

Confusion? Extra

July, 2009

A journal of ideas, thought and opinion

Extra Edition

Light Rail Comes to Seattle

After years of fighting and wrangling, the first 16 miles of light rail makes its debut on July 18, 2009. The first Sound Transit riders will board at International Blvd in Tukwila and the Seattle Transit Tunnel for the inaugural runs of the Central Link. To be sure, the trains have been running for much longer than that. They've actually been running since 2008, in various testing phases. So, by the time the first revenue passengers board the trains, the cars will already have hundreds of miles on their odometers.

The Link, Sound Transit's light rail, is one part of a larger regional transportation system. The total system comprises regional bus routes, The Sounder commuter trains and The Link. When fully built, the Link system will run trains throughout most of King County.

The initial portion of the line runs from downtown Seattle to Tukwila in South King County. The second portion, Airport Link, will open in December. One and a half miles of elevated track make up this portion of The Link. Originally, Sound Transit did not have enough money to build the line all the way to the airport. This oversight gave rise to Link being "the train to nowhere." Through cost savings, Sound Transit was able to amass enough money to extend the line to the airport. Thus, the train finally went "somewhere". The third portion, University Link, is starting construction. Although a short segment of a few miles, University Link will run entirely underground. Because of the underground route, building this segment will take almost as long as the current 16 miles took to build.

Link actually comes 30 years late and many years after other West Coast cities have built their light rail systems. Seattle is the last West Coast community to build a light rail system. A light rail system was proposed as part of a major 1970's bond issue, Forward Thrust. Seattle was reeling from massive Boeing layoffs, rising gas prices and a stagnant economy. The light rail bond was defeated. But a county-wide transit system, Metro Transit, came out of the bond issue. Metro was created by combining Seattle Transit and Metropolitan Transit. Metro began offering bus services to most of King County, including far flung communities like Skykomish and North Bend.

Other municipal transit agencies expanded into county-wide agencies. In addition, these agencies began offering service to Seattle. Each agency operated in its own sphere and it became clear that a regional agency was needed to coordinate transportation throughout the area. In the 1990's, the Washington Legislature voted to create an agency that would run bus and rail routes in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. That agency became Sound Transit. In 1996, voters in the three counties approved Sound Move, which was the funding package to make it all happen.

Bus routes formed the core of the initial services of Sound Transit. Unlike Metro's more urban runs, these routes were limited stop, long distance runs. The agency bought special buses that were more like tour buses than transit buses. They have air conditioning and better seating.

Sound Transit also created The Sounder, a commuter rail line which runs from both Tacoma and Everett to downtown Seattle. This is a “heavy rail” line that operates over the Burlington Northern tracks and uses regular diesel locomotives and passenger coaches. The service has grown from three daily runs to more than ten.

The crown jewel of the system, though, is Link. There are actually two Links, Central Link and Tacoma Link. The Links are not connected, though. Tacoma Link uses street cars, whereas the rest of the Link system uses larger vehicles. Like street cars, light rail equipment runs off overhead electrical wires. But the vehicles are both heavier and faster.

Light rail has faced several setbacks due to various challenges of the light rail system and Sound Transit itself. One court battle sought to cancel light rail construction due to the agency’s scaling back the size of the system. The suit contended that the agency did so in violation of the law. Sound Transit prevailed and began work on the system. Also, a state initiative passed that took vehicle tab fees away from Sound Transit. The idea was to starve the agency and force it to stop building light rail. By finding other income sources, Sound Transit was able to continue building light rail. They also saved money in the process.

Another potential setback came in the form of the Seattle Monorail. Approved by the Seattle voters, the monorail system was to have crisscrossed the city in an “X” formation. Due to the monorail’s building costs, the system had the potential to compete with Sound Transit for funding. Monorail opponents forced several public votes to reapprove the system. Seattle voters consistently reapproved the system. In the

end, though, the monorail project died. It was a victim of poor design, and poor management.

Most recently, area voters approved Sound Move2, which is a package to expand transportation throughout the county. Light rail is one piece of this overall package. The proposed East Link line will extend across Lake Washington to Mercer Island, Bellevue, and Redmond. Tracks will run along the Lake Washington floating bridge express lanes, across Mercer Island and through Bellevue to Redmond. The current line will be extended north to Lynnwood and south to Federal Way.

By the time this article gets read, Link will be running and carrying passengers. Will it meet or exceed its goals? Only time will tell. But, now it’s time for me to grab a seat on an inaugural run and ride into Seattle history. Save me a window seat near the front!

About this publication

Confusion? is an occasional publication and is produced by the Snoqualmie Ridge Press, Frank Hansche, prop., for family, friends, and members of the AAPA and NAPA. The typefaces used: nameplate, 48 point Brush Script; body, 12 point Baskerville, headlines, 14 point Baskerville Bold and 14 point Baskerville Italic. To comment on this publication, please contact:

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