Comments to the Regional Transportation Commission, August 30, 2006

Good morning, I'm John Niles, from Seattle, and president of the public policy consulting firm, Global Telematics. We are focused on information technology applications that influence transportation outcomes, such as telecommuting, and such as computerized intelligent transportation systems and intelligent vehicles. For over 20 years I have melded service as a consultant and as a volunteer activist working for better transportation policies in our region. My work is based partially on what I experienced while living in eastern cities before moving out to Seattle in 1982 from the other Washington where I served in the Mayor's Office of the first home rule DC government.

I came down to Tacoma this morning first of all to thank you for your service in developing recommendations to reform transportation governance in Western Washington. I don't know how you are going to do what you are charged to do in such a short period of time. As one who faces impossible deadlines frequently, I suggest you ask for an extension of time. Sometimes that works ...

I also want to make several observations keyed to your particular areas of legislatively defined responsibility.

You have a mandate to make recommendations to improve coordination in the planning of transportation investments and services: Predictably, the myriad of agencies involved has sent leaders who assure you that they coordinate all the time with everybody else who is involved. Indeed they do. I see lots of meetings, lots of memos of agreement and understanding, etc, etc, etc, all of which is a good process.

But the main issue may not be the amount or quality of coordination, but rather what the coordination is trying to accomplish. Unfortunately, a top level strategic aim of cooperation and coordination in regional transportation in our region now is the pursuit of high cost, low performance investment strategies that seek an investment balance between roads and high capacity railroad transit. Railroad systems like Sounder and Link overlaid on the road network are considered to be more modern, more world class, and more important than the high capacity road vehicles, buses, that provide most of the transit service around here and always will. Coordination is aimed to achieve new railroad spines fed by buses.

In the local transit planning experience, with a few important exceptions, rather than emphasizing phased investments to upgrade and adjust the bus and road network toward higher performance, including adding more traffic operations management, and more incentives to increase average vehicle occupancy, we have the regional transit agency Sound Transit in close coordination with the regional planning agency PSRC in effect declaring traffic congestion to be an unsolvable problem. To see what I mean, read the Sound Transit Long Range Plan EIS, and read the PSRC Vision 2020 draft EIS update, both based on computer modeling.

Improved coordination needs to be focused on improving investment strategies, another of your

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responsibilities for recommendations. Some might say, this means strategies for convincing people to vote more taxes for the investments being made and planned. But are the best investment strategies now being pursued? I urge that you consider whether enough attention is being paid to cost-effectiveness; transportation bang for the buck; how many additional people are parking their cars and taking transit for each dollar spent?

The mantra we hear is that buses will ALWAYS be stuck in traffic no matter what, and more people need to be able to choose a train instead. The "more choices" doctrine has led to a path of investment toward multiple billions in not one, but several urban railroad overlays -- street cars, commuter rail, light rail, and until recently, monorail.

Cost-effectiveness -- if like me you think it's a priority-- suggests giving much more attention to operations improvement such as traffic signal coordination that works across jurisdictional boundaries and is kept up to date. Instead of digging tunnels and laying track, more impact could come from marketing and incentive programs to use transit and other HOV systems already in place to cause voluntary increases in average vehicle occupancy that could easily exceed train ridership as a way to remove vehicles from rush hour traffic.

Another area of your recommendations is better coordination of transportation planning with land use policies. I suggest you study closely how this is being done by PSRC, a national thought leader in articulating the land use and transportation connection. It is a main strategy of this region to organize living and working patterns around densified urban centers served by train stations. What is remarkable and worthy of your consideration is how badly this strategy is forecast to perform by PSRC vis a vis traffic congestion. In a leading future alternative of extreme densification in the main cities of the region, the fraction of commuters with a public transit ride that is faster than the average driving time is forecast as below 2 percent in 2040, even after complete build out of the Sound Transit urban RR plans.

Technology applications -- such as cell phones and wireless data -- have much more influence on mobility than land use, but the planners at PSRC spend almost no time considering technology impacts and alternatives, save for some fine work exploring open-road tolling.

Finally, let me note your requirement to assess the current roles of Sound Transit and PSRC, among other agencies. Your assessment would be aided by evaluating the results of the decision-making and coordination that have been undertaken by these and other agencies in recent years. These are some results that I find worth contemplating: (1) construction of 21 new RR grade-level street crossings in urban Seattle carrying 272 trains per day, each up to 380 feet long moving at up to 35 mph; (2) a plan to build tracks and overhead catenary on two lanes of the I-90 floating bridge, thereby reducing vehicle capacity of all kinds, including trucks and buses; (3) the extraordinary amount of time to figure out what to do about the SR-520 Lake Washington crossing; (4) planning to build a five mile-long twin tube bored rail tunnel from Pine Street to NE 75th Street in Seattle, the most expensive light rail in world history, with only four stations stops, where the construction will generate more greenhouse gas than will ever be saved by people riding the train in the future; (5) expanding commuter railroad service along the

Tacoma to Everett main freight right of way at a per passenger cost far exceeding express bus subsidies; (6) the King County Metro Transit Now bus-expansion initiative which seemingly offers much more service expansion for much less money per new rider than Sound Transit's light rail plans and (7) the defunct Seattle Green Line monorail, well worth a post-mortem analysis on the governance that let it play out as it did.

I haven't commented on more than a fraction of what you are required to consider, so again, ask for more time!

I'll post some materials for your notebook on the world wide web and send the link address to your staff.

Thanks again for your service.

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