



Regional Transportation Investment District of King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties

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To: RTID Executive Committee
Fr: Kjristine Lund, Executive Director
Re: Recommendation on Ballot Timing and Next Steps

Recommendation

Staff is recommending that adoption of a final RTID Plan be postponed due to an unfavorable climate for voter approval in November 2004. Based on recent public opinion research conducted in May 2004 of 500 voters in King, Pierce, and Snohomish Counties by Davis, Hibbitts and Midghall, there is strong evidence that voters will not support the tax increases needed to finance the proposed RTID projects. A more favorable climate is needed to succeed with a voter-approved package.

While transportation remains the top local issue, Hibbitts said people are concerned about the economy and are skeptical about how the money will be spent. People do not believe they are getting their money's worth from government spending, not limited to transportation issues.

Projects and Benefits

The RTID list of projects now constitutes the region's most up-to-date consensus on the highest-priority road and transit projects in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. Building from the Puget Sound Regional Council's Destination 2030 and WSDOT plans, the RTID Executive Board has identified the projects that can serve as the basis for the region's future transportation improvement initiatives. Project scopes have been clarified and can be better described to the public. The RTID completed an analysis of the performance of individual projects and the system. Those results can be used to help the public better understand the results of investments.

Accountability and Cost Review

US Cost completed an evaluation of the cost estimates for the RTID proposed project investments. These results were generally positive with some suggestions for further actions to increase the likelihood of delivering projects within budget. The RTID statute includes accountability measures that make it important to update cost estimates and validate those costs close to the date of voter action because those costs for each project become fixed. Therefore, while project costs and scopes were defined for a November 2004 election, those costs will need to be updated for any future election date.

Recommendation for Next Steps

The following list of activities should be explored with legislative leadership and the Secretary of Transportation to continue momentum for financing necessary transportation improvements in the region.

Assess research for solutions that can succeed. RTID's research is extensive – two public opinion polls conducted roughly six months apart and two sets of focus groups conducted last fall. Developers of future transportation solutions should assess the research with open minds, apart from RTID's framework, to determine key factors for success before starting to craft initiatives.

Provide a report to the legislature on the pros and cons of the existing statute for RTID. The experience of the RTID members can provide valuable feedback to the legislature as they examine ways to address the state's responsibility for infrastructure, including ways to make regional funding most effective.

Clarify the funding package. Determine the package most likely to be accepted by the Legislature and public. Any errors should be made on the side of simplicity.

Build strong assurances of accountability. RTID contained such assurances in its revenue projections, cost reviews, and requirements that projects remain within a certain funding limit or return to voters for approval. These assurances however need to be examined to ensure they are the most efficient way to deliver projects – the sound bite must be consistent with the best practices for project management. Future initiatives should contain similar assurances of accountability, which should be communicated extensively to the public and other audiences.

Consider educating in advance of the next initiative. The rest of this year could productively be spent on a communications program to educate the public and elected officials on transportation needs, value of potential projects, and funding options. To be most effective, such a program should be a multi-interest effort, with the private sector heavily involved. As indicated by polling related to RTID, a government-only effort alone is unlikely to have the trust needed to gain public credibility. A communications program could lay the foundation for consensus to develop and approve a transportation solution to get the region's people and goods moving again.

Background

The objective of the Regional Transportation Investment District Plan as authorized by the Washington State Legislature is to finance transportation investments in Pierce, King, and Snohomish Counties that will improve mobility and protect lives. The investments are to be at least 90% on highways of statewide significance, and no more than 10% on local streets and roads.

The impetus for regional financing was the reality that between 1992 and 2002 the State of Washington had not authorized new taxes for highway needs in the region. The Puget Sound region has a backlog of unfunded transportation needs last measured at \$40-45 billion, including highways and transit.

The RTID legislation assumed that funding would primarily be dedicated to road investments, including HOV lanes and bus capital purchases. The assumption was that regional high-capacity transit-taxes are already authorized for capital and operations and that transit districts also have existing local tax authority.

The RTID enabling legislation required that specific taxes and projects be approved by a majority of the voters in the three-county area. The statute allows three failed elections before revoking the authority to create an RTID. Election analysts agreed that a successful measure would require a super majority of yes voters in Seattle and Bellevue, based on prior voting records on transportation issues. They also agreed that a general election is the best time for a large transportation package, and that a presidential election is optimal.

Public opinion research in the three-county area conducted during the fall of 2003 showed that voters expect a balanced transportation system and that their highest priority projects include both transit and road investments. As a result, the RTID Executive Committee proposed a plan that would include a joint ballot with Sound Transit to provide the public with a transportation package that responded to local priorities within the region.

Recent public opinion research conducted in May 2004 showed that voters are pessimistic about the economy and that the proposed RTID tax package costs too much. In addition, the research showed that the public is skeptical about funding by government in general being spent efficiently and effectively. The public opinion research results do not absolve public officials from the responsibility for addressing transportation infrastructure needs. The results of the research demonstrate the need to provide greater public information if voter approval will be required for transportation financing, or alternatively to re-design a financing mechanism to minimize the no voters.