deal with the issues of regional transportation planning. This was the least of the JRPC's worries. Everyone was eager to jump into the fray, and community meetings attracted more than 1100 participants.

The arithmetic of the recommended plan and the EIS caused a great deal of confusion, and not a little suspicion. The draft EIS calculated only impacts and benefits for the maximum Rail/TSM option, which complicated comparisons with the smaller recommended system. This was compounded when RTP planners aired a "core rail" option which scaled the light rail component to 56 miles and a construction budget of \$4.6 billion, while preserving 97 percent of the projected rail ridership.

This was too much for *The Seattle Times* to swallow. It responded with a long and vitriolic editorial, which sneered, "Befitting the paper magic of the process, Metro estimates that the new model can carry 97 percent of the passengers at 57 percent of the cost of the old." No magic, actually. The core rail concept simply eliminated all but the highest ridership northend and cross-lake routes.

The *Times'* editorial reaction showed that the JRPC was not getting its capacity-building argument out. Worse, the RTP was now the object of political paranoia. The *Times* complained, "A smothering momentum has inhibited debate, and made it unfashionable -- if not politically risky -- to challenge Metro's rail vision." In truth, it had already become quite fashionable to challenge the rail plan. Everybody had a better, different, or cheaper idea, and no one was shy about promoting it.

The first major scheme to surface was the Puget Sound Light Rail Transit Society's "Rhododendron Line." The main features of this system are surface streetcar lines along Highway 99, I-5 and 405, augmented with "City Link" express bus service in future rail routes and expanded trackless trolley lines in Seattle. It is essentially a revival of the core Stone & Webster system, with new rolling stock.

The Rhododendron Line plan was soon followed by the more modernistic "R2B2" proposal. Conceived by two Seattle architects, Greg Hill and Preston Schiller, this plan calls for surface streetrail and commuter rail ("R2") and more aggressive bus and bicycle/pedestrian ("B2") services. Contrary to the science fiction pun of its name, R2B2 evokes the old streetrail system and some of the "small is beautiful" schemes circulated during the Forward Thrust debates.

These plans were forwarded in time for detailed analysis by the RTP staff in preparing the final system EIS. The review faulted both rail systems for failing to address the fundamental need

for new rights-of-way, slow operating speeds in mixed traffic, and low ridership-cost ratios. The sponsors of these proposals retreated from the field, at least temporarily, but other critics would take their places.

Meanwhile, the JRPC was heartened by a November 1992 public opinion poll which showed that 55 percent of regional voters supported the plan and 17 percent were leaning toward it. More encouraging still, nearly 70 percent of respondents indicated that their support did demand "some benefits right away" and 93 percent agreed that "we may need to make some sacrifices today so that this will be a good place for our children and grandchildren to live."

This magnanimous spirit was not universal. In January 1993, the "Transportation Discussion Group" fired a 56-page broadside ripping the RTP from stem to stern.

A caucus of rail skeptics formed in 1991 with the support of Eastside developer, Kemper Freeman, Jr. and other business interests, the TDG recruited an impressive roster of transit experts, including frequent Metro consultant Bill Eager and frequent Metro critics, U of W professors Richard Morill and Jerry Schneider. In January 1993, the TDG fired a broadside at the RTP, titled "Heading Down the Wrong Track."

The 56-page critique attacked every aspect of rail and turned selected conclusions from the RTP's own EIS against the project. In essence, the Group argued that rail system costs historically ran over budget that the riderships fell below forecasts; that the RTP was a Seattle-centric solution to a suburban problem, since intrasuburban travel represented the fast growing sector of auto use; that rail is actually an old technology that became obsolete due to lack of ridership; and that more HOV lanes and buses offered a cheaper "solution" to congestion. To make its point about RTP costs, the Group report inflated the budget to 2020 dollars and added in all finance charges. Like adding the mortgage interest to the "price" of a house, this calculation caused the "real" RTP cost to balloon to \$32 billion.

RTP planners and supporters mounted a spirited rebuttal, beginning with several erroneous TDG assertions, such as the claim that the light rail tracks would take over freeway lanes and "will actually increase traffic congestion" This stung, since planners had been so careful to avoid precisely such displacement. Similarly, the RTP challenged the claim that the "rail system will inconvenience all transit riders" by reorienting bus service to serve rail stations. The TDG ignores the 40 percent increase in general bus service proposed by the JRPC's recommended plan and the

fact that rail would take over service on the most heavily travelled commuter routes, freeing up buses for other destinations.

The TDG made much of the "Pickerell Report" but failed to mention that the State Expert Review Panel had conducted a thorough "peer review" of the RTP's budget and ridership estimates and had certified their realism. Then there was TDG's hyperbolic inflation of the RTP's costs and its rhetorical ignorance about the distribution and character of auto travel and transit's market share. In reporting the RTP's own calculation that rail would carry about 3 percent of all trips in the region by 2020, the TDG neglected to distinguish between commuting and other vehicle travel. The RTP rebuttal notes that only 11 percent of current travel happens on I-5 and I-90 "but few would argue that these investments are irrelevant." The RTP projects that rail and buses will carry 16 percent of all work trips to and from major activity centers.

Understandably, RTP staff was skeptical of the TDG's alternative remedies, which included more HOV lanes and carpooling, fixing "pinch points" such as Mercer Street, "deregulate private-sector transit" such as taxi cabs, and "use market-oriented approaches" to penalize polluters, parking lots and peak-hour commuters. The best that could be said of these ideas is that the feasible ones are already in practice or have been tried with no success. In truth, none of them solves the real problem.

Finally, the TDG report cites the astounding example of Houston, which has added 2,675 miles of new roads and freeway lanes to reduce congestion "without rail." Even if new highway construction were possible in the Puget Sound basin, it would cost far more than a rail system. The State Department of Transportation recently estimated that completing the highway system laid out in the 1967 Regional Transportation Plan would cost \$32 billion in today's dollars -- three times the RTP's total budget.

The tone of the TDG's polemics signalled that the political debate over rail was about to get very nasty. It also showed that the RTP's central theme of new capacity to preserve mobility was not being heard.

On January 25, 1993, King County Executive Tim Hill called for phasing in RTP with an initial \$3 billion increment including commuter rail and light rail over I-90. Puget Sound Regional Council president Jim Street replied that Hill's scheme had put some of the highest cost, lowest ridership segments first. JRPC co-chair Brubaker derided the proposal: "My general reaction was,

"Tim, you have never been part of the process."

This could not be said of a coalition of civic and environmental leaders who ripped the RTP as "fundamentally flawed" on February 13, and released a proposal for "starter" rail line linking downtown with the University District, Sea-Tac or Bellevue. They called themselves and their plan, "Sound Metropolitan Area Regional Transit" or "SMART" (an acronym once considered for Metro Transit). SMART included many members of the RTP "Sounding Board," an assembly of representatives from 38 civic and environmental organizations convened in June 1992 under the aegis of U of W School Institute for Public Policy to educate the public on transit issues and monitor the RTP. Such proximity made the SMART critique sting all the more.

On March 3, 1993, the JRPC issued the final system environmental impact statement. The Washington Environmental Council and Sierra Club legally challenged its adequacy in calculating air pollution caused by park-and-ride lots. A private consultant also criticized RTP's neglect of his idea for electric shuttles to transport people from their residences to rail stations (a similar notion had been aired by Seattle Mayor Norm Rice, who proposed a "LINC" system of neighborhood shuttle vans to serve city rail stations). A state hearing examiner rejected both challenges on April 19, and none of the parties appealed their cases to the courts.

This left the field clear for the Joint Policy Review Committee to make its final decisions for the design and budget for the Regional Transit Project on April 30. As this deadline approached, it became clear that Governor Mike Lowry's plan for a sales tax on gasoline to fund substantial state rail aid for the RTP was DOA in Olympia.

On April 19, 1993, Tim Hill released a letter scolding the JRPC for "unnecessarily delaying county action to build a high capacity transportation system." He demanded a moratorium on studies and an immediate start on commuter rail construction. Since the County Executive must stand for re-election this fall, most observers discounted the move as electoral posturing.

Observers were equally cynical about a KING Television News special on the regional plan which aired the following day. The RTP had paid KING \$40,000, or about a fourth of the cost of the hour program. Both KING and the RTP stoutly defended their integrity, but the flap did nothing to help the credibility of either (a similar fate no doubt awaits this history).

Far more undermining was an April 25, 1993, editorial in *The Seattle Times*. Under the

headline, "Make Progress, Not Tracks," the *Times* declared that it was time to "quit stewing about pricey rail. This region can move in the 21st century efficiently and comfortably aboard an expanded fleet of buses." The editorial scoffed at the "top-down, do-everything plan" and asked "Why are all the detractors so animated and the proponents so ingrown and low-key?" Observing pointedly that "Promotional campaigns flush with cash are no substitute for genuine grassroots enthusiasm," the *Times* warned, "This is a recipe for disaster at the polls."

Although the Sunday edition of *The Seattle Times* enjoys a readership of 300,000-plus, its editorial comments were clearly aimed at an audience of just 21 -- the members of the Joint Regional Policy Committee. The following day, the Boeing Company cast its "vote" by publically criticizing rail in its employee newsletter.

With this chorus of skepticism rising in the background, the JRPC began a month of deliberations to finalize its system plan by May 28. The Committee stuck to its basic system plan, but it made crucial accommodations to enhance the RTA's authority to adjust the final plan. According to Fred Jarrett, the JRPVC "disengaged" the rail and bus components to give the RTA more flexibility and emphasized the "alternatives analysis" phase of project planning to allow the financial arrangement to reflect new state and federal funding in phasing rail construction.

The JRPC finished its discussions on May 28 and submitted its final report to Pierce, Snohomish and King Counties on July 9, which activated a statutory 45-day clock for approval or rejection. Both the *P-I* and *Times* urged the counties to take the next step, although the latter newspaper repeated its reservations about the System Plan. Key members of SMART endorsed the RTA, while the Transportation Discussion Group continued its anti-rail harrangue.

Support for the RTA was solid in Pierce and Snohomish Counties, and their Councils endorsed the new authority by unanimous votes on June 22 and July 8 respectively. The King County Council's consideration proved to be cliffhanger. The RTA passed by a single vote on July 6, with members Greg Nickels, Cynthia Sullivan, Paul Barden, Bruce Laing and Larry Phillips saying aye, and Ron Sims, Brian Derdoswki, Kent Pullen and Audrey Gruger saying nay.

The County Executives of each county must now appoint 17 members to the RTA board, with 10 from King, four from Pierce, and three from Snohomish. All of these members must be either a county or municipal elected official. State Transportation Secretary Sid Morrison automatically becomes the 18th member. This body will have two years from the date of its first

meeting to secure voter approval of a final plan and tax proposal from the residents of the RTA benefit area. If their first proposition fails, they get only one more chance. If the second proposition fails, the Regional Transit Authority would go out of business, and the great metropolitan transit debate would return to square one.

Meanwhile, a well-orchestrated tax revolt is slouching toward the ballot box in the fall of 1993. Although the tax and spending cuts proposed by Initiatives 601 and 602 would have only a tangential impact on transit funding, their success or failure will have a profound effect in either weakening or stiffening the courage of local officials to ask their constituents to fund the largest single public works project in state history.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

The faithful reader who has traveled to the end of the line with this history will likely feel compelled to quote Yogi Berra, "It's deja vu all over again." The themes, interests, ideas, errors, criticisms and even some of the individual players which have emerged in the course of the regional rail debate are all very familiar from the Merger arguments, the creation of Metro Transit in 1972, and the Forward Thrust battles of 1968 and 1970.

They echo, consciously or otherwise, the original Metro debate of 1958, and the struggles to found and then dismantle streetrail and the interurbans between 1884 and 1940. Not only does history repeat itself, so do most of its participants.

The Regional Transit Project steered into some very predictable trouble. Some of this was avoidable. Clearly, the RTP's own public outreach and promotion has miscast the issue of congestion and the impact of rail upon it. It has inadvertently created expectations it cannot fulfill, and given its enemies ammunition. The promoters of the Regional Transit Authority would be wise to take a cue from President Clinton's campaign and post large signs around the office which read, "It's the capacity, stupid!"

But even if the latest generation of transit visionaries were miraculously blessed with the gift of precognitive hindsight, it would still face the same general array of critics, cavils and carping. Foremost, among these is the historical aversion of metropolitan Seattle to real planning. The region loves to talk about plans, but it does not like to adopt them. Blame this on a native contrariness and a history of rebellious forebears, populist constitutions and government charters

which encode a suspicion of concentrated power, and the corresponding absence (or disinterest) of a critical mass of civic and economic interests able to persuade the public to invest in its own progress without the prod of an impending crisis.

A second key factor is the widespread ignorance of the dynamics of transportation policy itself, which have very little to do with simply getting around. As Peyton Whitely observed in a 1990 column, "I'd suspect the person who writes Chevy's Beretta ads has a greater effect on the public transportation consciousness than all the studies done by the Puget Sound Council of Governments."

Transportation economics is always about something else: selling real estate, or electricity, or cars, or buses or bonds. Transportation planning is usually dominated by "secondary issues" such as protecting the economic viability of central business districts or creating markets for suburban subdivisions and shopping malls. Transportation may be the medium for these debates, but it is seldom the message.

Finally, there is human nature itself. The political species can be divided into two sub-orders: those who can explain why nothing will work, and those who can make anything work. Unfortunately, there are a lot more of the former than the latter, and the public becomes so fearful of making a mistake that it commits the greatest blunder of all, which is to do nothing.

The story of public transportation in metropolitan Seattle is far from over. Something will be done to solve today's problems, maybe not tomorrow, or the day after, but eventually. It will probably be too little and come too late, and the citizens of the future will look back on our era and ask, "Why didn't they see this coming."

The answer is, we did.

End (July 9, 1993)