

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Kjris Lund

FROM: Steve Boyer

CC: John Giese

RE: RTID communications report

DATE: May 29, 2004

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While the Regional Transportation Investment District recommendation apparently will not appear on the November ballot, the effort provides significant value to the Puget Sound region. Its accomplishments strengthen the foundation for future transportation solutions. Its weaknesses highlight flaws that future initiatives should avoid. Finally, its lessons provide direction for future initiatives to increase chances of success.

This report assesses RTID's accomplishments, weaknesses and lessons from a communications perspective. In doing so, the report seeks to identify pathways to consensus and approval of improvements to the region's transportation network. Regardless of RTID's outcome, the need for such improvements remains critical for our economic competitiveness and quality of life.

### STRENGTHS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

**Identification of highest-priority road and transit projects.** The RTID list of projects now constitutes the region's most up-to-date consensus on the highest-priority road and transit projects in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. Building from the Puget Sound Regional Council's Destination 2030 and WSDOT plans, the RTID Executive Board has identified the projects that can serve as the basis for the region's future transportation improvement initiatives.

**Earthquake safety.** By including \$1 billion each for the Alaskan Way Viaduct and SR 520 bridge, RTID provides a means to remove the regional transportation network's most glaring vulnerabilities in a major earthquake. If voters were to approve the RTID package, the region would have a local funding share to leverage state and federal money more easily to complete the viaduct.

**High-value projects.** The RTID list includes projects of highest value to the region's transportation network. RTID projects would fill in gaps in the network, especially on highways of regional significance. Completion of these highway projects would be a

major step toward clearing the \$40 million backlog of road projects needed to get people and goods moving in the region again.

**Favorable election timing.** In pointing toward the November 2004 ballot, RTID could take advantage of favorable timing. Presidential elections draw the largest voter turnout. Least frequent voters are most likely to support tax measures. Consequently, presidential elections offer the most likely opportunity for passage of a transportation measure because that is when least frequent voters turn out in greatest numbers.

**Focus on competitiveness.** The RTID effort coalesced during a regional emphasis on competitiveness following the state's successful effort to capture the Boeing 7E7 project and the earlier move of Boeing headquarters to Chicago. Transportation's role in economic competitiveness was highlighted by Boeing Commercial Airplane President Alan Mulally's statement that "we suck" when asked how the region's transportation system compared to other areas Boeing had considered.

**Local taxes for local areas.** By designating that local tax dollars be spent in the area in which they are raised, RTID provided a strong selling point for Puget Sound taxpayers who normally ship a share of their taxes to the state's rural areas.

**National taxation trend.** In utilizing local taxes for major transportation projects, RTID follows a national trend. Other areas such as San Francisco, Miami and Northern Virginia have sought to leverage local taxes and fees for major transportation initiatives, recognizing challenges in obtaining federal and state funding.

## **OBSTACLES & WEAKNESSES**

**Too much money.** The funding package is simply too large for the public to accept without a much more extensive education campaign than has been conducted regarding the projects' value.

**Complexity & change in funding package.** Over the two years of plan development by the RTID Executive Committee, the diverse, changing package of funding sources proved difficult for the public to understand and support. Each of the funding sources draws opposition for different reasons, while none draws significant support from any population segment. In addition, the funding package has kept changing, both in the amounts of individual components and the overall total, making it difficult for information to be delivered with consistency.

**Complexity & change in project list.** The project list is diverse and changing as well, making it difficult for the RTID project list to develop a cohesive identity and facilitate public understanding and support. The list includes both roads and transit and the roads include highways of statewide significance as well as local roads. Also, it wasn't finalized until April 29, 2004. In recent months as Sound Transit considered a joint ballot, the list also has been described as possibly including light rail. The projects stretch

across three counties. As a result, it has been difficult for the public to grasp what is included or retain a unified impression.

**Vague brand recognition.** The name “Regional Transportation Investment District” is too long for the general public to remember, and the “RTID” acronym carries no inherent meaning. In contrast, “Sound Transit” and “Seattle Monorail” offer much clearer, more comprehensible identities based solely on their names. Short of a massive awareness campaign involving extensive advertising, it would be difficult to impossible to build a strong public recognition for the RTID brand.

**Unfriendly ballot title.** RTID’s ballot title does not draw public support in its own right. On one hand, it is hampered by requirements concerning information that must be included. On the other, its word limit leaves no room for additional information that might resonate with the public.

**Many competing interests.** The substantial number of entities with interests in RTID has contributed to confusion and conflict. Different interests – whether Seattle and the rest of King County or the various road, transit and light rail advocates – competed to influence the final recommendation. As a result, the development of the RTID funding and projects recommendation was marked more by controversy than consensus in the public perception.

**Lack of consistent, positive information.** While the competing interests sought to influence the recommendation, until early 2004 the public received little consistent, positive information about RTID, for example, its progress or the projects’ value. Consequently, the controversies dominated news media coverage and public perceptions during RTID’s first year. First impressions are always difficult to overcome. Those first impressions of RTID were largely sustained this year, particularly within King County due to difficulty in achieving agreement on the county’s project list.

**Unwillingness to compromise.** Transportation-oriented environmental interests compounded the controversy with their unwillingness to support an RTID recommendation. These interests consistently advocated for a greater share of RTID funding for transit. However, they did not reciprocate with a bottom-line recognition that businesses and less urbanized areas require expanded road capacity to move people and goods efficiently.

**Lack of agreement in potentially supportive areas.** If the RTID recommendation were to go to the ballot, it would have to surmount an inherent structural issue. In Pierce and Snohomish counties, Executive Board members were able to agree on a projects and funding recommendation with relative ease. However, polls indicate the public in those counties would be less likely to vote in favor of the package. In King County and especially Seattle, polls indicated the public would be more supportive of an RTID recommendation. However, Seattle and East and South King County were unable to reach agreement on a recommendation, eroding potential public support in the areas most inclined to be supportive.

**Previous transportation missteps.** Public distrust in government transportation projects has been weakened by financial missteps by Sound Transit, Seattle Monorail. Consequently, polls indicated the public does not trust RTID or other government entities to deliver projects on time and on budget.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

**Assess research for solutions that can succeed.** RTID's research is extensive – two public opinion polls conducted roughly six months apart and two sets of focus groups conducted last fall. Developers of future transportation solutions should assess the research with open minds, apart from RTID's framework, to determine key factors for success before starting to craft initiatives.

**Develop a clear, simple focus.** Solutions are more acceptable, whether to the public or state legislators, when they have a clear, simple focus. Future transportation solutions should have a focus that is easily communicated and understood by all audiences.

**Make the brand identity reflect the focus.** The initiative name, which constitutes the brand name or identity, should reflect the focus and be instantly recognizable and meaningful. Instead of a meaningless, incomprehensible acronym such as "RTID," it should communicate the objective in a word or two that all audiences will understand and remember.

**Clarify the funding package.** Determine the package most likely to be accepted by the Legislature and public. Any errors should be made on the side of simplicity.

**Build strong assurances of accountability.** RTID contained such assurances in its revenue projections, cost reviews, and requirements that projects remain within a certain funding limit or return to voters for approval. These assurances however need to be examined to ensure they are the most efficient way to deliver projects – the sound bite must be consistent with the best practices for project management. Future initiatives should contain similar assurances of accountability, which should be communicated extensively to the public and other audiences.

**Confine initiatives requiring voter approval to areas most likely to be favorable.** Future initiatives to be submitted to voters might be confined to King County, the Sound Transit district boundaries, or possibly the urban growth boundary. RTID polling indicates the public in these areas would be more likely to support tax measures for transportation.

**Start educating early.** Any transportation initiative or organization should have staff from the outset, enabling it to organize and communicate with its audiences more effectively. By waiting more than a year to retain staff and begin a formal communications program, RTID found its communications dominated by controversy, with insufficient positive information being conveyed to audiences.

**Consider educating in advance of the next initiative.** The rest of this year could productively be spent on a communications program to educate the public and elected officials on transportation needs, value of potential projects, and funding options. To be most effective, such a program should be a multi-interest effort, with the private sector heavily involved. As indicated by polling related to RTID, a government-only effort alone is unlikely to have the trust needed to gain public credibility. A communications program could lay the foundation for consensus to develop and approve a transportation solution to get the region's people and goods moving again.