

Sound Transit Community Oversight Panel Hybrid Meeting Summary

August 14, 2024

COP Members Present: Linda Dorris, Paul Thompson, Mark Lewington, Tom Norcott, Tina Pierce, James Peyton, Charlotte Murry, Zak Osborne, Lorenzo Frazier, Trevor Reed

COP Members Absent: Diana Cambronero Venegas, Scott Lampe, Donia Zaheri, Lucas Simons

Others Present: Adam Montee, Katie Flores, Nancy Thai

Discussion with Interim CEO Goran Sparrman

- Goran Sparrman, Interim CEO

Interim CEO Goran Sparrman last presented at the COP in June and shared updates about external challenges and changes. This time he shared updates about internal changes, driven by the six TAG recommendations. These recommendations included building trust within staff and addressing internal processes and challenges, such as agency silos, improving efficiency, and collaborating across the agency. Interim CEO's Sparrman's contract ends Jan 12, 2025 and he is implementing significant changes in the agency before his last day. In the agency, there was a lack of clarity of who owned problems and drove solutions and staff were not empowered to problem-solve. Interim CEO Sparrman worked to remove the silos and improve collaboration amongst staff. He changed the agency management structure from 18 separate departments to a cabinet structure. The cabinet members oversee their areas and, together with the CEO office, manage the agency together. Staff worked to identify and define the functions of each department so there is clarity of where each function lives. Staff are currently identifying each person in the agency (about 1,300 people) and ensuring that each person has a specific position and function and reviewing if there are redundancies or gaps and will redeploy resources based on this process. There is some nervousness amongst staff, but overall there is a positive reaction. The goal is that each person has clarity and the right management support to do their job. Having a clear chain of command helps reduce "circling the problem" so people know if they need to escalate an issue. Interim CEO Sparrman is very impressed with the caliber of staff at the agency, and staff have shared they appreciate the changes. Staff are aiming to wrap up the change implementation in November.

A member asked if there will be a new organization chart in November. Interim CEO Sparrman responded, yes, there will be a refined org chart with the cabinet members listed. The cabinets are:

- Legal
- Capital delivery, with four portfolio leads (two of which have already accepted offers)
 - ST 2
 - West Seattle and Ballard
 - Tacoma Dome and Snohomish
 - Sounder Program
- Service Delivery, which includes the Asset management program, passenger experience, operations, and state of good repair projects
- Agency oversight office
- Finance and business administration, which includes IT and procurement departments
- People and culture – HR (deputy CEO level)
- Civil rights, equity, and inclusion
- Strategy – a new department created
 - A new position (deputy CEO level) that will open at the end of this week

A member asked if Interim CEO Sparrman has a coach like the last CEO did. No, not currently. The member continued to ask if he has consultants. Yes, there are several consultants and contracts. One example is Eagle Hill, a major HR firm, who is helping achieve this substantial agency culture change and transformation endeavor now. There is also a consultant to develop larger agency communications strategy.

A member asked how is the internal agency restructuring impacting project timelines? The change work being done now will hopefully help projects save time and improve efficiency, which translates to time and cost savings. Members representing the Everett area are anxious for projects to move forward. Interim CEO Sparrman replied that these agency changes and transformation may actually accelerate timelines with more efficiencies and streamlined decision making. Financial process improvements will also help make funding available when projects are ready to move forward. Interim CEO Sparrman commended the Board for recognizing the challenges early and listening to the TAG recommendations.

One member brought up that East Link was behind schedule and the plinth issue along the I-90 bridge and asked if there will compensation for the tax payers. Interim CEO Sparrman responded that they are approaching mediation in October in good faith and will work with the contractor to see what the contractor will cover and also reflect on the agency's role. They are over 90% done replacing the plinths (there were boxes glued on the plinths that needed to be fixed and laminate that had quality issues) and just started system testing between Mercer Island and South Bellevue, but need to also test along the I-90 floating bridge. Sound Transit is aiming for late 2025 for revenue service.

Interim CEO Sparrman continued that he is working to empower, and increase accountability of, staff lower in the organizational hierarchy to make key decisions and share power. Sound Transit staff have not historically made recommendations to the Board, but drawing from TAG recommendations, the agency is changing so that staff can help the Board understand the data and offer a staff recommendation. This work is still in progress and will need to continue with the new CEO.

One member asked how staff can move feasible recommendations forward without being burdened by political forces. One example shared of politics being challenging and costing time and money was the East Link Extension in Bellevue, where there was controversy over the downtown Bellevue tunnel. Interim CEO Sparrman responded that the CEO's job is not to make policy, that's the Board's role, but the CEO and staff help the Board understand the consequences of their decisions. Another example was a second tunnel through downtown Seattle and whether that was really needed. Interim CEO Sparrman responded that Sound Transit does need a second tunnel through downtown Seattle in order to expand to Everett and Tacoma. The current tunnel was a bus tunnel and it already needed rail repairs in January 2024. The second tunnel is required to be able to take the first tunnel offline for repairs and improvements. For example, there have been some power outages on the line, but there have been some continued issues with the 2 Line and it's related to the technology implemented and Sound Transit is testing for redundancy (currently conducting an independent review of the entire system for system resiliency).

A member asked about Sound Transit jurisdiction and rights-of-way along their routes. Interim CEO Sparrman responded that Sound Transit has to follow local agency jurisdiction rules with each agency that they work with. In WA state, there is currently no legislation that allows Sound Transit to overrule local agency jurisdictions. Sound Transit has been partnering with different agencies on its projects and that's been going well so far. For example, WSDOT has been a great partner to work with addressing the I-90 floating bridge plinth issue since it's WSDOT's jurisdiction.

Interim CEO Sparrman shared that he hopes to come again to the COP before his last day.

Sound Transit Engagement Practices

- Alex Ko, Acting Director of Systems Engagement
- Andrea Burnett, Manager – Capital Project Engagement

Staff presented about Sound Transit's engagement with the public on decisions and project delivery, an important element of ST's work. Sound Transit's community engagement values are: building and maintaining relationships, honesty and integrity, empathy, and hard work and commitment. Engagement includes dialogue and feedback, using diverse methods to engage with the public via social media, mass mailers, events, and presenting at COP. Sharing accurate and timely information is key in transparent communication.

Sound Transit is a member of the local chapter of the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2). Sound Transit engagement staff take the IAP2 fundamentals course within their first year at the agency and use the engagement spectrum: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. Staff work to proactively engage with communities at the beginning of projects. One example is the Everett Link Extension open house on scoping and station locations. 1600 people attended (typically about 100 to 200 people attend), and staff engagement and community connection raised an early issue of a church that could potentially be affected by the line, and thus the congregation attended. This early engagement and outreach was so important to understand the potential issue, which may not have been discovered just from a technical perspective and analysis.

Staff work to balance public infrastructure goals with community needs. Sound Transit community engagement specialists are both project experts and community experts. They are liaisons between the community and project team, and are co-located on projects to advocate for community needs and at the table during planning and implementation. Community engagement team goals are: no surprises, responsiveness, minimize impact, positive relationships, keep the end in sight – highlight benefits on these long projects, and inclusivity. Staff transition from planning, design, and construction to start of service; they pass the engagement baton from capital project phase staff to start of service staff. There is also a business support program to support businesses in the project area.

A member commented that there is a lot of engagement at the beginning of a project with planning and design and wondered if there are mid-project updates. Yes, engagement occurs throughout the life of the project, for example with the Everett Link Extension, there are 19 engagement events (e.g., tablings and festivals).

The transition from construction phase to start of service includes messaging on what is changing, including bus-rail updates; working closely with local transit agencies that will tie into the Sound Transit line; safety engagement, especially with at-grade crossing (staff are working with 17 surrounding schools in Bellevue); and talking to the general public about how to ride and upcoming changes, like a new flat fare when the Lynnwood Link Extension opens, a station name change, and new sounds when trains begin operating.

During the start of service phase, staff conduct an equity review by the Office of Civil Rights, Equity and Inclusion and if there is an undue burden or disproportionate impact on people of a marginalized community, Sound Transit is required to mitigate that. There is current engagement work around safety and youth engagement, including at at-grade crossings in the Rainier Valley, which is of great interest to the Board and Interim CEO. As part of youth engagement, students got to visit an operations and

maintenance facility in south King County and learned about environmental work like soil and water testing.

Sound Transit has an equitable engagement center of expertise, which works towards the agency being an anti-racist organization, for example, working on acquiring more language access contracts to improve language access. Staff have reached out to other agencies such as RTD (Denver, CO), TriMet (Portland, OR), DART (Dallas, TX), and King County Metro (Seattle, WA) to learn from their programs.

The risk of not doing engagement early can cause delays and be costly, it is a critical function Sound Transit.

A member asked how many people are on the engagement teams and what their budget is. There are 13 to 14 staff on the capital engagement team and their budgets are tied to each project. There are 10 staff (11 when fully staffed) on the systems engagement team and their budget is around \$2 million. Staff (Alex Ko) currently reports to the Executive Director of Communications and Marketing, who will report to the new Chief Strategy Officer (but current reports to CEO).

Another member commented that it would be helpful for project directors to bring their engagement staff (like when the director for the Federal Way Link Extension came) to be able to hear what the responses and challenges are from the community members.

One member asked about the process of moving an issue forward when the engagement team hears something from the public, such as safety around at-grade crossings. Staff responded that political will can play a factor. Staff are gathering information now, then focusing on specifics of which intersections does the agency need to focus on or are particularly problematic (looking at data like near collision and collisions), and in the next year or two identify solutions and then moving to design and construction. Some of the funding will come from Sound Transit's budget and some from the city Department of Transportation.

A member asked where staff would put Sound Transit on the IAP2 spectrum with their engagement. It depends on the project, but often in the "Inform" and "Consult" columns since the Board makes final decisions. However, staff are curious if there will be future opportunities for communities to have more influence as decision making is being flowed down the organizational chart (as Interim CEO Sparrman mentioned earlier in the agency transformation work and empowering staff more).

Welcome new member Trevor Reed (East King County)

Sounder South Strategic Plan Update

- Melissa Flores Saxe, High Capacity Project Development Director – Sounder South

Staff presented an update on the Sounder South Strategic Plan to address implementation of capital improvements along the south corridor. Staff are revisiting the Sounder South priorities to meet today's and future ridership demand. Prior to COVID Sounder south trains were in high demand and created crowdedness of trains, which saw 16,000 riders daily, at that time the plan was to implement longer platforms for 7 car trains. This work was paused during COVID and ridership decreased, but its slowly coming back, with about 7,000 daily peak riders now. Staff are also looking at expanding ridership and tapping into a new market, including conducting engagement and demographics analysis of the corridor. Staff are also exploring a service model change from a peak commuter model to one of regional travel. There was robust community engagement in south King and Pierce County and staff collected many

responses (over 5,600 responses, even more than West Seattle and Ballard engagement at that time in Fall 2023). There is potential interest that Sounder could offer mid-day trips, which it does not currently offer. It was noted that that 40% of people who responded were nonriders. Staff used different engagement methods to reach people, including Instagram posts, tablings, and a staff member who spoke Spanish went on Spanish radio. There is interest in mid-day trips (currently trains begin at 2:30p) and weekend service. Overall, respondents shared that they preferred adding new trips over longer trains, though current regular riders during peak commute times are less supportive of reducing the frequency of peak period trains (which may need to happen if Sounder were to offer more trips).

Staff conducted a demographics and equity study with a goal of understanding how to better meet the needs of communities Sounder South serves, especially low-income and people of color, and also a potential new market to tap into. Sounder South offers service during peak commute times, like other agencies, and caters to traditional office workday schedules. Staff used three data sources – Replica cell phone travel data, which provides data on where cell phone users are travelling in the corridor; ORCA card taps on Sounder and nearby bus routes, and King County Metro Rider/Non-rider survey (2023). Data show that people are travelling along SR 167 and that indicates a potential to offer Sounder service. There is a similar percentage of people who travel on Saturdays as during the weekday and a high percentage of all modes of travel occur when Sounder has no or limited service. Data also show that people from Seattle want to travel down to Tacoma and that people are interested in staying in the south, travelling from Tacoma to Kent or Tukwila, not necessarily all the way to Seattle.

A member asked how Sounder may be in competition with the Link light rail. The Sounder South does not overlap with the Link. The Sounder North is different and doesn't serve the residential area as much. Another member shared an anecdotal story about checking which mode will get people to their destination quicker, the Sounder or a bus, and it depends on conditions and traffic. Staff shared that Sounder is giving choices to riders and has been well used during sporting event games.

Staff met with five peer agencies in Los Angeles, CA (Metro Link); Salt lake City, UT (UTA); Washington, DC (Marc); Chicago, IL (Metra); and Northern VA (VRE) because these agencies also coordinate with host railroads (e.g. BNSF Railway). Peak ridership is down for all systems compared to pre-pandemic levels. Agencies that offered off-peak service is seeing evening and weekend service return quicker than peak periods. The key to adding more service on Sounder is dependent on partnering with BNSF, the host railroad that Sounder and Amtrak operate on.

From past experience, Sounder ridership has increased as more trains were added. Looking at the ridership forecast (slide 16 in Sounder South Strategic Plan Update presentation) – the black bar is conservative (assuming a continued hybrid work environment, three days in the office), the pink bar is base line (assuming four to five days in the office), and the blue bar is a high estimate (assuming a full return to the office, a very robust economy that's higher than historical trends, and that PSRC implements the vehicle-per-mile tax vs gas tax). During pre-COVID times, staff estimated they needed 10-car train sets to accommodate demand, but that doesn't seem needed now until later, in 2046. Staff presented a similar presentation (as the one given to the COP) to the System Expansion Committee on June 13 to reconsider the timeline to expanding round trips versus extending platforms based on public feedback and data.

A member asked about adding more trains instead of longer trains. The current contract with BNSF has a fixed number of 13 roundtrips and it would be a tough negotiation to change that because Amtrak also uses the rail and Sound Transit cannot disrupt the freight train system (which is vital to the economic health of the region). Staff would like to start conversations with BNSF now to understand their interests and concerns in adding additional Sounder trains. Another member shared a recommendation that Sound Transit could consider adding bypasses to move trains to the side in the negotiations with BNSF.

A member asked about the BNSF rights-of-way. The rights-of-way widths vary along the corridor. Sound Transit owns their own Sounder corridor in Pierce County (about 17 miles) and would also need to improve that section if they were to enter into negotiations with BNSF to add additional trains.

One member noted that the Sounder North does not have much recovery since the pandemic and wondered if it makes sense to continue operating. Staff are planning to return two more trains to the system to help mitigate the traffic that will be caused by the future WSDOT I-5 work.

Based on updated data and feedback, staff are now considering swapping their original timelines and advancing additional roundtrips in 2036 (instead of 2046) and extending platforms in 2046 (instead of 2036).

Panel Chair and Vice-Chair Nominations, Discussion, Adoption of Previous Meeting Summary, Member Reports

Nomination of Tina Pierce for Chair (seconded) and Charlotte Murry for Vice Chair (seconded), to start in the regular October meeting.

Motion to elect Tina for Chair and Charlotte for Vice Chair (seconded) by acclamation, no objections, motion passed.

A member shared that they appreciated the Sounder data and that the agency is willing to change their plans based on ridership, data, and public feedback. We need to have a system in place and available to use to train the next generation to use Sounder and public transit.

There was some disappointment in the Sounder presentation of the generalization of data and explaining how the data is being used to inform potential markets and knowing if the data accurately captures data about people who have low incomes or people of color.

There was a comment that the Sound Transit budgets are tied to projects and wondering if that's typical of these types of projects. Another member responded that it seems to be.

There is an edit to the July 10 notes in the workforce development and apprenticeship program section to change "number of staff at the agency" to "the total number of workers working on projects" in the first sentence. The administrator will update the notes and send back out to the COP members.

Some members are planning to ride in from the Lynnwood station for the next meeting.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, September 11, 2024, 5:30 – 8:15 PM

- At-Grade Crossing Program Update
- Bus Rapid Transit Program Update