## STAFF REPORT

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| **Agenda Item:** | 8 | **Name:** | Mary Bourguignon |
| **Proposed No**.: | 2021-0423.2 | **Date:** | February 15, 2022 |

**COMMITTEE ACTION**

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| ***Proposed Substitute Motion 2021-0423.2, which would accept Metro’s 2021 System Evaluation report, passed out of the Regional Transit Committee on January 19, 2022, and the Transportation Economy & Environment Committee on February 15, 2022, with a “Do Pass” recommendation. The motion was amended in the Regional Transit Committee with a technical amendment to correct an inadvertent omission in the section on Reliability.***  |

**SUBJECT**

Proposed Motion 2021-0423 would accept Metro’s 2021 System Evaluation report.

**SUMMARY**

Each year, King County Metro Transit prepares a **System Evaluation**[[1]](#footnote-1) report to assess the status of fixed-route, Dial-A-Ride Transit (DART), water taxi, and flexible services, and to identify investment needs based on the King County Metro Service Guidelines.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Typically, the System Evaluation is based on data from March through June. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 System Evaluation is based on data from September 2020 through mid-March 2021. This timeframe was entirely during the time of the pandemic, when transit ridership and service levels were significantly reduced.[[3]](#footnote-3) As a result, some of the usual analysis was not completed, and information from the report will not be used for making service decisions. Based on the information that was analyzed, the report identified, and Attachment 3 to this staff report summarizes, the following service hour needs, based on the priorities for service investments:

* **Crowding (Priority 1):** 0 hours
* **Reliability (Priority 2):** 6,500 hours[[4]](#footnote-4)
* **Service Growth (Priority 3):** Analysis was not completed due to the pandemic

The System Evaluation report is a dual referral. The legislation was amended and approved by the RTC on January 19, 2022, and it now moves to TrEE. Proposed Motion 2021-0423 would accept the System Evaluation report.

**BACKGROUND**

**NOTE:** The 2021 System Evaluation report, which was due to the Council on October 31, 2021, is the last report to be prepared under the Service Guidelines adopted by Ordinance 18301. Future System Evaluation reports will be prepared under the Service Guidelines and reporting requirements of Ordinance 19367, which took effect in December 2021. All references in this staff report and in the 2021 System Evaluation report itself, are to the requirements of the **previous** Service Guidelines and reporting requirements.

The System Evaluation report is meant to provide an annual review of the performance of each route in Metro’s system, with information about fixed-route, Dial-A-Ride Transit (DART), water taxi,[[5]](#footnote-5) and flexible services.[[6]](#footnote-6) The report, which is based on the criteria in the adopted Service Guidelines,[[7]](#footnote-7) is used to identify the need for service investments on individual routes, as well as to identify low-performing routes that could be candidates for reduction. The report is required to include:

* The corridors analyzed to determine the Metro All-Day and Peak Network with a summary of resulting scores and assigned service levels as determined by the King County Metro Service Guidelines;
* The results of the analysis, including a list of over-served and under-served transit corridors and the estimated number of service hours, as either an increase or decrease, necessary to meet each underserved corridor’s needs;
* The performance of transit services by route and any change in the King County Metro Service Guidelines thresholds since the previous reporting period, using the performance measures identified in the Strategic Plan and the Service Guidelines;
* A list of transit service changes made to route and corridors of the network since the last reporting period;
* Network and rider connectivity associated with transit services delivered by other providers; and
* A list of potential changes, if any, to the Strategic Plan and Service Guidelines to better meet their policy intent.

**ANALYSIS**

The 2021 System Evaluation report is very different from both past and future reports:

1. **The 20201 System Evaluation is the last report to use the 2016 Service Guidelines.** The 2021 System Evaluation report, which was due to the Council on October 31, 2021, is the last report to be prepared under the Service Guidelines adopted through Ordinance 18301 and the reporting requirements in effect at that time.

As a result, even though the Regional Transit Committee (RTC) and Council recently adopted updated transit policies, all references in this staff report and in the 2021 System Evaluation report itself are based on the requirements of the previous Service Guidelines and reporting requirements. Future System Evaluation reports will be prepared under the Service Guidelines and reporting requirements adopted by Ordinance 19367, which took effect in December 2021.

1. **The COVID-19 pandemic affected the report’s timeframe, data collection, and analysis, limiting the information that could be provided.** Typically, the System Evaluation report is based on data from March through June. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 System Evaluation is based on data from September 2020 through mid-March 2021.

Because the 2021 System Evaluation report was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, during a time in which a significant number of Metro fixed-route services were fully or partially suspended and in which ridership was significantly lower than pre-COVID levels,[[8]](#footnote-8) the 2021 report does not include information on Service Growth (Priority 3) service investment needs; Peak Route Analysis; or the Metro Connects Progress Report. The 2021 System Evaluation report also does not identify the top 25 percent and bottom 25 percent of routes in terms of route productivity.

In addition, the 2021 System Evaluation omits several of the appendices that are typically included and includes several new appendices to summarize information about ridership and the status of service on individual routes both before and during the pandemic.

1. **Data from this report will not be used for service decisions.** The System Evaluation report’s primary purpose is to provide performance information about transit service that can be used to guide decisions on service investments or reductions, or other changes to how the transit system operates. Because the 2021 report was prepared using information collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, during a time in which ridership and transit service were both significantly reduced, the report states that the information that was collected will not be used to guide service decisions.

Specifically, in a section titled “How Will Metro use the 2021 System Evaluation Report?”[[9]](#footnote-9) the report states:

“Metro is presently planning to make some permanent service changes in 2023. These could include additions, changes, or permanent reductions. Metro will not be using fall 2020 data to make near-term service change decisions. Instead, Metro will continue to use 2019 as the baseline to inform these decisions. To inform service investment decisions for the fall 2022 service change and beyond, Metro proposes to use 2019 data, pandemic-era data, and any pandemic recovery data available at the time. As a result, the 2021 System Evaluation Report will not be used as it has been in the past.”

However, the report does point out several findings about ridership patterns during the pandemic that point to the transit needs of essential workers who cannot telecommute. Specifically, the peak periods saw larger ridership declines than off-peak periods; some of the largest ridership declines were on peak-only routes; and many of the routes that retained a higher share of their ridership serve South King County.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Despite the unusual circumstances and limited data available, the report does provide information about the status of transit service during the pandemic. Attachment 3 to this staff report summarizes the report’s findings on:

**Bus service evaluation.** Bus service is evaluated in the System Evaluation using the Service Guidelines’ four priorities[[11]](#footnote-11) for investments in transit service, as well as the peak analysis that is completed for peak-only service:

* **Priority 1: Passenger loads (Reduce Crowding)**

Crowding happens when a vehicle’s average maximum load is more than the threshold for the vehicle type or when the average passenger load is more than the number of seats for 20 or more minutes. Trips must be crowded consistently for several months to be identified for investment.[[12]](#footnote-12)

**The 2021 System Evaluation did not identify a** **needed investment of annual service hours to reduce crowding.** The report does note that Metro added 24,000 service hours to three routes (the A, D, and E RapidRide lines) in September 2020 to address crowding caused by the temporary load limits that Metro established to maintain social distancing. (These load limits were eased and then removed during 2021 as vaccination levels increased.) The report notes that Metro will monitor ridership trends as the region recovers from the pandemic to watch for potential crowding issues.

* **Priority 2: Schedule reliability (Improve Reliability)**

Reliability is measured as the extent to which buses arrive on time.[[13]](#footnote-13) Routes on which buses arrive late more than 20 percent of the time all day, or more than 35 percent of the time during the afternoon peak, are candidates for investment. The System Evaluation notes that investment can come in the form of added service hours (by adding running time to existing schedules) or through capital investments made with jurisdictional partners to improve speed and reliability.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The report notes that during the pandemic many routes experienced reliability challenges because there was so little traffic that the buses were running early. Metro adjusted bus schedules to account for this, but the report notes that Metro will be monitoring traffic levels as the region recovers from the pandemic to adjust schedules as needed as traffic returns.

**The 2021 System Evaluation identifies a** **needed investment of 6,500[[15]](#footnote-15) annual service hours on 20 routes to improve reliability.** Because of the incomplete nature of the information available for the 2021 System Evaluation report, Metro has stated that the report will not be used to guide future service decisions, and that service changes will not be made during 2022, other than continuing to restore service suspended during the pandemic and to add service to the RapidRide H Line, which is planned to open in 2022. As a result, it is not clear how or when these reliability needs would be addressed.

* **Priority 3: All-Day and Peak-Only Network (Service Growth)**

The previous Service Guidelines summarized the criteria Metro uses to set target service levels along corridors to develop an all-day and peak-only network: corridor productivity (aka land use) (50 percent); social equity indicators (25 percent); and geographic value (25 percent), with investment in new service prioritized based on the scores for geographic value, productivity, and equity in that order.[[16]](#footnote-16) Target service levels are adjusted for ridership loads, service span, and the need for additional peak-hour service. The needed investment is defined as the gap between the target service level and the amount of service currently provided on that corridor.

**The 2021 System Evaluation did not complete an analysis of Priority 3 (Service Growth) needs.** The report notes that the incomplete data available due to the suspension of so many routes and the low ridership levels would not provide good information about a route’s performance or potential.

The 2021 System Evaluation report notes that in Fall 2020 Metro invested 3,900 annual service hours in service growth (Priority 3) to meet transit needs identified as part of the Renton-Kent-Auburn Area Mobility Project.[[17]](#footnote-17) This service restructure was initiated prior to the pandemic.

* **Priority 4: Route Productivity**

Productivity is defined by the level of demand for transit service. Appendix B of the 2021 System Evaluation provides route-by-route productivity data. However, because of the pandemic conditions, it does not identify the top and bottom 25 percent of routes. In a typical year, based on the previous Service Guidelines, the top 25 percent would have been eligible for investment and the bottom 25 percent eligible for reduction if the budget or other conditions required service reductions.

* **Peak Analysis**

Peak-only routes, those that run only during the morning and afternoon peak periods on weekdays, receive an additional level of analysis that compares the peak route to the local alternative (if one exists). This additional analysis was not completed for the 2021 System Evaluation report because most peak-only routes were suspended during the pandemic.

**Marine service evaluation.** The report notes that Metro’s Marine Division provides passenger ferry service on two routes between Downtown Seattle and West Seattle and between Downtown Seattle and Vashon Island. The report provides information on ridership and route reliability, noting that service on both routes was reduced during the reporting period due to low ridership during the pandemic.

**Flexible services evaluation.** Metro’s flexible services program includes Community Ride, Community Shuttle, Community Van, and feeder-to-fixed route services (such as Via). One feature of flexible services is that Metro can design pilot projects in specific geographic areas to complement existing bus service and test emerging technologies or new service models.

The System Evaluation notes that many flexible services were suspended during portions of 2020 as part of pandemic service reductions, although several services were restored in late 2020 and several new services began operations during the pandemic. The report also notes that new flexible services resulting from the Renton-Kent-Auburn Area Mobility Project[[18]](#footnote-18) and North Eastside Mobility Project[[19]](#footnote-19) are planned for the coming year.

**Metro Connects Progress Report.** The original Metro Connects long-range plan, which was adopted in early 2017,[[20]](#footnote-20) states that Metro’s the annual System Evaluation report will report on progress toward the Metro Connects vision. The 2021 System Evaluation report does not include a Metro Connects progress report due to the impacts of the pandemic.

**Integration with Sound Transit.** The System Evaluation discusses integration with Sound Transit, noting that during 2021 Metro was in the process of planning to implement a service restructure in October 2021, the North Link Connections Mobility Project,[[21]](#footnote-21) in conjunction with Sound Transit’s extension of Link light rail to Northgate. The report lists corridors in which Sound Transit is the primary provider of high-capacity transit service and notes that, as Link light rail continues to expand, the number of corridors for which Sound Transit is the primary high-capacity transit provider will increase. The report states that Metro will restructure its services as needed to integrate with Sound Transit services.

**Appendices.** The System Evaluation’s appendices typically include route-by-route metrics that are used to prioritize service investments and reductions (if needed), and to set target service levels. Due to the pandemic, many of the typical appendices are not included in the 2021 System Evaluation report, while several new appendices comparing ridership and service levels prior to and during the pandemic have been added. The appendices include:

1. Methodologies and Process Descriptions
2. Route Productivity Data
*Does not identify top and bottom 25 percent of routes*
3. Route-level Reliability
4. Route-level Ridership and Hours
*Shows Fall 2020 route status and compares ridership and service hours in Fall 2019 to Fall 2020 | Separate table shows comparison of ridership and service hours in Fall 2018 and Fall 2019*
5. Service Changes and Corridor Changes
*Shows changes resulting from service restorations between September 2020 and March 2021, the Fall 2020 Renton-Kent-Auburn Area Mobility Project,[[22]](#footnote-22) and a reduction in 175,000 service hours due to the smaller Seattle Transportation Benefit District approved in November 2020[[23]](#footnote-23)*
6. Route Changes
*Shows full and partial suspensions due to COVID-19, listing the change in weekday, Saturday, and Sunday trips between Spring and Fall 2020 and between Fall 2020 and Spring 2021*

**Action at RTC.** At its January 19, 2022, meeting, the RTC approved the legislation with a technical amendment to correct an inadvertent omission in the transmitted report.

**Next steps.** Proposed Motion 2021-0423 would accept the King County Metro Transit 2021 System Evaluation. The legislation was approved by the RTC on January 19, 2022, and it now moves to TrEE and then to the full Council.

1. Please note that the 2021 System Evaluation report, which was due to the Council on October 31, 2021, is the last report to be prepared under the guidance of Ordinance 17143, as amended by Ordinances 17597 and 18301. Future reports will be guided by Ordinance 19367. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This System Evaluation report was prepared under the Service Guidelines adopted through Ordinance 18301. Future reports will be based on the Service Guidelines adopted through Ordinance 19367. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Metro began implementing emergency transit service reductions on March 23, 2020. During the timeframe of this report, fixed-route transit service was operating at approximately 85 percent of pre-COVID levels, and ridership was ranging between 30 and 40 percent of pre-COVID levels. Service and ridership information during the pandemic can be found on Metro’s [Rider Dashboard](https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/transportation/metro/about/accountability-center/rider-dashboard.aspx). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The transmitted report erroneously omitted Reliability information for the RapidRide lines. This was corrected with a technical amendment at the RTC meeting on January 19, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ordinance 18413 included a requirement that passenger ferry services be integrated with and subject to the methodology of the Service Guidelines. In response, the Marine Division’s water taxi services were included in the System Evaluation report. The portions of Ordinance 18413 related to the Marine Division were repealed with the passage of Ordinance 18777, which created the Metro Transit Department and moved the Marine Division into Metro. Thus, although the water taxi-specific provisions of Ordinance 18413 are no longer in force, the Marine Division’s current status as a part of Metro means that water taxi services continue to be analyzed as part of the System Evaluation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Motion 13736 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ordinance 18301 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Metro began implementing emergency transit service reductions on March 23, 2020. During the timeframe of this report, fixed-route transit service was operating at approximately 85 percent of pre-COVID levels, and ridership was ranging between 30 and 40 percent of pre-COVID levels. Service and ridership information during the pandemic can be found on Metro’s [Rider Dashboard](https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/transportation/metro/about/accountability-center/rider-dashboard.aspx). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Proposed Motion 2021-0423, Attachment A, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Proposed Motion 2021-0423, Attachment A, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The updated Service Guidelines, adopted under Ordinance 19367, use three priorities for making service investment decisions (Crowding, Reliability, and Service Growth). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See 2021 System Evaluation (2021-0423, Attachment A) Appendix A for Methodologies and Process Descriptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. On time is defined as up to 1.5 minutes before the scheduled time and up to 5.5 minutes after the scheduled time (See 2021 System Evaluation (2021-0423, Attachment A) Appendix A). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See 2021 System Evaluation (2021-0423, Attachment A) Appendix A for Methodologies and Process Descriptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The transmitted report erroneously omitted Reliability information for the RapidRide lines (the E Line did show Reliability investment needs). This was corrected with a technical amendment that was approved at the January 19, 2022, RTC meeting. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. These factors and the weighting and prioritization are based on the Service Guidelines adopted through Ordinance 18301. Future System Evaluation reports will base Priority 3 (Service Growth) analysis on the factors and prioritization called for in the updated Service Guidelines adopted through Ordinance 19367. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ordinance 19097 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ordinance 19097 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ordinance 18944 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The 2021 System Evaluation report is the last report to be based on the Metro Connects plan adopted in 2017 through Ordinance 18449. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ordinance 19210 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ordinance 19097 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. In November 2014, Seattle voters approved a six-year transportation funding measure comprised of a 0.1 percent sales and use tax and a $60 vehicle license fee. In November 2020, Seattle voters renewed the funding measure at a lower level, by approving a 0.15 percent sales and use tax increase that expires on March 31, 2027. To implement the new, smaller funding measure, the City of Seattle and King County approved a Transit Service Funding Agreement that allowed Seattle to purchase bus service from Metro (Ordinance 19240). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)