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1. Seattle Is Building Light Rail Like It's 1999

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Seattle Is Building Light Rail Like It's 1999

Decades ago, the Pacific Northwest city launched a multibillion-dollar transit building boom. Now the new lines and stations are drawing riders — and criticism.

By Linda Baker

January 16, 2026 at 9:00 AM PST

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It's not easy to run a train across a floating bridge. To extend light rail service across the mile-long stretch of Lake Washington that separates downtown Seattle from Mercer Island, engineers converted two lanes of the existing I-90 span to carry four-car electrified trains. That demanded a host of technical innovations, including a system of curved and rotating track supports that allow trains to adapt to the shifting movements of the bridge as it is buffeted by wind and waves.

According to regional transit agency Sound Transit, which operates the metro area's Link system, it's the first light rail in the world built on a floating bridge.

"If you go over a bump in a car, you're OK," says Ryan Avery, deputy director of the [Washington State Transportation Center](#) at the University of Washington, explaining the painstaking construction process. "But with a train, a bump is a derailment." Another innovation is a unique "cathodic protection" system that is supposed to capture stray electrical currents before they enter the structure,

slowing corrosion of the rebar inside the massive floating concrete pontoons that support the bridge deck.

[Since September](#), test trains have been chugging back and forth across the bridge, prepping for regular service this spring. The so-called Crosslake Connection is just one particularly complex part of Sound Transit's latest expansion: the 2 Line, a 14-mile, \$3.7 billion effort to connect the city with the suburbs of Redmond and Bellevue. Voters approved the Link extension back in 2008; it was originally slated to open in 2020. According to Josh Brown of the [Puget Sound Regional Council](#), a regional planning agency, the project is critical to relieve traffic congestion and help the area meet its economic development goals.

"In terms of the region's strategic objectives," he said, "this is one of the big ones."

Redmond is home to Microsoft's world headquarters, Brown noted, while Amazon, headquartered near downtown Seattle, is [expanding its footprint in Bellevue](#). Link stations at the University of Washington and the University District opened, respectively, in 2016 and 2021. "We're going to have one train connecting all our key educational institutions and technology centers," Brown said.

Seattle's Link system, which opened its first line in 2009, is in the middle of a multibillion-dollar growth spurt, funded largely by tax measures approved by voters in 2008 and 2016. The north-south 1 Line now stretches for 41 miles, after a [\\$3 billion extension to the northern suburb of Lynwood](#) that opened in June and a \$2.5 billion southern leg [to Federal Way](#) that debuted in December. That line has been joined by a 10-mile eastside-only segment of the 2 Line that opened in phases over the past 18 months.

Next up: new lines to the Seattle neighborhoods of Ballard and West Seattle, as well as the cities of Everett, Issaquah and Tacoma (where an existing 4-mile segment called the T Line runs through downtown). A \$54 billion tax package approved in 2016 calls for adding 62 miles of light rail track, in addition to expanded [bus rapid transit](#) and commuter rail service. Over the next decades, the light rail system is set to reach 116 miles — the largest transit expansion in the US based on miles per capita.

Thanks in part to this building binge, Link ridership is up 24% since 2019 — the highest post-pandemic ridership recovery across all US

light rail systems, says Yonah Freemark, a researcher at the [Urban Institute](#), a Washington, DC-based think tank. In October, 3.4 million people rode Link trains, up from 3 million during the same period in 2024. “If ridership trends continue,” says Freemark, “Seattle will soon have the highest light rail ridership in the country. That’s pretty impressive for a system that’s only a few decades old.” Link’s growth reflects the city’s uniquely transit-friendly political ecosystem — embodied most recently by the rise of Katie Wilson, co-founder of the [Transit Riders Union](#), as the city’s newest mayor. Still, Sound Transit is steeped in controversy. Ballooning construction costs have left the agency with a roughly \$30 billion budget shortfall, imperiling extensions approved under the 2016 ballot measure. The Trump administration is almost certain to yank grant funding, adding to its financial woes. And even [rail boosters have raised questions](#) about Link project delays, planning decisions and service disruptions.

With Seattle set to host an estimated 750,000 soccer fans for [2026 FIFA World Cup matches](#) in June, the resilience and usefulness of the upgraded system will soon face a high-profile test.

“Light rail has opened up the city — overall, it’s a huge boon to everyone,” said Wilson (who spoke to CityLab before the November election). “But there are equity issues in how light rail got conceptualized and planned, and it’s an ongoing problem.”

Late Start

Seattle was late to the light rail party. The first systems emerged in the austere 1980s [as a compromise mode](#) — cheaper to build than the “heavy rail” networks that the federal government had bankrolled a decade earlier. Unlike subways that ran in tunnels or on elevated tracks, light rail trains could be funded largely by state and local sources, and by the late 1990s and early 2000s, they [dominated urban rail openings across US cities](#).

But not in the Pacific Northwest. Bugged down by the [Boeing recession](#), Seattle [rejected transit ballot measures](#) in 1968 and 1971, missing out on a large federal grant that would eventually pay for Atlanta’s [MARTA](#) service. Pivoting, local leaders instead spent decades building what became a [leading US bus network](#), with [one of the nation’s busiest bus corridors](#).

King County Metro, which operates the bus network, helped establish a culture of transit ridership. “In Seattle a lot of people got used to riding the bus,” Avery said. “It didn’t have the same stigma it did in other cities.” That ultimately built support for a voter measure approving [a transit plan that included light rail](#) in 1996. Today, he adds, “a lot of transit ridership is on the back of King County Metro.” Adding further incentive, the 1990s tech boom [flooded the region with wealth](#) and new residents, reshaping the social, political and business landscape. “People were concerned about traffic, pollution and how they were going to afford the region,” said Kirk Hovenkotter, executive director of [Transportation Choices Coalition](#), a Seattle nonprofit that led a broad coalition of environmental, business, labor and advocacy groups to support Link’s expansion.

Boxed in by the Puget Sound to the west and Lake Washington to the east, Seattle’s hilly, water-bound and earthquake-prone topography points to a fundamental paradox girding the rail network: One of the factors that make light rail so effective in Seattle also makes it complicated and expensive to build.

Brown draws a comparison with the sprawling Phoenix metro. Like Seattle, the Arizona city has boomed, but unlike Phoenix, “we haven’t doubled in size. We’re growing up, not out.” Aided by Seattle’s ’90s-era [growth management policies](#), higher-density land use helps mass transit to thrive.

Many Link trains enjoy their own dedicated rights-of-way on tracks underground like a subway or on elevated lines. That’s more expensive to build than light rail systems that run in mixed traffic at street level, says Brown. But it allows for longer trains and provides “real advantages in terms of speed that you don’t get elsewhere — not heavy-rail speed but pretty darn close.”

The Link segment connecting downtown, Capitol Hill and the University of Washington, for example, compresses a trip that takes upwards of 30 minutes during rush hour into an eight-minute ride through [a 3.1-mile \\$1.8 billion tunnel](#) — an engineering marvel that runs 300 feet below Volunteer Park and under the Montlake Cut, a canal that connects Lake Washington and Lake Union.

That’s a departure from many first-generation light rail systems, Freemark points out, which tend to run along highways or use old

rail corridors — often far from existing housing and commercial centers. That disconnect is one reason why light rail networks in Portland, Denver and other cities [have flat or declining ridership](#). Seattle planners, by contrast, “worked hard to ensure stations served dense neighborhoods pretty effectively,” Freemark says.

The Housing Connection

Improving on that utility, light rail is being tasked with helping to address Seattle’s affordable housing crisis. Under a state law passed in 2016, Sound Transit [is required to offer 80% of surplus land for new housing construction](#) — and dedicate most of that housing to subsidized rentals. So far, more than 2,500 units have been built or are in the pipeline, and Amazon has pledged \$100 million to build 1,200 affordable housing units at light rail stations.

Many of the Link stations located in core Seattle neighborhoods such as Capitol Hill and the University District are seeing [some of the highest ridership on the network](#). But suburban areas are also seeing a boom.

Years before Sound Transit decided to route an extension through downtown Redmond — a suburb so sleepy it was once [dubbed Deadmond](#) — city leaders selected a preferred light rail route, then planned and permitted the area for the alignment. The city also upzoned the central core, as well an adjacent industrial area, for new development.

That advance planning contrasts with the Link’s standard design and development process, in which planners hash out station locations and route alignment only after voters approve the bare outlines of the project at the ballot box, says John Marchione, who served first as a Redmond city councilman and later as mayor during that period. “Allocating the money first and then picking the route [is expensive and leads to delays and cost overruns](#), which we didn’t have on the Redmond segments,” said Marchione, a former Sound Transit board chair who now leads the Washington State Public Stadium Authority.

Initially, Sound Transit staff were “disinclined” to route the Link into downtown, according to Marchione. “I said: ‘This is zoned for density; this has housing, parks and so forth. And by the way, we will have this built out before you get here.’”

That's what happened: Over the past decade Redmond developed a popular [downtown district](#) featuring thousands of new apartments, along with restaurants, shops and public spaces. As of last May the area is also anchored by one of two Link stations that connect to the South Bellevue and Microsoft stations that opened last year. Soon after the stations opened, ridership soared, with [more than 306,000 riders boarding 2 Line trains](#) in July, an increase of 47% from June and nearly 100,000 more riders in a single month.

A Sound Transit light rail train in Shoreline, Washington, in May 2025. *Photographer: M. Scott Brauer/Bloomberg*

Still, critics note that not all Link alignments are so ideal. Wilson, the new mayor, points out that extensions in suburban areas tend to follow the freeway, making it harder for people to walk to stations and undermining opportunities for new housing; several stations are surrounded by parking lots and Park & Ride structures. She also singles out street-running urban sections that have trains mixing with traffic, like a [four-mile stretch through low-income neighborhoods](#) in South Seattle that has been plagued by pedestrian and car crashes.

The Sound Transit board [consists of elected officials who are appointed](#) from around the region, Wilson added. While that structure “is important for political buy-in,” she said, it also tends to favor smaller cities and suburbs at the expense of higher-need areas in Seattle.

“Sound Transit likes to build things,” she said, “but is not as good on the rider experience side.”

Avery also believes that the agency's recent focus on expansion has taken a toll on day-to-day operations. “Sound Transit is building so much and expanding systems so rapidly, I sometimes feel like they see themselves as a construction company rather than an operating agency,” he said.

Costs and Complications

In August 2025, when Sound Transit released new cost estimates for the next round of rail extensions, approved by voters under the 2016 ballot measure, the price tag on a 7.7-mile line to Seattle's Ballard neighborhood had swelled to \$22 billion — double the original forecast. A four-mile section of track to West Seattle is now pegged at \$7.9 billion, up \$800 million from 2016 estimates.

“That’s unique,” said Eric Goldwyn, a program director at New York University’s Marron Institute of Urban Management and co-investigator of the [Transit Costs Project](#). “Only New York builds things more expensively.”

Blame often falls on the region’s tricky topography — the I-90 floating bridge being just the latest example of the system’s engineering challenges — along with inflation, tariffs and other macro-level economic factors. But Goldwyn says some of the system’s issues are avoidable. “The original sin in Seattle is they go to the ballot with very immature planning and design that is selling people all of this stuff — a tunnel or an elevated line,” he said. Once the full design and construction process gets underway and complications accrue, the cost equation changes.

Taking that message to heart, in 2025 Sound Transit launched a restructuring initiative aimed at “delivering projects more expeditiously, within scope, schedule and budget,” according to Luke Lamon, the agency’s executive director of communications. To close the budget gap, the board is considering a range of measures, including potentially [nixing a downtown tunnel](#) to slash \$11 billion from the Ballard line and improving farebox recovery [by installing ticketing gates](#).

Riders at the Star Lake Station during the opening of the Federal Way extension on December 6, 2025. *Photographer: Glenn Landberg/Sound Transit*

Sound Transit has also pledged to tackle its maintenance needs: A series of fixes instituted last year [reduced disrupted service hours by half](#), and UW’s Avery says the agency is doing a better job responding to incidents as they occur. Still, another \$5 billion is forecast to be needed to update the network and maintain reliable service.

The agency’s \$30 billion construction shortfall has provided plenty of fodder for Sound Transit critics, some of whom are [calling for state intervention and a pause on](#) all new rail lines. “Their whole financial plan looks like a house of cards and does very little to solve the region’s mobility problem,” said Charles Prestrud, director of transportation at the Washington Policy Center, a free-market think tank that advocates shifting much of the rail money to bus rapid transit lines.

Even some Link advocates are losing patience. “People have been

diligently paying their taxes for a decade now — they want the transit investments, and they want the board to stop dithering,” says Hovenkotter, whose group recently launched a “[Build the Damn Trains](#)” campaign demanding the board make good on a plan to issue 75-year bonds to help close the funding gap.

Although the long-term financial outlook is cloudy, Sound Transit has enough money to get started on the new extensions now, Goldwyn and other transit experts say. The voter-approved ballot measures also protect temporarily against the likely loss of federal grant funding. About [68% of Sound Transit’s projected 2026 budget](#) comes from sales, motor vehicle and property taxes. “The board might be risk averse,” Goldwyn said. “But they are somewhat in control of their own destiny.”

Challenges Ahead

Sound Transit isn’t out of the woods yet. Recent ridership gains have been shadowed by public safety concerns, as Seattle [saw crime spike](#) during the pandemic and its aftermath. (In December 2024, a [King County Metro bus driver was fatally stabbed](#).) The agency responded by beefing [up security aboard Link trains and stations](#) and expanding outreach teams that work to deescalate crises. Assaults on Link passengers declined from 140 in 2023 to 123 in 2024.

“Most all the trips are safe, but there are routes that are not safe and fine,” said Claudia Balducci, Sound Transit vice chair and a King County Council member. “Along with maintenance and reliability,” she added, “safety is a big emphasis now because these are the basics on which ridership can grow.”

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Meanwhile, Amazon and Microsoft are simultaneously instituting [back-to-office mandates](#) and [laying off thousands of employees](#) — competing trends that could make or break Link’s goal of hitting 50,000 daily riders on the completed 2 Line. And [like Los Angeles](#), Seattle is racing to complete construction and maintenance upgrades before FIFA World Cup games begin in June. During the global soccer tournament, Sound Transit plans to [expand service](#), running trains every every four minutes on the busiest segments on game days.

The Crosslake Connection across the floating bridge should be ready, as the agency projects a May 31 opening. Pulling off a global transit first during the biggest public transportation event in local history might be the strongest validation yet of a message Link advocates have sounded for decades.

“The only thing that is more popular than light rail is getting it done sooner,” Hovenkotter said.