Sound Transit as constituted cannot deliver the transit projects necessary to secure the region’s future vitality in a timely, cost, or strategically effective manner. Its central flaws are a governance structure with no accountability: decision-making is based on political expediency and funding is functionally limitless.

Seventeen of the eighteen Board members are elected officials appointed by the executives of King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties, whereas funding is approved by voters regionally. ***Members are accountable to their jurisdiction while tasked with acting in the region’s interest***. Each member is incentivized to say ‘yes’ to others’ local excesses to receive a reciprocal ‘yes’ for theirs. The structure *promotes* delay. Each day that more tax is collected, and debt retired, the capacity to underwrite more expensive projects increases. The unaccountable structure is exacerbated by Sound Transit’s limited powers that incentivize [jurisdictional](https://www.soundtransit.org/sites/default/files/documents/system-expansion-project-scope-betterments-policy-update-202407.pdf) extortion and empowers [municipalities](https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=19991119&slug=2996198) to degrade service and regional value for local special interests.

Failing to deliver desperately needed transit robs people of opportunities and undermines economic competitiveness, while the climate and health benefits of CO2 and PM 2.5 reductions (heart and lung disease causal factor) go unrealized. Political inertia is choking our economy, climate, and communities.

When voters approved Sound Transit 3 (ST3), a $54 billion [plan](http://www.politco.com) based on “[little more than a drawing on a napkin](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/be-bolder-to-get-light-rail-done-expert-panel-tells-sound-transit/)” it created an unprecedented opportunity for jurisdictional resource extraction and meddling, with predictable outcomes. Over a decade ago East Link spiraled into a multi-year delay, culminating in [36-alternatives](https://www.soundtransit.org/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/projects/eastlink/eis_2011/03_chapter2_alternatives.pdf) entering environmental review, itself a repeat of the broken processes that went unfixed after the Tukwila routing [debacle](https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=20020629&slug=tukwila29m) another decade prior. [Ballard/West Seattle Link Extension](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/west-seattles-light-rail-estimate-soars-past-6-billion/) is the latest chapter in Sound Transit’s tortured project delivery legacy.

Approved in 2016, the West Seattle/SODO segment was estimated at a [high](https://enotrans.org/article/eno-releases-major-report-on-u-s-transit-costs-and-project-delivery/) [$1.4B-1.5B](https://st32.blob.core.windows.net/media/Default/InteractiveMap/Templates/July1/LRT_WestSeattletoDowntownSeattle.pdf) ($340-360 million/mile) that is now $6.7B-7.1B ($1.63-1.73 billion/mile). A significant share of the increase ($600M-850M) is driven by a tunnel, added for political reasons, *in a corridor Seattle voters supported as* [*elevated*](https://www.geocities.ws/greg_vassilakos/cascadia/cascadia.htm) *transit* ***five times*** - the monorail [four times](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/monorail-dream-reaches-end-of-line/) and by [over 60%](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/planned-light-rail-areas-big-backers-of-sound-transit-3/) of West Seattle voters who endorsed ST3’s elevated rail. Meanwhile, broken processes are delaying SODO/Ballard, where board members [add](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/harrell-constantine-light-rail-ideas-add-years-money-to-sound-transit-planning/) and remove [stations](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/sound-transit-sweats-over-spot-for-south-lake-union-light-rail-station/) on a whim

Montreal’s Réseau Express Métropolitain, approved in 2015, provides an example of what is possible. The first segment, of 41-miles and 26 stations, opened a year ago costing [$141 million/mile](https://transitcenter.org/on-track-for-success-decoding-montreals-rem-model-for-efficient-transit-projects-in-the-u-s/) and features automated trains every two-minutes during peak versus Link’s six-minutes. Montreal delivered 3x the service in half the time and a tenth the cost. Their success is no accident. Provincial legislators made its authorization contingent on [governance](https://www.legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/document/cs/r-25.02), design, and procurement reforms identified as major shortcomings in preceding projects.

While Sound Transit is making improvements by implementing the [Technical Advisory Group’s](https://www.soundtransit.org/st_sharepoint/download/sites/PRDA/ActiveDocuments/Report%20-%20Sound%20Transit%20Technical%20Advisory%20Group%2002-27-2023.pdf) recommendations, these will not address governance and powers deficiencies. Minnesota provides an example of how to identify reforms and establish the basis for Montreal-style success. When the Southwest Light Rail Line went [$1.5B over budget and nine years](https://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/sreview/SWLRTbudgettimeline.pdf) behind schedule, their [Legislature](https://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/ped/2023/swlrt-council-decisions.htm) commissioned a comprehensive audit in 2022. Several audit recommendations were adopted in their 2024 [transportation bill](https://www.cbsnews.com/minnesota/news/push-to-reform-met-councils-governing-structure/).

The Washington State Legislature must commission an audit modeled on Minnesota’s example, with two key focuses. First, investigate how Sound Transit’s governance structure contributes to poor planning and delivery. Second, review Sound Transit’s powers and examine opportunities for partnering with WSDOT to leverage their authority and capabilities.

Finally, given WSDOT’s [issues](https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/prices-skyrocket-on-wa-transportation-projects-and-fewer-contractors-want-the-jobs/) and broader infrastructure delivery challenges, taxpayers deserve a systematic review of cost and delay drivers for major projects. A Blue-Ribbon Commission centered on *how* to efficiently deliver infrastructure is necessary. The United Kingdom’s [Cost Drivers of Major Infrastructure Projects](https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads/NIC-Costs-Report-Final-Oct-2024.pdf) is a strong example.

Washington and the Puget Sound Region are at an inflection point. The opportunity to realize the ambitious climate, economic, health and social objectives via transit is being squandered. Project delivery systems are broken. We must do better.