

To: Business Leaders Looking at Seattle Region Transportation Challenges

Douglas B. MacDonald, October 26, 2015

Two observations on the regional transportation challenge:

- There is no way to make progress without a radically new approach by state and local governments to coordinating, prioritizing and authorizing projects and programs.
- If transportation outcomes are to be improved, there must be better use of meaningful metrics by which expectations for and performance of the transportation system are established and accounted for.

1. *Better coordination and decision-making.*

A call-out from last Monday's Seattle Times news article on the *Move Seattle* levy:

"In my opinion, the bus and rail integration is probably the worst on the entire West Coast," said project manager Michael James. "We can do better than this."

Lindblom, "Move Seattle levy: better bus service or a bunch of guesstimates," *Seattle Times*, Oct. 19, 2015.

Refreshing candor from SDOT. But no surprise (at project level scale) of a problem pervading the *entire* regional transportation situation: dysfunctional coordination and decision-making at *every level* of the regional transportation enterprise.

Diagnosis of the problem was painstakingly laid out *nine years ago* in Chapter 5 of the Regional Transportation Commission *Final Report* [Stanton-Rice Report] (Dec. 2006). Matters are worse now than they were then.¹ It's a top-to-bottom, edge-to-edge picture of decision-making, program direction and financial investment *in silos* running at cross-purposes or no purpose at all through every dimension of the transportation enterprise.

We hide this problem behind a stultifying label, *Governance*, as we side-step rather than confront this fundamental obstacle. We need, instead, clamorous and undistracted attention to our first need: *Decision-making that will work*: a venue and a process for making effective choices and charting meaningful steps forward on regional solutions.

¹ Recently I offered a "taxpayers' viewpoint" report – un-rebutted in any particular to this date -- that many of you have seen (pdf links are in the email that transmits this note). It displays the levels of taxes now and in prospect levied on Seattle residents to feed the revenue streams of six transportation agencies. This could be called "how the silos grab the revenues." The most important takeaway, however, is actually drawn from between the lines. For all the revenue, today *not one of the silos* can point to programs (in its own jurisdiction or in coordination with other) for existing or new spending that seriously address the most important regional issue, the future condition and use of the I-5 corridor or how to relieve its dysfunction, a core issue in virtually every derivative element of the transportation problem.

As broken as regional transportation decision-making now is (and no one really steps forward to deny it), the current situation has deeply invested, powerfully entrenched defenders. Like legions barricaded in ancient Roman stockades, they occupy the agency/ legislative silos and frustrate regional transportation solutions at virtually every turn.

In 2006 the Stanton-Rice Commission,² with extensive analysis, discussion and review of successful examples from elsewhere as well as our own legal requirements, recommended a 15-member Regional Transportation Commission. It would have subsumed PSRC and replaced the existing “cluster of bodies created for discrete purposes, geographies and modes” and brought together a single entity to plan, prioritize and fund all modes of regional transportation. It would have had authority to generate tax and toll revenues and broadly allocate state transportation spending in the region as well. It would have had power to implement demand management and technology strategies, as well as support new projects – for transit as well as cars and trucks. Nine of the 15 commissioners would be elected from districts; six would be appointed for relevant expertise.

What was the fate of the Stanton-Rice Commission proposal at the hands of the transportation powers-that-be in Olympia and in the region? “*Dead on arrival. Too hard.*” And there has been no meaningful return to the topic for now nearly eight years.

The hard reality is this: *Meaningful progress toward fixing the transportation mess in the Seattle region will not be made until the challenge of improved decision-making is again taken up and a solution successfully crafted and implemented.*

A long-standing principle of a modern architecture and industrial design applies here: Form follows function. What tasks exactly must a successful regional decision-making venue/process perform? The Stanton-Rice proposal is a good starting point for discussion, but may not be the last word. If more must be said, the first question today is what is the functional need? Then settle questions of form, membership and so on. Design the other way around will fail. In any case, relegating (to follow big visions) the hard questions of a new decision-making approach will assure that any overall exercise pursuincan produce no meaningful change or new directions.

A new way forward – on the Stanton-Rice model or an alternative -- must be found out of the existing dysfunctional structure for prioritizing integrating and funding projects and programs. That is the first and indispensable condition of progress.

Citizens have two fair questions about transportation. (1) “Who’s in charge?” Answer: everybody and nobody until the decision-making imbroglio is addressed – see above.

² Chapters 5, 6 and 9 of the report stand today as a foundation on this question that has not been equaled or improved upon in ensuing years.

(2) “What am I getting for my money?” Answer: There is no mechanism for knowing, and no mechanism for supporting decision-making to better results. Those are big problems – see below.

2. To improve regional transportation, new metrics must be brought to bear in evaluating and prioritizing proposed investments and providing accountability as to results.

Metrics -- Accessibility

For years I’ve been struck by the sense of Australian transportation policymakers³ and planners who focus attention on what they denominate the *transportation task* – a concept we would be wise to embrace. What functions and outcome describe what we ask and expect our transportation systems to achieve and produce?

Often we fog our needs in normative ambiguity wrapped catchwords (“mobility” or “seamless connectivity” or “move people not cars”). We insist on animating public passions and advocacy on *modes* (“light rail,” or “bicycles”) as distractions from clear thinking about *goals* of transportation systems. We fasten on symptoms or descriptions of experience (“congestion”) with little discipline or uniformity as to our definitions, let alone the precise etiology of what we see.

Orienting ourselves to thinking about the *transportation task* can be very clarifying. Where, when, by whom and for what purpose are *trips* needing to be made (or not)? How best can those trips individually and as an aggregate be achieved in societally reasonable ways?

Today’s most promising (among several) directions on this fresh approach is the arena of *accessibility metrics*. It springs (in one iteration) from a crucial consideration both to individuals and the economy: Can people reach their jobs and employers attract their workforce? (In general, the larger the pool of people and jobs who conveniently can be connected for the utilization of skills in a metropolitan economy, the stronger will be the performance of that region to the benefit both of firms and workers).

³ For a dose of clear English and useful thinking in considering urban infrastructure strategy, see the crisp, cogent policy summary (just 13 spare-text easy reading pages not counting all the pictures), Infrastructure Australia, *Urban Transport Strategy* (Dec. 2013), accessed at http://infrastructureaustralia.gov.au/policy-publications/publications/files/InfrastructureAus_Rep_UrbanStrategy.pdf Space limits an extensive review of the Australian practices and experience, but it is very sophisticated and extends well beyond a lot of U.S. practice. This can be expanded upon to the great benefit of our stilted regional discussions.

This is precisely the kind of metric regional leaders in Seattle should be focused on in thinking about the shape and performance of the regional's transportation systems ten, twenty or thirty years into the future.

Metropolitan accessibility metrics have had little attention in the Seattle region, but others are forging forward with this kind of thinking.⁴ Noteworthy leadership now is evident at the University of Minnesota's [Accessibility Observatory](#), a program within the university's Department of Civil, Environmental and Geo-Engineering.⁵ The program combines disciplines of transportation engineering and evaluation with land use and demographic data. This foundation supports tools for understanding (and benchmarking) regional performance *and* planning improvements for better future performance.

Its ambitious [National Accessibility Study](#) will support analysis of how transportation investment furthers not just individual trips at specific times, but a variety of trips across a system's lifetime. This has the power of a "pooled funds" study supported by the federal government and the leading state DOTs.⁶

⁴ My own exposure to accessibility metrics stems from encountering in 2009 one of the background reports prepared for the Bipartisan Policy Center's *National Transportation Policy Project* (co-chaired by former Washington Senator Slade Gorton). See "[Performance Metrics for the Evaluation of Transportation Programs](#)" (Nov. 2009) 5-11, accessed at <http://bipartisanpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/default/files/BPC%20NTP%20Metrics%20fnl.pdf> for a solid discussion and their development, together with useful illustrations from the Dallas-Ft. Worth metropolitan area.

On the completion of the Bipartisan Policy Center's project and its publication of an important report, "[Performance Driven: A New Vision for U.S. Transportation Policy](#)," much of its "talent" migrated to the [Eno Center for Transportation](#) where a very active presence in performance metrics for transportation continues to be maintained. Emil Frankel, Acting Director, Paul Lewis, Vice President, Policy and Finance, plewis@enotrans.org. A useful report is: "[Evaluating Potential Performance Measures for Congestion and System Performance](#)" (2013), accessed at <https://www.enotrans.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Perf-Measures3.pdf>. These would be good resources for Seattle area regional leaders seeking insights on issues of system performance and evaluation.

Accessibility metrics can also be applied to a variety of other transportation outcomes such as access to recreation or to educational or health care facilities and so on. Some of the illustration of this work can be drawn from Australia.

⁵ The Director of the program is Andrew Owen, 612-624-7570, aowen@umn.edu. In a recent telephone conversation Owen stated a strong interest in finding opportunities beyond what has been done to date for partnering with a major region for applying the tools and insights in development, especially as tools for measuring the benefits of proposed transportation investments to *system* performance. The program has been unable to interest PSRC in this work but has had discussions, only exploratory, with King County Metro. Incubating this kind of thinking in the Seattle region is a major contribution that business leaders could make in the transportation planning arena.

⁶ Minnesota, Arkansas, California, Florida, Iowa, North Carolina, Virginia and Wisconsin. WSDOT is not participating.

Its [Access Across America – Transit 2014](#) ranks accessibility of jobs by transit in 46 of the nation’s 50 largest cities (Seattle ranks 8th).⁷ [Walking 2014](#) similarly examines how jobs can be reached on foot (See Seattle region [map](#) depicting its sixth place ranking). [Auto 2013](#) – an elaborate study that “goes beyond congestion rankings . . . to examine both land use and transportation systems,” put Seattle at 23rd place. Perhaps most interesting is the [Green Line and related bus network improvements increase access to jobs](#) evaluating the job accessibility benefits for the Twin Cities of a transit expansion program depending on an *integrated* light rail/bus network approach. That kind of analysis could actually relate benefits to costs in Sound Transit’s planning for ST3. But that won’t be done in today’s decision-making silos unless diligent citizens or business people outside Sound Transit insist upon it!

For a broader view of the emergence of *accessibility* in urban transportation thinking – coupled with very insightful observations about how *technology* is transforming the terms of reference for urban transportation -- highly recommended is a short book (\$4.99 on Kindle): Levinson and Krizek: *The End of Traffic and the Future of Transport*, <http://www.amazon.com/The-End-Traffic-Future-Transport-ebook/dp/B0145J1078>. There is no reason why business leaders thinking about the future of transportation in the Seattle region should not have these clear and simple issues in mind as new thinking replaces old about traffic problems and traffic solutions. At the same time as new technology and new demographic and economic trends transform transportation needs and possibilities along with the rest of our world.

Metrics – Asset Management

To state the obvious: To improve the performance of the transportation system, nothing is more important than (a) maintaining in good condition the huge asset investment we have already made in transportation assets; and (b) making *better use* of the assets we already have.

It’s puzzling, then, that business leadership has for all intents and purposes given transportation decision-makers a pass on both issues.

⁷ This important report builds upon and extends [earlier work released in 2012](#) by the Brookings Institute that surveyed the 100 largest metropolitan areas.

[W]hen it comes to the question of how effectively transit connects people and jobs within and across these metropolitan areas, strikingly little is known. With governments at all levels considering deep budget cuts, it is increasingly important to understand not just the location and frequency of transit service, but ultimately how well transit aligns with where people work and live.

The results for Seattle can be found on a single page [here](#). So far as I am aware, despite [national press coverage](#) (see Seattle’s ranking in 26th place) of this report in 2012, **no transportation agency in the Seattle area (let alone PSRC) has called attention to this report as a foundation for current or future metrics of transit performance in the region.**

Take just one issue as illustration: pavement condition. Examining just Seattle (despite credit due for a significant proposed investment in pavement in the forthcoming *Move Seattle* levy),⁸ we know that SDOT has the capability of producing Pavement Condition Index ratings and has in the past (presumably through use of *Street Saver* or other industry accepted methodology) supplied out-year estimates of the overhang of deferred maintenance responsive to various proposed investment levels.⁹ We also know that such estimates this year *appear not to have been shared* with even the City Council let alone the public in connection with the proposed investment level advertised in the levy vote. We also know that WSDOT as recently as 2013 produced such information in budget submissions to the legislature (absorbed into the Washington Roundtable's [2013 transportation investment recommendations](#)). But no such disclosure -- was the analysis even done? -- accompanied any public discussion surrounding the huge (but appallingly short shrift to preservation) 2015 state transportation funding/spending package.

If business leaders will not insist on the generation and discussion of metrics of this kind (no successful business would operate today without the use of such metrics for its own management, shareholders or investors with regard to asset condition), then who will? And isn't it the case that such metrics should routinely be produced by governments under the letter and the spirit of GASB 34 (1999)?

Governments should report all capital assets, including infrastructure assets, in the government-wide statement of net assets and generally should report depreciation expense in the statement of activities. Infrastructure assets that are part of a network or subsystem of a network are not required to be depreciated **as long as the government manages those assets using an asset management system that has certain characteristics and the government can document that the assets are being preserved approximately at (or above) a condition level established and disclosed by the government.**¹⁰ (Emphasis supplied).

⁸ Though Danny Westneat took [a fair shot](#) yesterday at whether SDOT had credibly tracked and accounted for pledges on paving made to voters when *Bridging the Gap* was voted in 2006. "*Seattle road levy only a partial success last time*," Seattle Times (Oct. 25, 2015).

⁹ See my taxpayers' viewpoint report, pp 17 – 19. The discussion of the steep direct costs imposed on vehicle owners from poor pavement conditions (at pp. 15-16) is also relevant.

¹⁰ Governmental Accounting Standards Board, *Summary Statement 34*, <http://www.gasb.org/st/summary/gstsm34.html>