

1 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR TACOMA DOME LINK EXTENSION

1.1 Tacoma Dome Link Extension Project

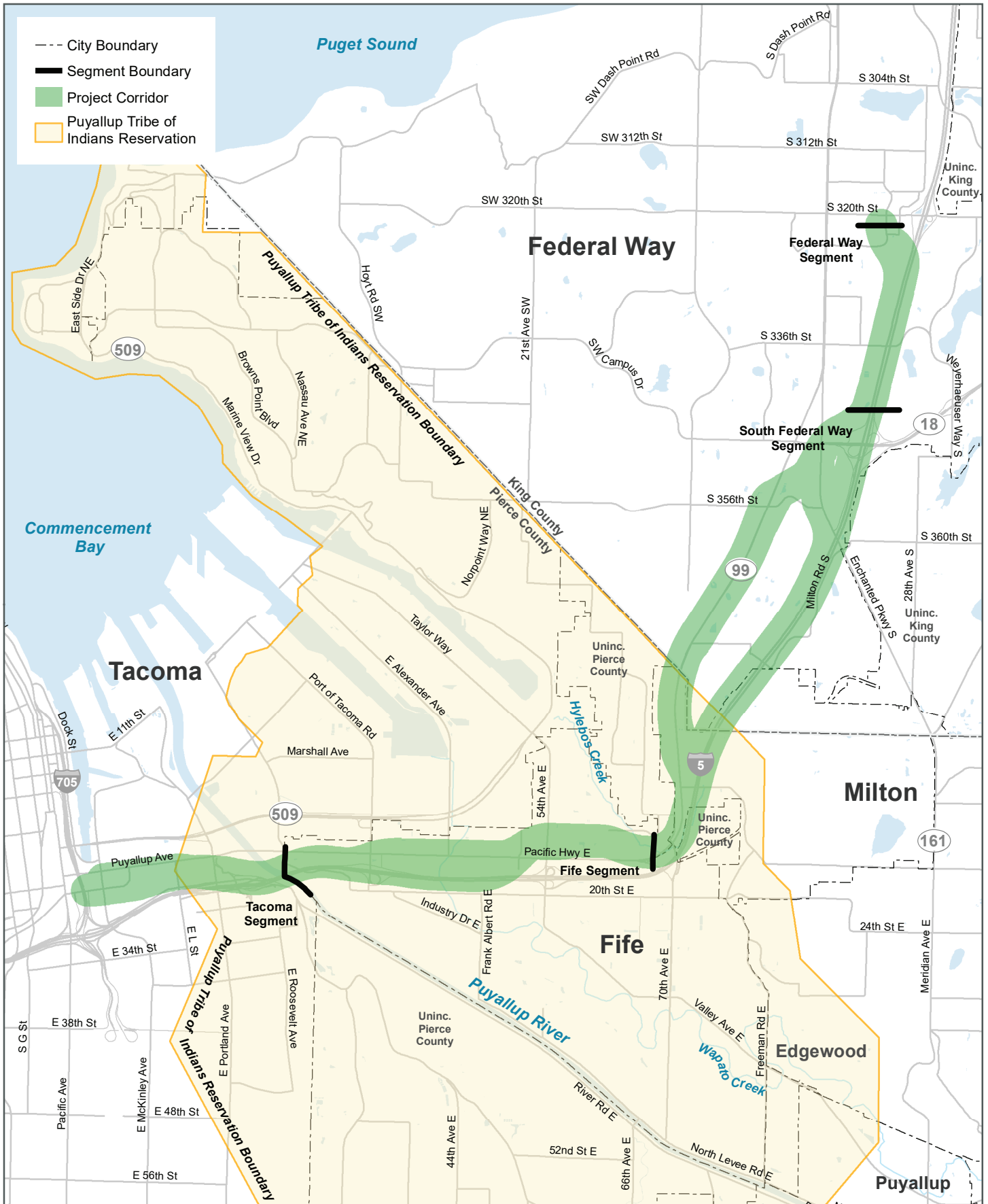
The Central Puget Sound Regional Transit Authority (Sound Transit) is proposing the Tacoma Dome Link Extension (TDLE) to expand the regional light rail system south from Federal Way in King County to Tacoma in Pierce County (Figure 1-1). TDLE would extend light rail approximately 10 miles from the Federal Way Transit Center to the Tacoma Dome area and include stations in Federal Way, Fife, and the two in Tacoma. Within the TDLE corridor, the project travels across the ancestral and reservation lands of the Puyallup Tribe of the Puyallup Reservation (Puyallup Tribe of Indians). Voters approved funding for regional transit system investments as part of Sound Transit 3 in November 2016, which included the TDLE project. Sound Transit and the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) are preparing this Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for TDLE as a joint National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) document. FTA is the lead federal agency under NEPA and Sound Transit is the lead agency under SEPA.

TDLE would provide fast, reliable light rail connections to dense residential and job centers in the south region of the Puget Sound. In 2020, about 338,000 people lived in in the cities of Federal Way, Milton, Fife, and Tacoma, and an estimated 173,000 jobs were located in these cities (PSRC 2023). It is anticipated that by 2040, the population will grow by approximately 111,000 people, and employment will increase by approximately 82,000 jobs (PSRC 2023). Puget Sound Regional Council's (PSRC) VISION 2050 anticipates population and employment in the Puget Sound region will continue to grow over the next 30 years (PSRC 2020a). The current long-range growth forecasts from PSRC inform elements of the Draft EIS analyses, such as ridership forecasts, projected vehicle trips and nonmotorized activities.

Existing local transit connections in the project corridor include bus (Pierce Transit and King County Metro) and light rail (T Line formerly called Tacoma Link) service. Tacoma Dome Station is a major transit hub, providing local and regional bus service, Sounder commuter rail, T Line, and Amtrak long-distance and intercity passenger rail service, along with two park-and-ride facilities.

Extensions of Sound Transit's Link light rail service are under construction, east to Bellevue and Redmond, and south to Federal Way, and are anticipated to begin operation between 2024 and 2026. Planned light rail extensions include expanding service to West Seattle in 2032, to Everett in 2037, to Ballard in 2039, and to South Kirkland and Issaquah in 2041 to 2044, depending on funding. TDLE anticipates beginning service in 2035. Figure 1-2 shows the full system planned for operation in 2042 under the target schedule.

The Sound Transit 3 Plan also identified the need for two new light rail maintenance facilities, one in the north corridor and one in the south corridor to support the overall Sound Transit 3 regional system expansion. The facility in the south corridor is called the Operations and Maintenance Facility South (OMF South), and it is evaluated under a separate NEPA/SEPA environmental review process.



Data Sources: King and Pierce County, Cities of Federal Way, Fife, Milton, Tacoma (2023).

FIGURE 1-1
Tacoma Dome Link Extension Project Corridor

Tacoma Dome Link Extension

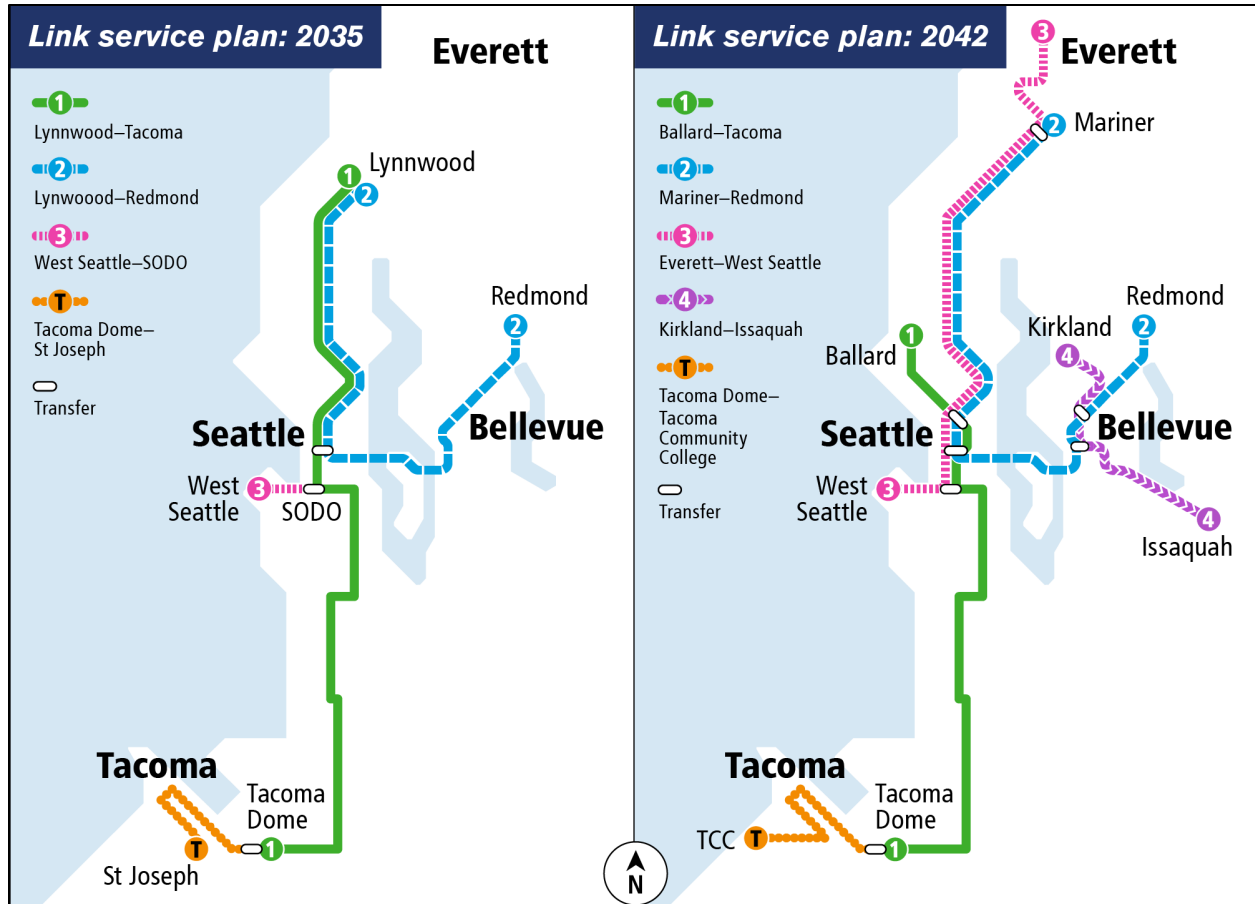


Figure 1-2 Link Light Rail System Expansion*

* 2042 is the current targeted schedule for completion of Sound Transit 3 projects.

1.2 Purpose and Need for TDLE

The purpose and need section describes why the agency is proposing to construct and operate the project. It clarifies what problems the project is to address and what goals or outcomes it supports. The purpose and need statement establishes the basis for developing and evaluating a range of reasonable alternatives for environmental review and assists with the identification of a Preferred Alternative. Sound Transit used the purpose and need statement to define the Draft EIS alternatives described in Chapter 2, Alternatives Considered.

1.2.1 Purpose of the Project

The purpose of TDLE is to expand the Link light rail system from the Federal Way Transit Center to the Tacoma Dome Station area in order to:

- Provide high-quality rapid, reliable, and efficient light rail transit service to communities in the project corridor, as defined through the local planning process and reflected in the Sound Transit 3 Plan (Sound Transit 2016).
- Improve regional mobility by increasing connectivity and capacity in the TDLE corridor from the Federal Way Transit Center to the Tacoma Dome Station area to meet projected transit demand.

- Connect the lands of the Puyallup Tribe of Indians and the cities of Federal Way, Milton, Fife, and Tacoma to regional centers and destinations on the regional high-capacity transit system as described in adopted regional and local land use, transportation, and economic development plans and Sound Transit's Regional Transit Long-Range Plan (Sound Transit 2014a).
- Implement a system that is technically and financially feasible to build, operate, and maintain.
- Expand mobility for the corridor and region's residents, which include transit-dependent, low-income, and minority populations.
- Encourage equitable and sustainable urban growth in station areas through support of transit oriented development and multimodal integration in a manner that is consistent with local land use plans and policies, including Sound Transit's Equitable Transit Oriented Development Policy and Sustainability policies (Sound Transit 2018 and 2019).
- Encourage convenient and safe nonmotorized access to stations, such as bicycle and pedestrian connections, consistent with Sound Transit's System Access Policy (Sound Transit 2013).
- Preserve and promote a healthy environment and economy by minimizing adverse impacts on the natural, built, and social environments.

1.2.2 Need for the Project

The project is needed because:

- Chronic roadway congestion on Interstate 5 (I-5) and State Route (SR) 99 – two primary north/south highways connecting communities along the corridor – delays today's travelers, including those using transit, and degrades the reliability of bus service traversing the corridor, particularly during commute periods.
- These chronic, degraded traffic conditions are expected to continue to worsen as the region's population and employment grow.
- PSRC, the regional metropolitan planning organization, and local plans call for high-capacity transit in the corridor consistent with VISION 2050 (PSRC 2020a) and Sound Transit's Regional Transit Long-Range Plan (Sound Transit 2014a).
- South King and Pierce county residents and communities, including transit-dependent, low-income, and minority populations, need long-term regional mobility and multimodal connectivity, as called for in the Washington State Growth Management Act (Revised Code of Washington [RCW] 36.70A.108).
- Regional and local plans call for increased residential and/or employment density at and around high-capacity transit stations and for increased options for multimodal access.
- Environmental and sustainability goals of the state and region, as established in Washington state law and embodied in PSRC's VISION 2050 and The Regional Transportation Plan 2022-2050 (PSRC 2022), include reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by decreasing vehicle miles traveled (VMT).

Sections 1.2.2.1 through 1.2.2.4 explain the need for TDLE in greater detail.

1.2.2.1 Chronic Existing and Future Roadway Congestion in the TDLE Corridor

The Puget Sound region has experienced tremendous growth, resulting in key roadway corridors between Federal Way and Tacoma being at or near capacity. A large number of workers who live in Pierce County travel to and from jobs in King County. During the PM peak period, the highest volume of traffic between South Federal Way and Tacoma is southbound. The roadway network in that location is at or close to capacity, even in the high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) lane, resulting in travel delay for transit vehicles and general-purpose traffic. Congestion on I-5, SR 99, and key arterials is expected to increase and reduce transit performance and reliability. Existing travel times on I-5 between Seattle and Tacoma are approximately 33 minutes with free flow conditions and 60 to 75 minutes in the peak direction during peak periods. This travel time is expected to increase by approximately 15 percent in the year 2042 without TDLE. Even with substantial investments in both regional and local transportation improvement projects in the future, traffic is expected to worsen and lead to increased travel time and delays.

Population and employment growth are forecast to continue. According to PSRC, the TDLE corridor is projected to grow by 43 percent in population and 51 percent in employment by 2050 (PSRC 2020b). Due to the projected population and employment growth and the limitations on expanding the capacity of the surface transportation network, there is a need for future investments in high-capacity transit systems to serve future transit needs in the project corridor.

1.2.2.2 Regional and Local Growth Planning and High-Capacity Transit Investment

Regional and local agencies have been planning for high-capacity transit in the TDLE corridor for almost 40 years. Recent plans developed by local agencies, Sound Transit, King County Metro (King County Metro 2021a and 2021b), and PSRC that call for high-capacity transit in this corridor are described in Section 1.3. Pierce Transit Development Plan 2024-2029 also assumes TDLE (Pierce Transit 2024). The comprehensive plans adopted by the cities of Federal Way, Fife, Milton, and Tacoma each include goals and policies that support increasing high-capacity transit in the TDLE corridor. A detailed description of those goals and policies is included in Appendix H2, Land Use.

The Puget Sound region, which includes King, Kitsap, Pierce, and Snohomish counties, is expected to grow by 1.8 million people by 2050, reaching a total population of 5.8 million (PSRC 2020a). An anticipated 1.2 million more jobs are forecast by 2050 (PSRC 2020a). Regional planning has focused new housing and employment growth within urban areas, including those along the TDLE corridor. PSRC's VISION 2050, the regional land use plan, focuses growth in urbanized areas. VISION 2050's regional growth strategy includes a goal of attracting 65 percent of population growth and 75 percent of employment growth to the region's growth centers and high-capacity transit station areas. Along the TDLE corridor, portions of both Federal Way and Tacoma are designated urban growth centers and the Port of Tacoma is a designated manufacturing industrial center. PSRC also classifies the City of Tacoma as a Metropolitan City. Urban municipalities within regional growth centers serve as civic, cultural, and economic hubs and are expected to accommodate 36 percent of regional population growth and 44 percent of regional employment growth by the year 2050. Local planning, including the comprehensive plans for Federal Way, Milton, Fife, and Tacoma, are considering the light rail extension and its potential influence on local land use and development.

1.2.2.3 Regional Mobility and Multimodal Connectivity for South Sound Communities

Many people travel from communities in the southern part of the Puget Sound region, where housing is more affordable, to King County for employment or other regional attractions. Nationally, King County has among the highest number of commuters coming from other counties. According to census data, workers who commute from outside King County fill approximately 34 percent of the jobs (474,516 jobs) in King County (U.S. Census Bureau 2020). While employment in Pierce County is also growing, the trend of residents from the southern part of Puget Sound commuting to Seattle or other locations in King County is likely to continue, as employment forecasts from PSRC for both Seattle and King County suggest strong job growth between 2020 and 2050.

Continued development of a multimodal transit hub near the Tacoma Dome, connecting Pierce Transit, Sound Transit Express, T Line, Sounder, and Amtrak services, would improve mobility in the TDLE corridor and increase access to employment and educational opportunities around the region for residents, including transit-dependent, low-income, and minority populations. Light rail in the TDLE corridor would improve connections to major regional employment opportunities, such as at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, Amazon, and many smaller companies along the corridor, as well as downtown Seattle. It would also provide additional transit connections to University of Washington campuses and other educational facilities along the regional light rail system.

The light rail extension would also connect the public to regional activity centers, such as the Tacoma Dome, Lumen Field, T-Mobile Park, and the Seattle Convention Center. TDLE would improve access to these regional destinations for all populations.

As transportation costs, such as gas, tolls, and parking, continue to rise, these expenses increase burdens on low-income residents and impede access to employment, educational opportunities, and health care services. Effective transit may help eliminate or reduce the expense of automobile ownership and provide access to economic opportunity for disadvantaged populations.

1.2.2.4 State and Regional Environmental and Sustainability Goals

Environmental and sustainability goals of the state and region, as established in Washington state law and embodied in PSRC's VISION 2050 and 2018 Regional Transportation Plan, include reducing GHG emissions by decreasing VMT.

Washington has the goal of reducing overall GHG emissions in the state to 25 percent below 1990 levels by 2035 and to either 50 percent below 1990 levels by 2050 or 70 percent below Washington's current predicted emissions for 2050. With half of the Puget Sound region's GHG emissions coming from transportation activities, PSRC's VISION 2050 calls for developing a more sustainable transportation system. The transportation policies in VISION 2050 call for reducing pollution through cleaner fuels; promoting additional transit service; and promoting land use development patterns that shift trips from driving alone to transit, walking, and biking (PSRC 2020a). Washington state law sets goals to decrease the annual per capita VMT by 30 percent by 2035 and 50 percent by 2050 (RCW 47.01.440).

TDLE is expected to reduce dependency on single-occupancy vehicles, slow down growth in VMT, conserve energy, and reduce GHG emissions, helping to achieve Washington state's GHG emissions goals.

1.3 Planning History of the TDLE Corridor

High-capacity transit between Seattle and Tacoma has been included in Sound Transit’s Sound Move, Sound Transit 2, and Sound Transit 3 regional transit system plans. The Sound Transit 2 Plan built upon Sound Transit’s first phase of investment in the region’s mass transit system, Sound Move. The Sound Transit 2 Plan added regional express bus and commuter rail service while including 36 additional miles of light rail to form a 55-mile regional system. The Sound Transit 2 Plan included studying high-capacity transit in the Federal Way to Tacoma corridor to inform the future expansion plans that are part of the Sound Transit 3 Plan.

The Sound Transit 3 Plan would add 62 new miles of light rail to the Puget Sound regional system, totaling approximately 116 miles. Sound Transit 3 extends light rail from Federal Way to Tacoma, as well as to Everett, South Kirkland, Issaquah, downtown Redmond, and the Seattle neighborhoods of West Seattle and Ballard. Express bus and commuter rail service expansion was also included in the Sound Transit 3 Plan. Table 1-1 lists the previous plans and studies of high-capacity transit service expansion between Seattle and Tacoma.

Table 1-1 History of Plans and Studies in the TDLE Corridor

Year	History
1996	Regional Transit Long-Range Vision: Sound Transit adopted, and the voters approved, funding for the Sound Move Plan (Sound Transit 1996), which identified a potential rail extension between Federal Way and Tacoma.
2004	Central Puget Sound Region High-Capacity Transit Corridor Assessment: PSRC analyzed data to assess high-capacity transit modes in the study corridors, including SeaTac to Tacoma. The assessment concluded that high-capacity transit would support the long-range land use plans and the projected growth in Tacoma, Federal Way, and SeaTac (PSRC 2004).
2005	Regional Transit Long-Range Plan Update: Sound Transit published a supplemental EIS and approved the Long-Range Plan Update (Sound Transit 2005a and 2005b), which included potential rail extensions from Central Link to Tacoma Dome Link. Issue Paper S.1: Tacoma Link (now T Line) Integration with Central Link was completed in March 2005 and summarized how a light rail extension between Seattle and Tacoma could be phased and implemented.
2008	Sound Transit 2 Plan: Sound Transit adopted the plan and prepared the Sound Transit 2 South Corridor Design Report, which studied light rail transit between S 200th Street and the Tacoma Dome Station along the I-5 and SR 99 corridors (Sound Transit 2008). The corridor was considered in two sections, S 200th Street to Federal Way Transit Center, and Federal Way Transit Center to Tacoma Dome.
2014	Regional Transit Long-Range Plan Update: Sound Transit updated its long-range plan and prepared a SEPA Final Supplemental EIS (Sound Transit 2014a and 2014b). This update identified regional light rail extension between Federal Way and Tacoma in the TDLE corridor.
2014	Federal Way to Tacoma High-Capacity Transit Corridor Study: Sound Transit completed this study, which evaluated options to provide high-capacity transit service between the Federal Way Transit Center and the Tacoma Dome Station area (Sound Transit 2014c and 2014d).
2016	Sound Transit 3 System Plan: Sound Transit adopted the Sound Transit 3 Plan, which included an extension of light rail from the Federal Way Transit Center to the Tacoma Dome, with stations in the South Federal Way, Fife, East Tacoma, and Tacoma Dome areas (Sound Transit 2016). Operations planning also identified the need for an operations and maintenance facility to serve the south corridor and elements of the entire Link light rail system.
2020	VISION 2050: PSRC adopts VISION 2050, which identifies light rail in the project corridor and incorporates a focus on locating growth near high-capacity transit facilities.

EIS = Environmental Impact Statement.
 PSRC = Puget Sound Regional Council.
 SEPA = State Environmental Policy Act.
 TDLE = Tacoma Dome Link Extension.

The transportation mode and corridor served by TDLE were identified through the multiyear planning process for the Regional Transit Long-Range Plan and Sound Transit 3. Based on prior studies listed in Table 1-1 and public involvement, the Sound Transit Board adopted the Sound Transit 3 Plan in June 2016, which included light rail transit as the mode to serve the South Corridor connecting Seattle to Tacoma as part of the regional light rail system.

1.4 Next Steps and Schedule

1.4.1 Project Schedule

Figure 1-3 shows the anticipated schedule milestones for construction of TDLE. The forecasted in-service date for TDLE is 2035, with parking at the South Federal Way and Fife stations opening by 2038, per the system expansion realignment plan adopted by Sound Transit Board Resolution R2021-05.

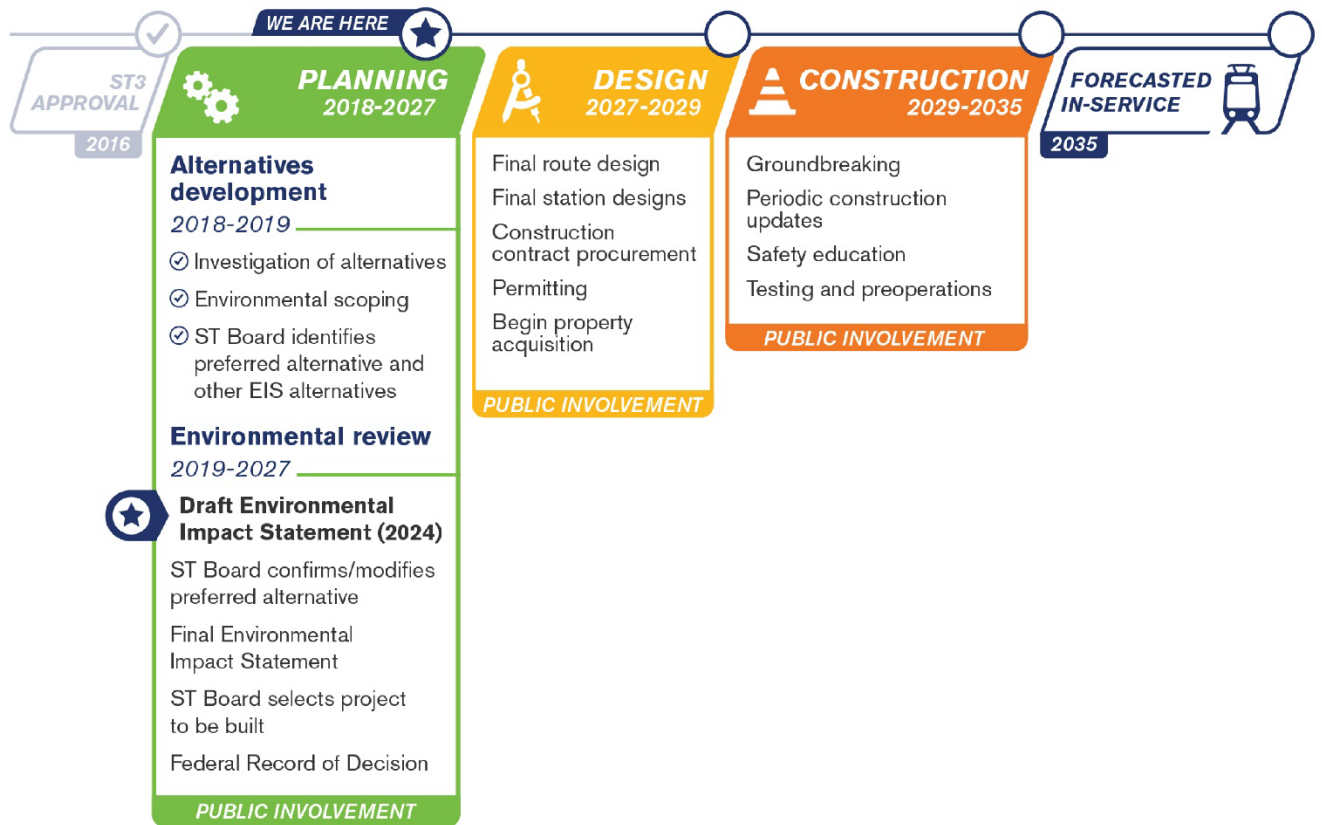


Figure 1-3 Project Milestones

1.4.2 Draft EIS Review and Comment

The Draft EIS is available at Sound Transit offices, online, and at public places listed in the Fact Sheet. Please see the Fact Sheet at the beginning of this Draft EIS for details, including how to submit comments during the 60-day formal public comment period.

1.4.3 Final EIS and Project Decision

Sound Transit and FTA will prepare a Final EIS that analyzes the Preferred Alternative along with the other alternatives evaluated in the Draft EIS. The Final EIS will include and respond to the substantive comments received on the Draft EIS. It will also describe proposed environmental commitments to mitigate project impacts. After the Final EIS is published, the Sound Transit Board will select the project to be built. FTA is anticipated to publish a Record of Decision (ROD) for the project, which would document its findings that the project has met the requirements of NEPA and related environmental regulations. The ROD would describe FTA's environmental determination on the project, the project description, the alternatives considered, the basis for the decision to approve the project, and the required environmental commitments. Issuance of the ROD completes FTA's NEPA process and is a prerequisite for federal funding or approvals.

1.4.4 Benefits and Disadvantages of Delaying Project Implementation

As required by SEPA, this section discusses the benefits and disadvantages of delaying the proposed project instead of approving it now.

Delaying the project would postpone impacts associated with project construction but would also postpone realizing a major component of the region's long-range plans for managing growth and transportation and the opportunity to link neighborhoods with Puget Sound regional employment centers. Delay would limit economic development from the movement of people and goods and allow projects to develop that might preclude or increase the cost of TDLE.

A substantial delay in implementing TDLE would inhibit the region's ability to accommodate growth, as articulated in local and regional plans. This would lead to a number of other consequences, including changed development patterns, steadily increasing corridor roadway congestion, and deteriorating transit performance and reliability, with related air quality issues and higher energy usage.