## STAFF REPORT

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| **Agenda Item:** | 10 | **Name:** | Mary Bourguignon |
| **Proposed No**.: | 2021-B0048 | **Date:** | March 24, 2021 |

**SUBJECT**

Today’s briefing will share Metro’s response to a budget proviso that requested information about proposed updates to Metro’s Service Guidelines to cover information related to post-pandemic service restoration and service restructures.

**SUMMARY**

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly changed Metro's services, operations, and revenues. As of early March 2021, following several rounds of reductions and adjustments, Metro is operating approximately 85 percent of pre-COVID service levels.

In response to these long-term, emergency service reductions, Metro’s planned updates to its adopted policy documents,[[1]](#footnote-1) and a major service restructure proposed for September 2021, the Council included a proviso requirement[[2]](#footnote-2) in the 2021-2022 adopted budget that required Metro to provide a letter by March 1 describing: its plans to address service restoration and service restructures in the updated Service Guidelines.

Metro responded, as required, with a letter transmitted on March 1, 2021.

In terms of service restoration, Metro’s response describes the measures that will be used to evaluate service and plan for restoration, including ridership, crowding, equity, employer activity, and productivity; and regional indicators of recovery, including vaccine availability, and back to school and work plans.

In terms of service restructures, Metro’s response notes that updates to the Service Guidelines will clarify policies around service restructures and service hour redeployment, as well as how future restructures will be designed to prioritize transfers and avoid disruption to rider travel patterns.

**BACKGROUND**

**Pandemic-related operational changes.** The COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed Metro's services, operations, and revenues during 2020 and will continue to affect Metro’s budget and operations into the 2021-2022 biennium and potentially beyond that.

In response to declining ridership and to ensure safe operating conditions for its employees, Metro began implementing emergency transit service reductions[[3]](#footnote-3) on March 23, 2020, the day Governor Jay Inslee issued the "Stay Healthy, Stay Home" order for Washington State.[[4]](#footnote-4) Metro implemented additional rounds of emergency service reductions on April 6 and April 18, reducing weekday transit trips by 27 percent. Metro began restoring some reduced service at the June 2020 service change, made another round of adjustments at the September 2020 service change, and is planning an additional round of service restoration at the March 2021 service change.

As of early March 2021, Metro is operating at approximately 85 percent of its pre-COVID-19 service level.[[5]](#footnote-5) Approximately 414,000 Metro service hours are currently suspended. These include:

* All-day routes: nine routes fully suspended, 17 routes partially suspended; and
* Peak-only routes: 49 routes fully suspended, four routes partially suspended.

Metro also undertook a number of operational changes in response to the pandemic, including eliminating fare collection from March 21 to October 1, 2020; restricting boarding to rear doors only during that time and restoring front-door boarding only after installing dividers between operators and riders; requiring masks for operators and passengers and providing mask dispensers on board coaches; sanitizing coaches daily; and limiting the number of passengers on coaches to approximately 22 percent of regular capacity.

King County’s adopted 2021-2022 biennial budget funds a return to pre-COVID service levels by the end of 2022, not including any changes to service funded by the City of Seattle.[[6]](#footnote-6) Metro states that its current plans are to restore approximately half of the suspended service (200,000 service hours) at the September 2021 service change.

**Budget proviso.** As transit service continues to operate at reduced levels and Metro plans for service restoration, Metro is also preparing updates to its three adopted policy documents (Strategic Plan for Public Transportation, Service Guidelines, and Metro Connects long-range plan[[7]](#footnote-7)). These proposed updates are expected to be transmitted to the Council in late July 2021. In addition, Metro is developing the North Link Connections Mobility Project, a proposed service restructure to be implemented for the September 2021 opening of the Link light rail extension to Northgate, and which the Council will be considering this spring.

In response to this combination of long-term, emergency service reductions, updates to Metro’s policy documents, and a proposed major service restructure, the Council included a proviso requirement[[8]](#footnote-8) in the 2021-2022 adopted budget that required Metro to provide a letter by March 1 describing: its plans to address service restoration in the updated Service Guidelines; and proposed changes to the Service Guidelines related to service restructures. The proviso states:

P7 PROVIDED FURTHER THAT:[[9]](#footnote-9)

Of this appropriation, $100,000 shall not be expended or encumbered until the executive transmits a letter related to the plans to update the King County Metro Service Guidelines.

The letter shall:

A. Describe how the King County Metro Service Guidelines shall include a new section that addresses implementation of the restoration of transit service that was suspended or reduced during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, including, but not limited, to:

 1. Identifying how the performance of transit routes that were suspended or reduced during the pandemic will be evaluated, including how prepandemic ridership and productivity measures will be used to plan for proposed service restoration, service additions or service reductions;

 2. Identifying how pandemic-related operating restrictions, employer trends, new or expanded partner agency transit service and other factors will be used to plan for and implement service restoration, service additions or service reductions; and

 3. Describing how transit service restoration planning will be incorporated into the interim system network map to be developed for METRO CONNECTS;

B. Include a description of the changes proposed for the restructuring service section of the King County Metro Service Guidelines that addresses:

 1. How King County-funded transit service levels will be deployed when transit service is restructured to connect to a new or expanded high-capacity transit station operated by a service partner, such as Sound Transit, so that transit service span and frequency in the area is maintained or improved;

 2. How transit service restructures will be implemented to retain ridership and help ensure efficient transfers to transit service of partner agencies or other governments; and

 3. The conditions under which a service restructure to connect to a new or expanded high-capacity transit station could be phased to avoid disruptions to rider travel patterns; and

C. Offer a briefing to the regional transit committee and the mobility and environment committee, or their successors, to describe the changes the Metro transit department is preparing to address service restructures and postpandemic service restoration in the King County Metro Service Guidelines before the executive's transmittal of proposed updates to the King County Metro Service Guidelines.

The executive should electronically file the letter required by this proviso no later than March 1, 2021, with the clerk of the council, who shall retain an electronic copy and provide an electronic copy to all councilmembers, the council chief of staff and the lead staff for the regional transit committee and the mobility and environment committee, or their successors.

Metro’s response to the budget proviso, a letter that was transmitted to the Council on March 1, 2021, as requested, can be found as Attachment 1 to this staff report.

**Metro response: service restoration.** Section A of the proviso asks Metro to describe how the Service Guidelines will incorporate policies related to post-pandemic service restoration. Metro’s response states that the proposed updates to the Service Guidelines will outline how Metro will approach emergency situations, “providing more clarity and transparency for future situations where Metro must rapidly change service.” Specifically, the response states that the Service Guidelines’ “Adding, Reducing, and Changing Service” section will be updated to include information on emergency service management, including:

* A description of the King County Code provisions for Metro’s authority during emergency situations;[[10]](#footnote-10)
* Information about how Metro should develop situation-specific policies during emergencies, including how Metro would use performance information from before and during emergencies to inform planning; and
* Recognition of Metro’s need to immediately change service in response to emergencies.

This section of the proviso asks Metro to address several specific points:

1. **Evaluation.** How the performance of suspended or reduced routes will be measured, including how pre-pandemic ridership and productivity measures will be used to plan for service restoration.

Metro’s response states that it will use pre-pandemic crowding, reliability, ridership, and productivity performance measures from the 2020 System Evaluation report[[11]](#footnote-11) to guide service restoration. Metro also proposes to use ridership, crowding, and route-specific performance information collected during the pandemic on its new rider dashboard, The Dash,[[12]](#footnote-12) to guide service restoration, as well as an expanded (not yet adopted) definition of equity based on Metro’s Mobility Framework.[[13]](#footnote-13)

In addition, Metro states that it will use route-level data to measure service recovery and restoration needs. Metro proposes to use this information to prioritize:

* + Ridership: routes with higher pre-COVID ridership based on the 2020 System Evaluation report;
	+ Crowding: restorations to mitigate identified crowding issues on pandemic services (will change as load limits are adjusted);
	+ Equity: restoration on routes with high opportunity scores;[[14]](#footnote-14)
	+ Employers: routes with high proportions of ORCA passport usage from major employers when those employers indicate they may begin reducing teleworking; and
	+ Productivity: de-prioritize service restoration on routes with low pre-COVID productivity based on the 2020 System Evaluation Report.

The letter notes that the existing Service Guidelines will guide service restoration and that the Metro General Manager cannot use the emergency authority outlined in the Code to permanently delete routes or make long-term changes affecting service hours on a route by more than 25 percent without approval from the Council.

1. **Recovery trends.** How pandemic-related operating restrictions, employer trends, new or expanded partner agency service, and other factors will be used to plan for and implement service restoration, additions, or reductions**.**

Metro’s response states that Metro is considering a number of regional demand indicators to plan service restoration. These include:

* + Governor’s Safe Start Phases: the state of reopening including forecasts for vaccine availability and distribution;
	+ Back to school: including the plans of the University of Washington, Seattle Public Schools, and other large educational providers; and
	+ Back to work: including the results of employer and rider surveys, ORCA usage, and engagement with major regional employers.

Metro’s response also notes that Metro will continue to coordinate with Sound Transit and the City of Seattle to ensure that service restoration, including any additions or reductions, is made in the context of the regional transit system.

1. **Impacts on Metro Connects.** How service restoration planning will be incorporated into the network maps to be developed for Metro Connects.

Metro’s response states that the pandemic has not changed the long-term vision outlined in Metro Connects and that the agency does not plan any pandemic-related changes to the future network maps to be included in the proposed updates to Metro Connects.

**Metro response: service restructures.** Section B of the proviso asks Metro to describe how updates to the Service Guidelines will cover service restructures. Metro’s response states that the existing, adopted Service Guidelines include guidance for service restructures and that the pandemic does not affect the policies and goals currently outlined in the Service Guidelines.

Metro’s response states that updates to the “Restructuring Service” section of the Service Guidelines will provide clear direction on service restructures, including the factors that would prompt a proposed restructure. Metro states that it anticipates that new goals for restructures would include:

* Improved access to address unmet need;
* Reducing emissions;
* Moving toward Metro Connects networks;
* Creating convenient transfer opportunities; and
* Matching capacity and mobility service types.

This section of the proviso asks Metro to address several specific points:

1. **King County-funded transit service levels.** How County-funded service will be deployed in a restructure so that transit service span and frequency is maintained or improved.

Metro’s response states that proposed updates to the Service Guidelines will clarify policies around service restructures and service hour redeployment, noting that Metro’s ongoing financial status and the plans of partner agencies will affect the level of service provided in future service restructures, including for the North Link and East Link light rail expansions.

1. **Efficient transfers.** How restructures will be implemented to retain ridership and help ensure efficient transfers to partner agencies’ service.

Metro’s response notes that restructures will be designed with community input and the goal of connecting frequent bus service to Link stations.

1. **Disruptions.** How service restructures connecting to a new or expanded high-capacity transit station will be phased to avoid disruptions to rider travel patterns.

Metro’s response states that in planning for the East Link light rail expansion, which will open in two phases – in 2023 and 2024 – Metro’s bus service restructure will also be proposed in two phases to correspond to the light rail openings and facilitate ridership patterns and transfers to light rail.

Metro’s response closes by noting that Metro staff will continue to work with the Regional Transit Committee and Mobility & Environment Committee in developing policy updates.

**INVITED**

* Chris O’Claire, Mobility Division Director, Metro Transit Department

**ATTACHMENTS**

1. Letter in response to budget proviso to Council Chair Balducci, March 1, 2021
2. Metro presentation: Service Recovery & Proviso 7 Response
1. Metro has three adopted policy documents: Strategic Plan for Public Transportation, Service Guidelines, and Metro Connects long-range plan

,Ordinances 18301 and 18449). Metro is updating them following the process outlined in Motion 15618. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ordinance 19210, Section 113, Proviso 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. KCC 28.94.020.B.2.a. states that “if, in the opinion of the director, an emergency exists that requires any change to established routes, schedules or classes of service, the director may implement such a change for such a period as may be necessary in the director's judgment or until such a time as the council shall establish by ordinance otherwise. Such changes that the director intends to be permanent shall be reported in writing to the chair of the council.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Proclamation 20-25.12 (including recitation of earlier iterations): <https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.governor.wa.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fproclamations%2Fproc_20-25.12.pdf%3Futm_medium%3Demail%26utm_source%3Dgovdelivery&data=04%7C01%7Ctara.lee%40gov.wa.gov%7C343e8b75e9f04492e1d508d8b691e965%7C11d0e217264e400a8ba057dcc127d72d%7C0%7C0%7C637460085227357477%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=nRT5LhW5nKALFwD%2FlDBc%2BSqz7%2FPGvHBAmlBv6zNt2rc%3D&reserved=0> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Metro’s Rider Dashboard (The Dash) for additional pandemic ridership and route information (<https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/transportation/metro/about/accountability-center/rider-dashboard.aspx>) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In November 2014, Seattle voters approved a six-year transportation funding measure comprised of a 0.1% sales and use tax and a $60 vehicle license fee. In March 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Seattle was using this funding to purchase 358,851 hours of fixed-route Metro transit service on 55 routes. In November 2020, Seattle voters renewed the funding measure by approving a 0.15% sales and use tax increase that expires March 31, 2027. The new funding measure is smaller than the previous one and includes a larger set of funding priorities. Following COVID-19 service reductions, by September 2020, Seattle was purchasing 183,941 Metro fixed-route service hours on 35 routes. This service level was used as the baseline for the new funding measure and is anticipated to continue through at least September 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The policy documents were adopted through Ordinances 18301 and 18449. The updates are being implemented following guidance in Motion 15618. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ordinance 19210, Section 113, Proviso 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ordinance 19120, Section 113, Proviso 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. KCC 28.94.020.B.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The 2020 System Evaluation report was accepted through Motion 15802. Typically, the System Evaluation is based on data from March through June. However, due to the significant decline in ridership and the transit service reductions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 System Evaluation is based on data from September 2019 through mid-March 2020, providing data about the transit system just prior to the major impacts of the pandemic, during a time when Metro was operating approximately 4.2 million annual hours of bus and DART service. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. https://www.kingcounty.gov/depts/transportation/metro/about/accountability-center/rider-dashboard.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Motion 15618 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Opportunity scores are based on the proportion of populations of persons of color, poverty/low-income, linguistically diverse, disability, and immigrant/refugee. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)