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Snohomish-Woodinville excursion train an 11-mile opportunity

By Bruce Agnew and Karen Guzak

It's been a tough time with a double dose of funding challenges for transit. Local agencies like Community and Everett Transit have reduced services because of the enduring economic downturn. And Congress eliminated "earmarking" for special projects and tightened transit funding in new, two-year legislation.

We believe that every financial crisis represents an opportunity. Public-private partnerships to leverage taxpayer-funded transportation programs with private development and infrastructure investment are the new political reality. We have an opportunity in the eastside, in the Snohomish to Woodinville area, to make such an investment. Let us explain:

Nationally, public-private partnerships are working for toll roads, bridges and freight projects ... and now transit. The Denver area's FasTracks program is adding 140 miles of rail and bus service by leveraging a 2004 voter-approved sales tax with federal loan guarantees and private sector partnerships, including Denver's Union Station.

The power of the real estate market to marry common goals in transportation and land use is also emerging as a political force. Nationally, real estate professionals (locally led by the Urban Land Institute) and transit advocates co-promote "walkable, transit oriented communities" in traditional suburban, mid- and small-sized town centers. They say resuscitating the real estate industry through changes in federal tax and transportation policies is the fastest way to general economic growth.

They point to younger workers turning away from auto-dependent strip malls and endless cul-de-sacs to mixed-use housing near town centers with recreational, transit and entertainment options.

Our Puget Sound Regional Council is a national epicenter for transit-oriented development focused on Sound Transit's light rail program. Their Vision 2040 encourages smarter planning around existing and new transportation corridors, including the Eastside rail/trail corridor.



These railroad tracks, shown in March 2008, pass over the Snohomish River en route to downtown Snohomish. They are part of a corridor that could be upgraded for an excursion train between Snohomish and Woodinville. (Dan Bates / Herald file 2008)

An instant winner for transit-deprived east Snohomish County residents is the existing 44-mile Eastside rail corridor (Eastside

TRailway) formerly owned by Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway. It connects Eastside communities from Renton in the south to Snohomish in the north.

The Port of Seattle acquired the 44 miles for \$81 million and King County, Sound Transit, Kirkland, Redmond, Puget Sound Energy and the Cascade Water Alliance have purchased sections or easements in the 33-mile Woodinville to Renton section for future commuter rail, trail development and utilities.

There currently is a weekly run with a rail operator under contract with the Port of Seattle for freight and excursion rail between Snohomish and Woodinville. The operation is emerging from bankruptcy with new potentials. Meanwhile, we are unfortunately losing sections of the valuable rail corridor in King County as the state transportation department has severed the Wilburton rail overpass to widen I-405 south of Bellevue, and Kirkland and Redmond are tearing up tracks for trail development.

Call to action for Snohomish County

Here is the opportunity we see: Snohomish County needs to step up and make the 11-mile section from Snohomish to Woodinville (which is outside of the Sound Transit taxing district) an immediate national case study for the power of public-private partnerships.

The simultaneous upgrading of the existing rail corridor and addition of an adjacent trail will bring jobs and increase real estate values, help concentrate growth around town centers, save farmlands and enhance public health by getting families outdoors to walk, bike and even ride horses.

Expanding service in this rail/trail corridor needs no new right of way, is useable in the

next few years, and would not require new taxes.

The Eastside TRailway is part of a national phenomenon known as Rails with Trails. Previously, the Rails to Trails program removed tracks and built trails on abandoned corridors. Fewer public resources to build trails drove advocates to embrace excursion, freight and commuter trains to bring private sector funding to trail development. Rails and Trails are proven to be compatible in multiple instances. From California to Vermont, over 1,000 rail and trail projects are moving forward partly financed through the "value capture" of new taxes to pay for stations, trails and walkable streets.

Pilchuck District to Woodinville wineries

Poised for redevelopment, the city of Snohomish is transforming 86 acres between the Pilchuck River and the historic downtown district into plans for a compact, walkable area made up of a mix of single-family houses, town homes and commercial buildings up to five stories high. Designated as the "Pilchuck District," it will be pedestrian friendly with access to the 29-mile Centennial Trail going north, and now the Eastside TRailway heading south.



This artist's rendering represents the type of town homes envisioned for the Pilchuck District development planned by the city of Snohomish. The district would have access to the rail line. (Contributed by city of Snohomish)

Through a partnership with Forterra, the new Pilchuck district is a "Transfer of Development Rights" receiving site and developers will be able to build more dwelling units in exchange for preserving open space elsewhere in the county.

Our southern bookend of the excursion train and trail is the city of Woodinville, home of over 80 wineries and, like Snohomish, home to a rich agricultural tradition. City leaders envision a "Wine Village" -- a 24-acre tourist district dedicated as a trading post for wineries east of the Cascades. Hotels and residential units are close to the Sammamish Trail (and Eastside TRailway), recreational fields, and Chateau Ste. Michelle entertainment.

The city has improved transportation infrastructure and established a binding site plan with permitting for wine-tasting facilities.

Financing the Eastside TRailway in the near term to upgrade the Woodinville-Snohomish rail for excursion trains: We have encouraged the Port of Seattle to seek state funding for \$2 million to upgrade the tracks to accommodate excursion trains. Internationally known rail companies such as Iowa Pacific Holdings are interested in freight and excursion trains if the current rail operator bankruptcy is resolved and the Port will maintain the tracks.

In addition, develop the trail: Snohomish County spent \$1 million a mile to design, engineer and construct the 29-mile Centennial Trail. How about a 2-mile demonstration trail with King County in Woodinville to showcase how active trail use can coexist with freight and excursion trains? Private fundraising should be encouraged as a community builder. Interlocal agreements for pooled private developer funding: Cities and developers

along the corridor could dedicate a small portion of the enhanced tax revenues coming from intensified development to a corridor pool for trail construction and maintenance and station development. Snohomish and King County should spearhead an effort to bring cities, community groups, tourism associations, recreational alliances and utilities to prioritize a straightforward interlocal agreement to coordinate the mix of public and private resources under a master plan.

Environmentally friendly transit for cross-county commuters: For east Snohomish County residents, direct bus service to Eastside employers is virtually nonexistent, forcing residents into long delays on Highways 522 and 9. Microsoft runs their Connector buses to pick up employees. How about a Microsoft commuter-rail car?

High-technology diesel multiple unit (DMU) commuter trains operate nationally on older freight lines without the expensive electrified overhead lines characteristic of light rail. DMUs are quiet as a bus, carry 24 bikes and meet stringent EPA air emission standards. Two-train car sets sell for \$7 million. Regional studies of ridership estimates compare favorably with similar-sized corridors nationally.

Sound Transit had a \$50 million budget (approved by the voters) in 2008 for such a public-private partnership for the Eastside Rail corridor. They could pay for capital investment and a private rail operator (also managing freight and excursion trains) could deliver passengers to their system from outside their taxing district and maintain the tracks -- without a public-operating subsidy. It was dropped because of budget constraints. Perhaps we can reclaim this to jump-start further partnership investments.

Start with the Woodinville-to-Snohomish excursion train, and see those communities blossom with new economic growth. Celebrate our wineries, our beautiful countryside, and our historic city of Snohomish. These trains are clean, environmentally sound, and efficient --

combining rails with trails. This is the promise of the future that we can begin now.

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