

1. Purpose and Need

1.1 INTRODUCTION

This section describes the background, purpose and need, and goals and objectives of the North Link light rail transit project, which is a segment of the Central Link light rail transit project. The purpose and need and background for Central Link were discussed in the Central Link Light Rail Transit Project Final Environmental Impact Statement (Sound Transit, November 1999) (1999 FEIS). This EIS supplements and builds on that prior 1999 FEIS. The regional context and background for the project remain as described in the 1999 FEIS, except for the changes noted below.

1.2 BACKGROUND

The Central Link light rail project is an element of the *Sound Move* Ten-Year Regional Transit System Plan adopted by the Sound Transit Board in May 1996. Voters within the *Sound Move* District authorized local taxes to implement the plan in November 1996. Within this plan is an electric light rail system, Central Link, extending from Northgate to SeaTac. It is envisioned as a “starter” regional system, allowing for future extensions to the north, south, and east. Many alternatives and alignments were studied for Central Link, and the 1999 FEIS was completed. On November 18, 1999, the Sound Transit Board selected the route, profiles, station locations, and maintenance base site to be built for the Central Link light rail project from NE 45th Street in the University District to S. 200th Street near the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac Airport). At that time, Sound Transit selected the Capitol Hill/Portage Bay tunnel route for the segment from downtown Seattle to the University District. A project route and station locations were not selected for the segment from the University District north to Northgate.

Sound Transit has since decided to reexamine the project for cost, schedule, and engineering reasons. The agency proceeded with design and construction of some segments, while it continued to study alternatives in other segments. On November 29, 2001, the Sound Transit Board adopted a 14-mile Initial Segment to be constructed and operated for the Central Link light rail project from the transit tunnel in downtown Seattle to the Tukwila International Boulevard station at S. 154th Street near Sea-Tac Airport. Construction of the Initial Segment began in 2003 and will continue until 2009, when the segment will open for passenger service. The Tukwila Freeway Route SEIS Addendum, issued August 2004, addresses design refinements and related updates for the Tukwila portion of the Initial Segment. Airport Link, connecting the Tukwila International Boulevard Station to the airport, was adopted by the Sound Transit Board on July 15, 2005; construction will start in 2007 and passenger service will begin in late 2009.

In September 2001, the Sound Transit Board directed staff to complete an SEIS and design effort to analyze alternative routes to the north of the Initial Segment terminus near Convention Place in downtown Seattle. This SEIS for North Link considers alternative routes from downtown Seattle to Northgate.

Evaluation of alternatives for the North Link project route and stations are being conducted in cooperation with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Before committing federal funds to the North Link segment project, the FTA is required to undertake environmental review in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). As the public agency proposing the Central Link project, Sound Transit is required to comply with the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA). The FTA, as the federal lead agency under NEPA, and Sound Transit, as the state lead agency under SEPA, have determined that alternative routes and stations in the North Link segment of the project may have significant adverse environmental impacts. As some aspects of the routes and schedule for the North Link alternatives are different than examined in the 1999 FEIS, an SEIS is being prepared. To satisfy both NEPA and SEPA requirements, the agencies are preparing a combined SEIS for the project extending north of downtown Seattle to Northgate.

In April 2001, prior to the start of the North Link SEIS, FTA and Sound Transit commenced an SEIS to evaluate routes between NE 45th Street and Northgate. That SEIS was terminated (a Draft SEIS was never published), and the alternative evaluation for that segment of the project is incorporated into this new SEIS. A

Draft SEIS for the North Link project was issued in November 2003, an addendum examining a revised route in the Montlake area was released in February 2004, and a second Draft SEIS was released in October 2005.

1.3 PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose and need for the Central Link Light Rail project was described in the 1999 FEIS and in the 2001 Tukwila Final SEIS. The purpose of the project is to construct and operate an electric light rail system connecting the region's major activity centers: the city of Seattle (Northgate, Roosevelt, the University District, Capitol Hill, First Hill, downtown, and the Rainier Valley area); the city of Tukwila; the city of SeaTac; and Sea-Tac Airport. These areas include the state's highest employment areas and generate the highest transit ridership in the region. Implementing the light rail element of *Sound Move* would expand transit capacity within the region's most dense and congested corridor, provide a practical alternative to travel on increasingly congested roadways, support comprehensive land use and transportation planning, provide environmental benefits, and improve mobility for travel-disadvantaged residents in the corridor. The Initial Segment of the Central Link project is now being implemented for a route connecting downtown Seattle, the Duwamish area, Beacon Hill, the Rainier Valley, the city of Tukwila, and the city of SeaTac. Airport Link is being implemented to the Airport and City of SeaTac. The Central Link light rail line from Northgate to SeaTac is envisioned as the initial phase of a long-range regional transit system. As described in Sound Transit's recently updated Regional Transit Long-Range Plan (July 2005), future phases may extend light rail to the north, east, and south.

As part of the Central Link project, the North Link project would provide for the construction and operation of a north light rail segment connecting downtown Seattle and Northgate. An additional purpose of the North Link project is to reduce costs and construction risks compared to the original Segment B route selected by the Sound Transit Board in 1999, and provide a cost-effective solution that maximizes light rail ridership given available resources.

1.4 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goals and objectives of the light rail project, detailed below, are consistent with the *Sound Move* plan and with Sound Transit's Long-Range Plan, adopted May 1996 and updated in July 2005. These policy elements have guided actions of the Sound Transit Board in designing the regional transit system, including developing and identifying route and station alternatives for evaluation in the SEIS. See Chapter 6 for an evaluation of the alternatives based on the goals listed below.

1. Transportation goal: enhance mobility
 - Provide an effective, high-quality transit system
 - Design a system to accommodate future extensions and expansion
 - Support the region's transportation goals
 - Integrate services and fare policies with local transit providers and provide convenient connections
 - Enhance transportation equity
2. Environment goal: preserve environmental quality
 - Minimize potential adverse impacts to the natural and built environment
3. Land use goal: support regional and local land use goals and objectives
 - Support adopted land use and transportation plans
 - Support pedestrian-friendly and transit-oriented community development
 - Enhance neighborhoods
4. Financial goal: achieve financial feasibility
 - Build, operate, and maintain a system within available revenues
 - Build a system that is cost-effective

5. Community support goal: maximize community support
 - Involve the community in the project development and design process
 - Enhance community support