
Adding Seattle Light Rail Would Sink a New Puget Sound Regional Roads and Transit Funding Package from RTID

Some politicians and journalists have made statements to the effect that the November 2003 survey conducted by professional opinion survey firms on behalf of the Puget Sound Regional Transportation Investment District (the RTID with a website at <http://www.rtid.dst.wa.us/>) shows that light rail is very popular. Some people are saying that adding funding for light rail to a Puget Sound regional funding proposal for improved roads and transit would improve the odds of the proposal passing with voters.

Not so! This false conclusion is based on selective reporting in support of a spin from light rail boosters who know the Sound Transit Central Link Light Rail project desperately needs RTID funding to survive.

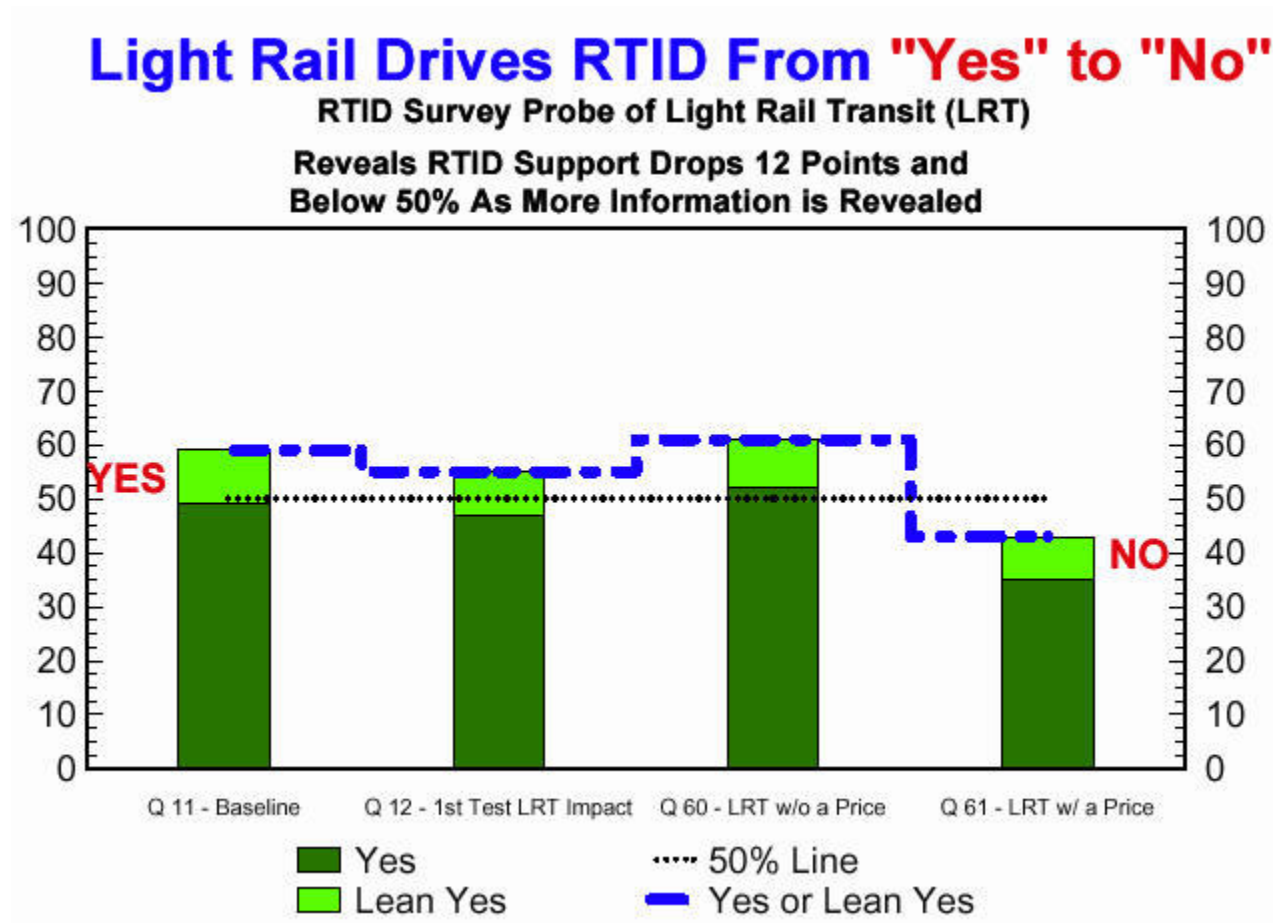
As an example of selective reporting, the December 11, 2003 *Tacoma News Tribune* reported this highlight: "61 percent said they would vote for the plan if it included money to extend light rail to reach Northgate and Sea-Tac Airport, while 32 percent said they would vote against it." This was based on just one question, number 60, which specifically asked, "What if the Regional Transportation Investment Plan included extending light rail to the north to reach the Northgate transit center and south to reach SeaTac airport, and would be funded specifically by taxes raised in King County? Knowing this, if the election were held today would you vote yes to enact or no to reject the Regional Transportation Investment Plan?"

(Incidentally, something odd and disturbing about this question is that light rail to SeaTac south of downtown Seattle is supposedly completely funded through existing Sound Transit taxes. However, the King County Executive as of January 21, 2004 has proposed that \$200 million in RTID taxes be used to help pay for light rail to reach South 200th Street in SeaTac, the destination approved and funded by voters in 1996.)

What is not reported in the *Trib* story is that when the next question in the poll, number 61, was asked, indicating the cost of a plan that included light rail, the "yes" vote plunged to 43% and the "no" vote jumped to 53%. In other words, Link Light Rail with the price stated sinks RTID. Question 61 is shown in the far right hand bar in the graph below, showing that the "yes" opinion on this question dropped below 50%.

An analysis of the results of the November 2003 poll carried out by the Coalition for Effective Transportation Alternatives (CETA, website at <http://www.effectivetransportation.org>) indicates that indeed light rail as described in the survey is popular in some parts of the region when described in a certain way. However, the clear overall implication of the survey is that adding light rail to the regional package as of last November would lower the probability of voter approval.

Here is a graphical highlight from that report:



(The text of the questions covered by the graphic, numbers 11, 12, 60, and 61, are quoted below.)

CETA's complete analysis focuses on a number of questions and comes out with these conclusions:

- ⊕ Light rail is more popular in Seattle, less popular outside Seattle.
- ⊕ The attitude of survey respondents did not become more positive to light rail as they learned more during the survey, except when learning they might not have to pay for light rail.
- ⊕ Light rail is polarizing, having high negatives and positives.
- ⊕ Light rail popularity in Seattle with 21% of regional voters does not overcome light rail unpopularity in rest of region with 79% of voters.
- ⊕ Light rail to SeaTac Airport is more popular in the RTID package than light rail to Northgate, even though Airport Link (low ridership) is already funded and Northgate Link (higher ridership) is unfunded.
- ⊕

Expanded buses (a transit alternative to light rail) tested better in the survey for the RTID package than light rail does.

[The CETA analysis is available full text in pdf here.](#) It includes the text of each question and the raw "top line" results. This analysis has been submitted to the RTID Executive Committee and to the Washington State House of Representatives Transportation Committee. The CETA report draws upon the results from the poll as provided by the polling firm, available for downloading in the file <http://www.rtid.dst.wa.us/Dec 11 2003/RTID Poll.PDF>.

Keeping light rail out of the RTID package is completely consistent with having a balanced package of roads and transit. There are many opportunities for including transit investments in the RTID package other than the controversial Link Light Rail. The CETA consensus alternative for a regional transit program without light rail is described at www.effective transportation.com.

Footnote: Questions from the RTID survey that are charted in the graphic above:

QUOTE

Next I am going to ask you some questions about a measure on an upcoming ballot.

10. In November 2004, voters in the Puget Sound region will be asked to vote on the Regional Transportation Investment Plan, a measure financing transportation improvements through sales and motor vehicle fees and taxes. The total cost of this package will be approximately fourteen billion dollars and will cost the average household three hundred twenty-five dollars per year. If the election were held today would you vote yes to enact or no to reject the Regional Transportation Investment Plan?

11. This measure would improve major highways such as I-405, U.S. Two, State Route 167, arterial routes leading to I-5, and include HOV lanes, park and ride lots, and bus purchases. These projects will be funded locally, meaning that money raised in each county will go towards projects in that county. If the election were held today would you vote yes to enact or no to reject the Regional Transportation Investment Plan?

12. What if the Regional Transportation Investment Plan included light rail? Knowing this, if the election were held today would you vote yes to enact or no to reject the Regional Transportation Investment Plan?

UNQUOTE

Toward the end of the RTID survey, after more focus on light rail as a transportation solution, where light rail is specifically named six times, more than any other public transit mode, this sequence is asked:

QUOTE

60. What if the Regional Transportation Investment Plan included extending light rail to the north to reach the Northgate transit center and south to reach SeaTac airport, and would be funded specifically by taxes raised in King County? Knowing this, if the election were held today would you vote yes to enact or no to reject the Regional Transportation Investment Plan?

61. And what if the Regional Transportation Investment Plan would require a sales tax increase equivalent to five cents on a ten dollar purchase? Knowing this, and if the election were held today would you vote yes to enact or no to reject the Regional Transportation Investment Plan?

UNQUOTE

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Last modified: February 14, 2004