



Community Engagement Executive Summary

With a change in travel patterns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and work-from-home schedules, Sound Transit is re-examining the priorities from the 2020 [Sounder South Strategic Plan](#). Prior to the pandemic, the forecast for heavy ridership growth during peak periods led to a prioritization of longer trains (10-car rather than the 7-car trains used in 2019) to serve this growth.

In the fall of 2023, we conducted engagement efforts to understand people's priority between keeping the current plan for longer trains during the commute peak versus adding more trip times to the current schedule. We also explored how people currently use Sounder and how they envision it could better serve them in the future. Our engagement noted that any new trips would require negotiation with BNSF Railway, which owns most of the tracks Sounder runs on.

Key takeaways from the feedback:

- Ninety percent of survey respondents prefer new trips over longer trains. This preference level was consistent across all demographic categories, but was slightly lower among frequent riders¹, with 79% preferring new trips.
- Adding weekend service was favored by 81.6% of respondents, while adding new weekday service was supported by 57%.
- A strong majority of respondents (75.3%) would support reducing frequency during peak periods to add trips at other times of day or week (contingent on BNSF approval).

To gather this feedback, we held an online open house between Sept. 27 and Oct. 29, which received over 5,600 survey responses and was translated into eight languages (Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, Tagalog, Simplified Chinese, Somali, Ukrainian and Russian). We also conducted four focus groups with underserved communities and engaged with over 4,000 people at community events and Sounder stations.

The online open house was publicized to communities throughout the Sounder South corridor, to reach both riders and non-riders. Materials including posters, digital ads, and local media advertisements were placed in cities with Sounder stations and neighboring communities in South King and Pierce counties. Six local media outlets also ran stories about the survey, including a Spanish radio station that interviewed Sound Transit staff. Numerous community partners and jurisdictions also helped spread the word by sharing content on their social media channels and with their email networks.

Engagement by the numbers



13,502 unique visitors to the online open house from Sept 27 – Oct 29, 2023



5,615 people engaged with the online survey



3 project email updates sent to over 3,400 recipients



3 rider alerts to over 18,000 recipients



4,000+ people engaged with at 13 tabling events, 13 stakeholder interviews, and 6 community presentations



4 in-person focus groups with underserved communities



11,000+ people engaged with digital ads in four languages



313 posters distributed on Sounder trains and at community destinations

¹ Frequent riders refers to those who indicated they ride Sounder at least once per week.



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Equitable engagement

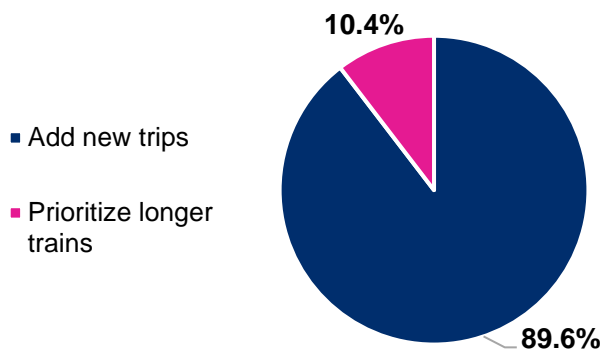
We used a multi-pronged approach to ensure that the voices of historically underrepresented communities were reflected in engagement results. We translated our survey and most of the communication materials into eight languages and conducted four in-person focus groups with underserved communities, three of which were bilingual (Spanish and Vietnamese). A major takeaway of these efforts was that priorities were generally consistent across all groups, with weekend service being the most popular among focus groups, survey participants, and across all income, race, and geographic categories.

Who we reached:

- 1,157 survey respondents (26.4%) self-identified as people of color
- 472 unique visitors to the translated versions of the online open house
- 108 completed translated surveys
- 462 survey respondents stated that a language other than English is regularly spoken in their home
- 24.8% of respondents reported household annual earnings under \$75,000

What we heard: survey results

Longer trains versus new trips



All demographic groups showed a similar preference for prioritizing new trips over longer trains, including all incomes and races, with 89.6% supporting new trips.

Frequent Sounder riders (those who ride at least once a week) were slightly less in favor of new trips (79%) than respondents as a whole.

Respondents from all geographic areas strongly preferred new trips over longer trains. The preference was highest for people in Seattle (96.4%) and lowest for people in South King County (84%).

Example comments from survey respondents

"I want to see Sounder become a proper regional rail system and not just focus on peak periods."

"More trips would be a huge benefit to me and my family."

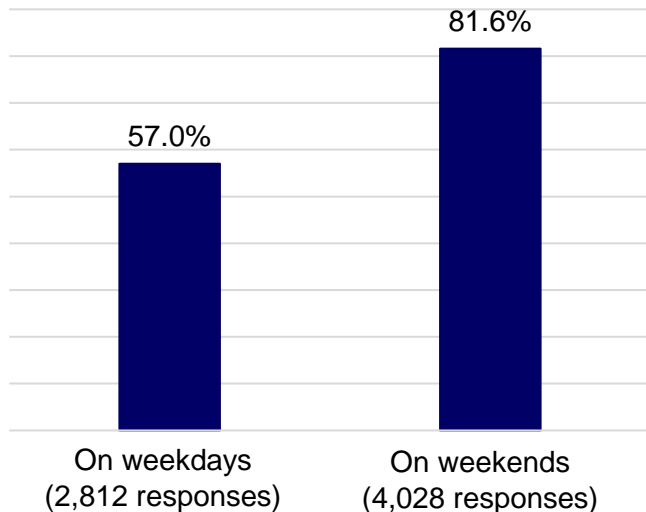
"Can we go back to 7 car trains at least? I've been riding the Sounder since 2005 and bicycling since 2008. The increase of ebikes and scooters necessitates more cars."



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Trip day and time preferences

Most respondents (81.6%) said that they would ride new trips on the weekend, while a strong majority (57%) say they would ride on weekdays. Responses were similar across income and racial categories.



Weekday trips

Respondents who selected weekday trips could select up to two options for the time of day and direction they would like to see new trips. The most popular categories were evening² southbound (65.2%) and midday³ northbound (52.2%). Non-riders and infrequent riders⁴ showed a higher preference for evening northbound trips than frequent riders.

Pierce County and South King County respondents preferred to have more options to attend late afternoon activities in Seattle (midday northbound / evening southbound trips), while Seattle respondents wanted to have options to go south during the day and return northbound in the evening.

Respondents could also select which days of the week they would ride. Mid-week trips showed the highest percentage of ridership potential, with 78.7% of respondents indicating they would ride on Thursday and 78.5% indicating they would ride on Wednesday. This was closely followed with 73.9% indicating they would ride on Tuesday and 73.4% on Friday. Monday showed the lowest ridership potential at 63.8%.

All demographic groups showed similar day-of-week preferences with the exception of lower income⁵ and Seattle respondents⁶ who showed the highest preference for Friday trips at the rates of 78.7% and 81.1% respectively.

Example comments from survey respondents

“The last morning train departure time from Tacoma was always very challenging as a one-car household with a child who needed to be dropped off at daycare. Later time options would make it much easier.”

I hate being stuck downtown from 8am to 2:30, I have on many occasions had to take Ubers home during that period for emergency reasons. It makes me want to drive in and park at my office.”

“Would definitely love to see evening trips added. Would allow for staying downtown for concerts/happy hours with coworkers and friends and not have to depend on an uber or bus instead of Sounder.”

² Weekday evening service is defined as 6 -10 p.m.

³ Weekday midday service is defined as 8 a.m. – 2 p.m.

⁴ Infrequent riders refers to respondents who indicated they ride Sounder less than once per month or 2-3 times per month.

⁵ Lower income respondents refers those who indicated a household income of \$35,000 or less.

⁶ Seattle respondents refers to those who indicated King Street station was the station they use the most (riders) or live closest to (non-riders).



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Weekend trips

Respondents who selected weekend trips could select up to two options for the time of day and direction they would like to see new trips. The highest responses were for evening⁷ southbound (57.7%) and morning⁸ northbound (46.6%). This is likely because most respondents are from South King and Pierce County. Seattle residents showed a strong preference for evening northbound (60.6%) and morning southbound (50.8%)

Lower-income respondents showed slightly more interest in a morning southbound and evening northbound trip, compared to other income levels. People of color⁹ showed slightly more interest in afternoon southbound and evening northbound trains, compared to white respondents.

Example comments from survey respondents:

"I'm from Tacoma but live in Seattle. All of my family still live in Tacoma, and I would love to be able to take the Sounder to see them on weekends..."

"I would love to be able to go into Seattle or Tacoma on the weekends to meet friends, or just visit the city... It's especially important as someone who lives nowhere near the Light rail expansions."

"Driving and parking in Downtown Seattle is difficult and expensive...A train with hookups to water taxis and ferries would be ideal for weekend outings."

Trip purposes

The most popular trip purpose would be for recreation or social activities, such as attending events, sightseeing, shopping/errands, or meeting friends and family. Work was indicated as a trip purpose by 68% on weekdays and 37.6% on weekends. Other trip purposes included attending school and medical appointments.

Capacity

About 10% of respondents expressed a desire to prioritize 10-car trains over adding new trips, and we received 80 comments relating to the amount of space or capacity on Sounder trains today. Seventeen of those comments cited the need to return to seven-car trains due to crowding. We also heard that bikes and scooters contribute to capacity issues.

Example comments from survey respondents:

"From seattle to tukwila, there is standing room only going southbound. it's frustrating. most of the time have to stand until at least auburn station"

"There are more riders on Tuesday through Thursday because some people only work 3 days a week. Making the cars very full on those days."

"There is increased number of commuters with bikes and scooters. Often during peak hours these spots on the cars are full especially during summer/good weather days."

⁷ Weekend evening service is defined as 5 -10 p.m.

⁸ Weekend morning service is defined as 6 a.m.- 12 p.m.

⁹ People of color is defined as: American Indian or Alaskan Native; Asian or Asian American; Black, African or African American; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander; Middle Eastern or North African; Two or more races.



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Adjusting today's schedule

The survey asked if respondents would support reducing frequency during peak periods to add trips at other times of day or week (contingent on BNSF approval). The majority of respondents (75.3%) supported spreading out trips, and this level of support was consistent across income, race, and geographic categories. Among frequent riders, 55.7% preferred reducing frequency during peak periods to add trips at other times.

What we heard: focus groups and stakeholder outreach



Focus group in Tacoma with Vietnamese Sunflower dance troupe members.

Staff engaged with a variety of historically underserved communities in four focus groups to understand their needs, travel patterns, barriers to riding the train, and how the S Line could better serve them. Across all focus groups, the strongest interest was in adding weekend service, with many indicating they would use Sounder at least once a month for recreational purposes such as sightseeing and shopping. There was also strong interest in additional weekday services at a variety of times, including early morning, late morning, midday and evenings in both directions to better support swing and graveyard shifts.

Staff also conducted interviews with organizations throughout the corridor. There were a variety of themes from these conversations, including: desire for more midday service mid-week; desire for more "reverse commute" trips among Pierce County employees; strong desire for weekend service, particularly in summer, from Pierce and South King County tourism destinations; and a desire for more midday service (both directions) for UW-Tacoma students.

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Tacoma LatinX Festival



Auburn Halloween Harvest Festival



Sumner vs Graham-Kapowsin football game

Next steps

Sound Transit will use this feedback from the community, along with research on travel patterns, peer agency research, and ridership estimating to inform Board discussions in Spring 2024 about whether to prioritize new trips over longer trains in the Sounder South Strategic Plan. Any new Sounder trips would require approval from BNSF, which owns most of the tracks Sounder runs on.