

CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION**Briefing on King County Metro Transit Policy Updates**

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DIRECTION NEEDED FROM COUNCIL**INFORMATION
ONLY**

Terry White, the new General Manager of King County Metro Transit (Metro), will provide an update on temporary service reductions and related changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. He will also brief Council on changes to Metro Transit policies for adding and reducing transit service.

No action is required from Council at this time. Tonight's presentation is an opportunity to learn about Metro's policies and service, ask questions, and provide feedback.

RECOMMENDATION

N/A

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Metro provided more than 430,000 rides every weekday on over 200 bus routes. Metro ridership decreased in March following Governor Inslee's Stay Home Stay Healthy orders. Since then, ridership has remained about 60-70 percent below 2019 levels. In response to the significant drop in ridership, Metro reduced and suspended some transit services. As a result of those changes, the following routes in Bellevue are operating on reduced schedules or are suspended. A map of reduced and suspended service in Bellevue is included as Attachment A.

- Reduced service on routes 212, 218, 221, 226, 240, 241, 245, 250, 255, 268, and 271
- Suspended service on routes 114, 167, 216, 217, 219, 232, 237, 246, 249, and 342

In March, Metro plans to further reduce commuter service on some routes that have low ridership. Impacts to Bellevue include routes 212 and 218, which connect Eastgate and downtown Seattle. These are temporary reductions.

Ridership in north King County and on the Eastside saw the greatest service reductions. This likely is a reflection of the ability to work from home, drive alone or telecommute for people living in those areas, while riders in other areas of King County are more dependent on transit.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in reduced transit demand in the near term; however, Bellevue and the region continue to plan for major growth over the long term. Bellevue anticipates adding more than 30,000 new jobs by 2025. The Puget Sound Regional Council's (PSRC's) draft regional growth plan, VISION 2050, forecasts an additional 1.8 million people and 1.2 million jobs in the four-county region by 2050. Fast, frequent, and reliable transit will support the region's growth.

Budget Impacts

Metro plans to restore service as ridership returns. However, potential revenue shortfalls could necessitate a 13 percent reduction in transit service hours in 2025-2026, compared to pre-pandemic service levels. Major reasons for the projected revenue shortfall include:

- COVID-19 pandemic. Metro anticipates losing about \$1 billion in sales tax revenue through 2028 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent recession. This represents over 20 percent of Metro's sales tax revenue. Metro also anticipates losing more than \$1 billion in fares and other revenues.
- Seattle Transportation Benefit District (STBD). The 2014-2020 STBD generated about \$50 million annually and funded about 10 percent of Metro's service hours. The STBD-funded routes operated largely within Seattle and did not serve Bellevue. In November, Seattle voters approved a ballot measure to help offset lost revenue when the STBD levy expired. The 2021-2026 STBD will generate about \$40 million per year and will purchase fewer transit services. Seattle and Metro staff are working on a plan to determine which services will be purchased with the levy funds.
- METRO CONNECTS. Metro's long-range plan proposes to increase transit service by 70 percent by 2040, based on the Puget Sound Regional Council's growth projections and cities' comprehensive plans. METRO CONNECTS identifies unfunded service and capital project needs such as new bus bases. In 2019, Metro estimated that 1.4 million more annual service hours and \$5 billion in capital are needed by 2040. Metro would need approximately \$220 million in new revenue per year to fund METRO CONNECTS and support the region's growth.

Due to these budget constraints, Metro suspended planning for new RapidRide lines in June, including the K Line. The K Line would connect Totem Lake, Downtown Bellevue, and Eastgate with fast, frequent service. Design work was underway, and Metro intended to begin service in 2025. Metro planned to invest \$47 million in the project and pursue an additional \$43 million in federal funding. The K Line corridor is a priority in Bellevue's Transit Master Plan (TMP). Council received a briefing on the K Line in 2019 and expressed support for the project. Metro staff confirmed that the R Line in Seattle and the K Line will be the next two lines built when funding becomes available. The rest of the planned RapidRide lines will be evaluated and may be deferred or converted to non-RapidRide frequent service.

Metro Policy Updates

The King County Mobility and Environment (ME) Committee and the Regional Transit Committee (RTC) are leading updates to Metro's policy documents this year. These policies guide where Metro adds or reduces transit service. Councilmember Jennifer Robertson represents Bellevue on the RTC. Major policy documents being updated include:

- Strategic Plan for Public Transportation: sets goals and performance measures in eight areas, such as safety, environmental sustainability, and service excellence.
- Service Guidelines: define Metro's process and criteria for incrementally adding or reducing transit service.
- METRO CONNECTS Long Range Plan: a blueprint for increasing transit service by 70 percent by 2040, based on the Puget Sound Regional Council's growth projections and cities' comprehensive plans.

Key drivers for the policy updates include:

- King County adopted the METRO CONNECTS Long Range Plan in 2017 and it needs to be integrated into the Strategic Plan and Service Guidelines.
- The King County Marine Division was incorporated into the Metro Transit Department last year.
- In 2019, the RTC adopted the Mobility Framework Summary, a set of recommendations intended to build on and strengthen Metro's existing network of transit services. The Mobility Framework recommended that Metro add transit service first in "areas of unmet need," defined as areas with:
 - high density;
 - a high proportion of "priority populations," which are defined to include low-income people, people of color, people with disabilities, and members of limited-English speaking communities; and,
 - limited transit service.

During the County Council 2021-2022 budget deliberations, Bellevue advocated for the County Council to balance near-term ridership losses and longer-term revenue constraints. Bellevue Mayor Lynne Robinson and the mayors of Issaquah, Kirkland and Redmond signed a joint letter that supported:

- Keeping COVID-19-related service cuts and suspensions separate from permanent service additions and reductions, so that Metro could restore the temporary service cuts when ridership returned.
- Using pre-COVID-19 data to make permanent service changes, since the long-term ridership impacts of the pandemic are unknown.

In response, the County Council adopted a budget proviso requiring the Service Guidelines update to include policy on how the pre-pandemic hours will be restored. The proviso also requires the Service Guidelines update to address how light rail-related transit restructures will maintain or improve transit service in the area, rather than shifting hours to other areas of the County.

East Link Service Restructure

Metro recently began planning for the East Link restructure which will shift transit service on the Eastside to connect people to light rail. Metro and Bellevue staff are discussing the scope and timeline

for the restructure process. Metro will conduct a public outreach process to develop and refine proposals for the restructured service. Council will receive updates on this process and will have opportunities to provide feedback.

Prior to the Northgate Link restructure, Metro reinvested service hours within the restructure area. This practice was not part of Metro's policies. The County Council decided last year to cut service from the north Seattle area and reinvest it in south King County, per the equity recommendations from the Mobility Framework. The RTC, ME Committee, and County Council may consider adopting reinvestment policies as part of the policy updates.

Metro service hours available for reinvestment during the East Link restructure will be limited. East Link will primarily replace Sound Transit's Route 550. Sound Transit's bus service hours will be reinvested in light rail service and will not be redeployed to bus service.

Bellevue College Connector

Bellevue's TMP identified the Bellevue College Connector as a key capital project needed to support the K Line. This project would construct approximately one mile of new roadway along the west side of the Bellevue College campus. The new road would allow K Line buses to bypass 148th Avenue SE and Eastgate Way and connect directly to the campus.

Last year, Bellevue, Metro, and Bellevue College each contributed \$100,000 to determine project scope and begin project design of this project. Council's 2021-2022 budget includes an additional \$100,000, which will be matched by contributions from Metro and the College, to continue preliminary design.

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 supports implementation of the frequent transit network.

Fiscal Impact

There are no direct fiscal impacts associated with this briefing.

OPTIONS

N/A

ATTACHMENTS & AVAILABLE DOCUMENTS

A. Map of Reduced and Suspended Service, prepared by Bellevue staff

AVAILABLE IN COUNCIL LIBRARY

N/A