

Sound Transit to invest \$2.1M in rail, bus ridership research

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By Mike Lindblom, Seattle Times transportation reporter

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"Finding out what will get people out of their cars and into our services is going to require some deep research and talking to a lot of people in our region," said communications Director Ron Klein.

The board's operating committee voted unanimously Thursday to pay EMC Research up to \$1.5 million over five years, and Resource Systems Group up to \$630,000 over three years. EMC will analyze public and customer attitudes, while Resource Systems will measure the effects of fares, fuel prices, tolls, congestion and parking on traveler choices.

Meanwhile, neighboring Pierce Transit and Community Transit are cutting buses. King County Metro is considering a \$20 car-tab fee to preserve bus service plus the roomier, more frequent RapidRide buses voters approved five years ago.

Sound Transit has announced a long-term \$3.9 billion shortfall in its \$18 billion, 15-year expansion plan, and the possible scrapping of a future station in Federal Way, but it has ample cash for now.

"If the economy weren't so bad, our partner agencies would want this information as badly as we do," Klein said.

Community Transit Chairman Dave Gossett said there's no way his agency could find \$2 million for market research. But it has paid consultants to examine who rides which bus lines — data now being used to make tough decisions, he said.

"Any transit agency is a business, and it's a business that needs to attract customers, just like GM or any other business," Gossett said.

Ridership on Seattle-area Link light rail increased in March to 21,341 average weekday trips, 18 percent above March 2010. That's still below an original goal of more than 26,000 trips. Recession is one factor, and a decision to charge fares downtown likely dissuaded some, a spokesman said.

Souder commuter trains in March carried an average 8,799 riders a weekday, down more than 4 percent from a year earlier, as mudslides closed the Everett line for a week.

EMC already does annual customer-satisfaction surveys for Sound Transit, but officials say they lack a clear picture of people who don't ride.

That knowledge could help target advertising dollars more effectively, Klein said.

After the Roads and Transit plan lost a regional vote in 2007, an EMC poll indicated a transit-only package might pass. That influenced the agency's decision to try again in 2008 and win.

Sound Transit won't dwell on certain bus lines, such as the 590 from Tacoma to Seattle, that are full, Klein said.

But there's plenty of room on Souder and Link. "We have trains that are going to run whether they are full or half full," Klein said. "We want them completely full."

Operations-committee members voting yes Thursday were Dave Enslow, mayor of Sumner; Claudia Thomas, of Lakewood; John Marchione, of Redmond; and Paul Roberts, of Everett, who each hold local elected office.

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Light-rail ridership

Unlike bus routes, Link light-rail ridership peaks in summer, when soccer, baseball and festivals add riders to the commuter base. Thousands of people make holiday trips to the SeaTac/Airport Station. Counts are higher than last year but trail initial forecasts of 26,600 weekday trips.

