

CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION

Briefing on East Link Connections

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DIRECTION NEEDED FROM COUNCIL**DIRECTION**

Service planners and engagement leads from King County Metro (Metro) and Sound Transit will provide an update on the *East Link Connections* project, including proposed changes for redistributing transit service in Bellevue as light rail expands.

Staff is requesting Council direction to prepare a letter of support for the routes with proposed changes with some recommendations for improvement.

RECOMMENDATION

Direct staff to prepare a letter of support for Phase 2 routes with proposed changes with some recommendations for improvement.

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

Metro and Sound Transit are co-leading *East Link Connections*, a process for improving transit connections throughout the Eastside as light rail service expands. Approved by Puget Sound-area voters in 2008, Sound Transit's multi-billion-dollar East Link light rail service, or the 2 Line, will connect downtown Seattle to Redmond Technology Station in 2023. In 2024, the Downtown Redmond Link Extension will add two more light rail stations to serve Marymoor Village in southeast Redmond, and downtown Redmond. Projected ridership for East Link and the downtown Redmond extension is expected to be 43,000 – 52,000 daily riders by 2026, based on pre-COVID-19 data.

East Link implementation represents a transformational opportunity to reimagine the current bus network in Bellevue, respond to changing mobility needs, and improve mobility and access for historically underserved populations. *East Link Connections* will deliver an updated transit network proposal that integrates with and complements Sound Transit's new Link light rail service. Metro briefed City Council on *East Link Connections* in January.

Metro and Sound Transit identified the following goals for the project:

- Improve mobility for priority populations, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; people with physical and/or cognitive disabilities; people with low- to no-income; people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity; immigrants and/or refugees; and people with linguistic diversity.

- Equitably inform, engage and empower current and potential customers.
- Deliver integrated service that responds to Link expansion, including:
 - Minimize duplication of bus service with Link;
 - Improve connections to Link; and
 - Be consistent with Metro Connects long range plan, and current and future mobility needs.

The *East Link Connections* project began Phase 1 in December 2020 by identifying community stakeholders, needs and priorities. During this phase, transit agency staff assessed transit needs by reviewing reports and interviewing key stakeholders. One input was Bellevue's Transit Master Plan (TMP), which was adopted by City Council in 2014. The TMP is a comprehensive look ahead at the system that will be required to meet Bellevue's transit needs through 2030. The TMP prioritizes routes to and from Bellevue's major activity centers where transit demand is high and is expected to increase.

The TMP identifies Bellevue's service and capital investment priorities to establish a frequent transit network that is an "efficient, useful, attractive service for most people, to most destinations, most of the time, serving maximum ridership." The TMP's frequent transit network supports Downtown growth, Bel-Red corridor redevelopment, and Bellevue's Factoria, Eastgate, and Crossroads activity centers with well-connected bus routes that seamlessly interface with East Link light rail.

Routes with Proposed Changes

East Link Connections Phase 2 began this summer, when Metro and Sound Transit publicly shared routes with proposed changes. Bellevue staff analyzed the proposed changes and confirmed that they substantially support the six goals of Bellevue's TMP, which state that transit should be:

- Convenient;
- Frequent, to minimize waiting times and improve connections;
- Efficient;
- Simple;
- Direct to major activity centers in Bellevue ; and
- Regionally connected, with a complete network of regional links in all directions.

The project proposes the following changes supported by the TMP:

- Creates new routes and new connections to future Link light rail and bus rapid transit stations.
- Adds more all-day, all-week service.
- More direct routing on frequent routes.
- Creates more transfer opportunities that are easy so that riders can travel to many different local and regional destinations.

Routes with proposed changes in *East Link Connections* are: **B Line**, 8, 111, 114, 167, 200, **202, 203**, 204, 208, **212**, 214, 215, **216, 217, 218, 219, 221, 222, 223**, 224, 225, **226, 232, 237, 240, 241, 245**, **246, 249, 250**, 251, 252, 256, 257, **268, 269, 270, 271**, 311, **342**, 541, 542, **544**, 545, **550, 554**, **555/556**, 630, 930, and 931. Affected Bellevue routes are indicated with **bold** text.

Key connections for Bellevue in the proposed network include:

- **Metro Route 203 (South Bellevue Station, Factoria, Newport Way):** A new route that replaces the Issaquah to Bellevue Transit Center portion of current Metro Route 271. Provides connection between Factoria and the future South Bellevue Station.
- **Metro Route 226 (Downtown Bellevue, Overlake, Crossroads, Lake Hills, Bellevue College, Eastgate Park and Ride, South Bellevue):** Continues functioning as a circulator around Bellevue, but with increased service levels. The route will run 10 minutes more frequently in the weekday peak and 15 minutes more frequently on weekday and Sunday nights.
- **Metro Route 249 (Overlake, Spring District, South Kirkland, Clyde Hill, Medina, Downtown Bellevue, Beaux Arts Village, South Bellevue):** Includes night service for the first time, on both weekdays and weekends.
- **Metro Route 270 (Downtown Bellevue, Northwest Bellevue, University of Washington, U-District):** Replaces the U-District to Bellevue Transit Center portion of the current Route 271. Service has been shifted to Bellevue Way from the current path of NE 8th Street and 84th Avenue NE, providing a straighter, more efficient path to SR-520 and corresponding freeway stations that serve the Points Communities. This routing also provides better service to equity, priority populations and serves more community resources.
- **Metro B Line (Redmond, Overlake, Crossroads, Downtown Bellevue):** Service will continue straight past NE 24th Street on 156th Avenue NE, providing a more direct service between Crossroads and Redmond by bypassing Overlake Village. Passengers traveling to/from Overlake Village will still be able to access all the destinations mentioned above via the East Link light rail and Metro Route 223.
- **Sound Transit Route 554 (Issaquah to Bellevue Transit Center):** This route iteration serves Issaquah to Seattle via Mercer Island, only stopping in Bellevue at the Eastgate Park & Ride. The *East Link Connections* proposal redirects this route to stop at the future South Bellevue Station and terminate at Bellevue Transit Center, providing a one-seat ride from Bellevue to Issaquah that runs every 10 minutes in the weekday peak, and every 15 mins in off-peak times.

Recommendation

Bellevue staff recommends submitting a letter from the City Council to Metro and Sound Transit leadership. The letter would identify Council's priorities as the transit agencies compile the route recommendations into a service concept. Bellevue staff recommends supporting the Metro and Sound Transit's proposal and the key connections described above, which align with Council's adopted transit priorities. This includes changes to serve priority populations and improve transit ridership in Bellevue, such as moving existing Metro Route 271/new Metro Route 270 to Bellevue Way.

The letter would also recommend the following changes to further align with the transit vision described in Bellevue's TMP:

- Complete the frequent transit network, Bellevue's highest-priority routes. The following corridors need additional frequency in weekday peak travel times to achieve the City's vision of fast, convenient transit options:
 - Downtown Bellevue to The Points Communities: Routes 249 and 270
 - Downtown Bellevue to Issaquah Transit Center: Routes 202 and 554
 - Downtown Bellevue to Kirkland Transit Center: Route 250

- Downtown Bellevue to South Kirkland Park & Ride: Routes 249 and 250
- Eastgate to Bel-Red: Route 226
- Eastgate to Issaquah Transit Center: Routes 202 and 554
- Overlake Transit Center to South Kirkland Park and Ride: Routes 249 and 544
- Overlake Village to Kirkland Transit Center: Route 245
- Bel-Red to South Kirkland Park & Ride: Routes 249 and 250
- Factoria to Renton: Route 240
- Factoria to South Bellevue Station: Routes 203 and 241
- Serve priority populations. Factoria was identified by Metro as an equity priority area and is a major regional employment destination. However, Factoria appears to be particularly underserved in the proposed changes.
 - Higher service frequency is needed for Routes 203 and 241, which connect Factoria and South Bellevue Station, in the peak, midday, and night periods. These routes will be a critical beginning/end of trip service for bus passengers transferring at the South Bellevue light rail station.
 - Higher service frequency is needed for Route 240, which connects Factoria and Renton, in the peak, midday, and night periods. Direct, high-quality service between these equity priority areas is critical to ensuring equitable mobility across the region.

Speed and Reliability Improvement Analysis

East Link Connections will also identify speed and reliability capital improvements to improve transit reliability and productivity. Identified project concepts will be evaluated to assess their benefit, viability and consistency with local plans and policies. Metro will hire a traffic engineering consultant to estimate the transit benefits of the selected project concepts, prepare conceptual design plans and develop preliminary cost estimates. To maximize public benefit, the Bellevue project concepts are concentrated to the Downtown-area where higher ridership is expected.

Public and Partner Engagement

A primary goal of *East Link Connections* is to equitably inform, engage and empower current and potential customers. The planning and engagement process is designed to create a single service concept in partnership with the *East Link Connections* Mobility Board and the Partner Review Board, based on the input and involvement of the public and stakeholders. Focus will be on iterative changes to a single concept rather than different concept alternatives.

Metro and Sound Transit convened a Mobility Board to equitably represent groups of people historically left out of decision-making conversations related to transit and who are disproportionately affected by restructure decisions. These groups of people include Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; people with physical and/or cognitive disabilities; people with low- to no-income; people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity; immigrants and/or refugees; and people with linguistic diversity. Seven members of the Board reside in Bellevue.

Mobility Board feedback in the Bellevue area included prioritizing:

- Routes that make transfers easier by being frequent and accessible to all travelers, with early and late trips that can serve transfers to or from East Link.

- Routes that offer more transfer opportunities so that riders can travel to many different regional and local destinations, including hospitals and community assets.
- Routes that offer speed and reliability, with more direct paths on faster routes where possible.
- First/last-mile connections to transit hubs.
- Routes that improve connections between Renton Highlands, Bellevue and Issaquah.

A Partner Review Board (PRB) was also convened to comment on service concepts and provide guidance on engagement opportunities. The PRB includes representatives from jurisdictions and major institutions in the project area, leaders of community-based organizations and representatives from partner transit agencies. Amazon, Bellevue College, Bellevue Downtown Association, Chinese Information and Service Center, Eastside Easy Riders, Facebook, Microsoft, Overlake Hospital and the Ethnic Chambers of Commerce Coalition are represented on the PRB.

In addition to the Mobility Board and PRB, Metro and Sound Transit have conducted neighborhood and stakeholder meetings, an online survey of proposed routes available in eight languages, an online open house and three live, virtual community meetings during Phase 2. Informational sessions were held with Hopelink and the Bellevue Chamber of Commerce.

The City of Bellevue provided input on the public engagement process and distributed survey information to approximately 22,000 constituents, employees, and communities to encourage participation. Bellevue's notification included emails to recipients of Choose Your Way Bellevue, Commute Trip Reduction Employer Services, City of Bellevue East Link listserv, City employees with ORCA cards, the Network on Aging and community-based organizations. Additionally, the City promoted the Phase 2 survey on the City Intranet, through social media and with stakeholders, such as Microsoft and Facebook.

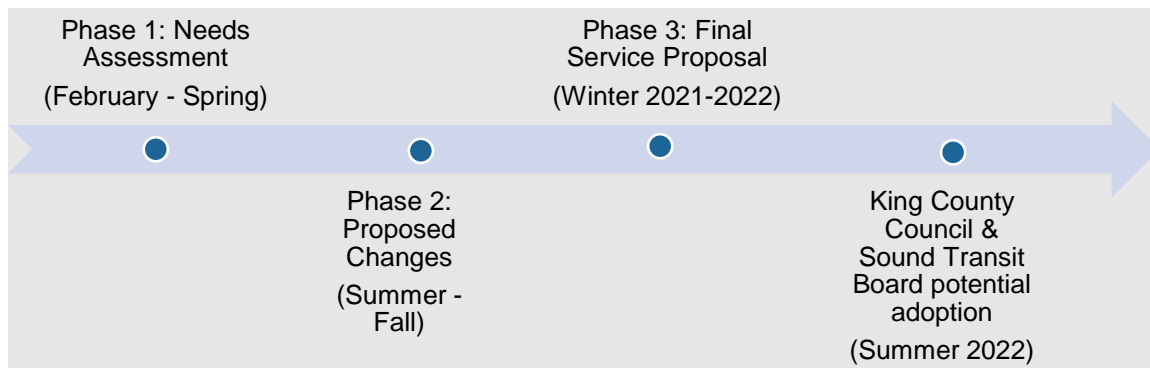
The online survey closed to the public on October 25; Metro and Sound Transit staff will share key themes and feedback during the Council briefing.

Timeline and Next Steps

Phase 2 is concluding now that Metro and Sound Transit have presented the routes with proposed changes to the public and gathered feedback. Beginning in early-2022, Phase 3 will consider public input, transit productivity, current and projected ridership volumes, access to community assets and an equity analysis to develop a final service proposal.

Next steps for *East Link Connections* include:

- December – January 2022: Prepare final recommendation for network changes
- January – March 2022: Release the Final Service Proposal (Phase 3)
 - Meetings with community groups, institutions, employers, and others
 - Briefings to local Councils as agreed upon by Metro, Sound Transit, and jurisdiction staff
- Spring 2022: Submit final network for legislative action
- Summer 2022: King County Council and Sound Transit Board anticipated action
- Fall/winter 2022: Prepare for service change and capital delivery, targeting March 2023



(The graphic above shows the full project timeline starting with Phase 1 to potential adoption.)

Complementary Transit Projects

In addition to *East Link Connections*, the City is working to ensure that transit riders have safe, comfortable and accessible ways to access East Link light rail when it opens in 2023. For example, the City is working with Sound Transit, King County Metro and the Bellevue Downtown Association to make passenger improvements at the Bellevue Transit Center. Additionally, Bellevue has partnered with the City of Redmond, Sound Transit, King County Metro and King County Council Chair Claudia Balducci to improve the walk, bike or roll experience at Overlake Village Station.

In the coming years, the City will benefit from additional high-capacity transit service, including Sound Transit's Stride I-405 Bus Rapid Transit and Metro's RapidRide K Line, and new transit connections, such as the Bellevue College Connection project.

Future Council briefings should highlight East Link light rail access improvements, as well as planning and design for future regional transit projects.

POLICY & FISCAL IMPACTS

Policy Impact

Council has identified transportation as a high priority, and transit solutions as an important part of the local and regional transportation system. Bellevue is expected to see an increase of 30,000 jobs by 2025. Multi-modal transportation options are a major part of the City's efforts to accommodate that growth. Bellevue's TMP envisions a transit network that serves a more diverse variety of people and trip purposes, and that is the mode of choice for an increasing number of people who live, work, shop and play in Bellevue. The TMP identifies service and capital investment priorities needed to establish a frequent transit network.

Fiscal Impact

There are no direct fiscal impacts associated with this briefing.

OPTIONS

1. Direct staff to prepare a letter of support for Phase 2 routes with proposed changes with some recommendations for improvement.
2. Provide alternative direction to staff.

ATTACHMENTS & AVAILABLE DOCUMENTS

- A. East Link Connections – Central Subarea: Proposed Routes Map
- B. East Link Connections – South Subarea: Proposed Routes Map
- C. East Link Connections – East Subarea: Proposed Routes Map
- D. East Link Connections – North Subarea: Proposed Network Map

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N/A