



# Light rail and Bellevue

## Transportation Director discusses East Link and why a tunnel downtown is favored

Planning is well underway on East Link, an 18-mile long light rail line that will run from downtown Seattle to Bellevue and the Overlake area of Redmond.

In May, Sound Transit's Board of Directors narrowed the number of route options to be studied in the final environmental report for the project. While the Bellevue and the Sound Transit Board mostly agreed on the best route through the city, there are differences. Most importantly, Sound Transit recommends that a street-level route through the downtown segment be included for more analysis. Bellevue officials firmly believe a tunnel is needed downtown.



Bellevue's Transportation director, Goran Sparman, recently answered some questions about East Link to help readers better understand the project and the city's position on light rail.

### Q: Why is East Link significant for Bellevue?

A: I think most residents understand that transit in general, and light rail in particular, is going to play a major role if we're going to maintain a balanced transportation system in Bellevue. We can make key investments in improving our roadways, but we can't pave our way out of congestion. We face real challenges and light rail will be an important component in meeting those challenges.

East Link is a huge investment in the heart of our city. It will have a profound effect during the years it takes to build out the system and have long-term consequences for Bellevue's transportation and land use structures. We see light rail as a 100-year commitment. That's why we're working closely with Sound Transit's staff to figure out what the best system is to meet the needs of the public.

### Q: Sound Transit recently decided to continue studying the feasibility of a street-level route for East Link through downtown. Why does the city believe a street-level route would not be a good choice?

A: We're concerned that putting light rail trains on our streets will both make vehicle congestion worse and cause a regional chokepoint for East Link, creating systemwide delays. Conflicts between light rail and vehicles could create major backups onto Interstate 405, which already has problems of its own.

Another drawback of a street-level, downtown light rail route is that the ability of employees and residents to access parking garages in some downtown office buildings and condominiums could be severely limited.

Our downtown street system was created in the 1950s, geared for automobile travel, and hasn't changed much over the decades. Basically, downtown is made up of very large blocks – we call them "superblocks" – that are about twice as long as those found in a typical downtown. That means we have roughly half as many streets on which to move traffic. And, the ones we do have tend to be big arterials such as Fourth and Eighth streets, that move a lot of traffic.

### Q: Downtown Bellevue has a lot more room to grow. How does a street-level alignment fit plans for future growth?

A: We've added thousands of new jobs and residents downtown and we expect to add tens of thousands more over the next 20 years. We're very concerned that operating light rail on the street would compromise travel times for the regional rail system.

The bottom line is that East Link must be built to deliver fast, reliable service to the greatest possible number of riders across the region. To do that, it needs to be compatible, not competitive, with downtown Bellevue's transportation system.

### Q: Where does the issue go from here?

A: We want Sound Transit to take a closer look at the impacts of the proposed downtown tunnel options (cut-and-cover or bored) and of a street-level light rail route. That includes more in-depth computer modeling and traffic analysis.

We've also asked Sound Transit to answer key questions about the two downtown tunnel options that have been put forward. We believe either tunnel option is greatly preferable to a street-level route, but more study is needed to determine which of the two is best. We simply don't have enough information to make an informed decision at this time.

### Q: What are some of the key questions you want answered?

A: There are several issues we've asked Sound Transit to address. Topics include the impacts of an excavated tunnel construction versus a tunnel bored below ground; the mitigation measures needed to address construction impacts; minimizing construction impacts of Bellevue's preferred tunnel route on the Bellevue Transit Center; how Sound Transit's preferred tunnel route, with a station above or near I-405, can be accommodated; and how a tunnel would impact 108th Avenue and Northeast 12th Street.

### Q: You've traveled quite a bit. What have you learned about other transit systems that might be useful in Bellevue?

A: Although I've lived in this country for many years and have worked for the City of Bellevue for the past 10, I was born and raised abroad. I've been fortunate to travel quite a bit in Europe and elsewhere, and I've experienced a variety of public transportation systems. That's one reason I'm very enthusiastic about light rail coming to Bellevue – because I know it's an extremely efficient way to move people.

I also believe that a good urban transportation system needs to be truly multimodal, with a variety of choices. Light rail will complement our existing road and bus system. One of the main lessons I've learned is the importance of building a transit system correctly from the beginning. I've seen good and bad ones and I believe that light rail needs to be built right the first time.

### Q: Are there other people or groups who agree on the need for a tunnel?

A: Several groups agree that a downtown tunnel is crucial. A citizens panel appointed by the Bellevue council last year to study light rail in other cities found that those cities all wish they could have avoided a street-level system. In Seattle, the need to run regional light rail underground to avoid problems has long been apparent. And both the Bellevue Chamber of Commerce and Bellevue Downtown Association believe the street-level alignment under consideration by Sound Transit could hinder performance of the entire East Link line.

### Q: If a tunnel is a better choice, why did the Sound Transit Board pick the street level alternative for further evaluation?

A: As I understand it, the Board agrees that a downtown tunnel would offer faster service and could attract a higher ridership. The main reason for analyzing a street-level route over the next few months is based on cost constraints, not effectiveness.

*"We can make key investments in improving our roadways, but we can't pave our way out of congestion."*

### Q: If the Board does ultimately pick a tunnel, who would pay the additional cost?

A: That's an important question. The Board asked Bellevue to identify additional sources of funding by the time design work for the routes reaches a specific level of completion, which is expected to happen in early 2010. We have committed to do that, but we need Sound Transit's partnership.

This is a regional project and we believe that in the end, all will agree the tunnel is the right solution and we should be working together to find the funding for it. Possibilities include state and federal grants and local funding sources. In addition to identifying other sources of revenue, we're working closely with Sound Transit to identify cost savings across the entire East Link route in Bellevue.

### Q: When will Sound Transit make a final decision about East Link routes and what comes after that?

A: The board is projected to choose its ultimate route for East Link in 2010 based on the additional evaluation it conducts as part of a final environmental impact statement. Construction on East Link is scheduled to begin in 2013 or 2014. Light rail service to Bellevue is slated to start in 2020; service to Overlake will start in 2021.



For more information on East Link, visit the City of Bellevue website at <http://www.bellevuewa.gov/light-rail.htm> or Sound Transit's web page at <http://www.soundtransit.org/x3245.xml>