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Date: April 17, 2015
To: Sound Transit Board
From: Light Rail Review Panel
Re: Lynnwood Link NE 130th St Station

The Seattle Light Rail Review Panel (LRRP) continues to support the Sound Transit Board of Director's efforts to obtain funding for the proposed light rail extension from Northgate to Lynnwood. However, we have continued to evaluate the potential station at NE 130th Street and have concerns about the approach reflected in the recent Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS). We submit the following thoughts in advance of the Board's upcoming vote on station locations.

The LRRP supports locating a station at NE 130th St rather than stations only at Northgate and NE 145th St for the following reasons:

1. Compared to the station under construction at Northgate or the proposed station at NE 145th St, a station at NE 130th St better serves the neighborhoods in and around Bitter Lake and Lake City, two growing hub urban villages that offer affordable housing options and have transit-dependent populations.
2. Because of its lower traffic volumes, planned bicycle facilities, and opportunity for bus route restructuring, NE 130th St is a superior location than Northgate and NE 145th St for connecting non-automobile modes with light rail.
3. A station at NE 130th St offers the potential for greater increased ridership than captured in the FEIS. This and other benefits outweigh the one-minute increase in travel times.

The following discussion expands on each of these arguments.

With membership from the Seattle Design, Planning, and Arts Commissions, the Seattle Light Rail Review Panel is the advisory body that provides integrated review of Sound Transit Link Light Rail projects. LRRP members are professional from the various fields related to urban development and infrastructure, including urban planners, transportation planners, and developers. The LRRP provided rigorous review of Central Link and University Link and is in the process of reviewing Northgate Link and Rainier Station.

1. Compared to stations at Northgate or NE 145th St, a station at NE 130th St would better serve the high transit-dependent populations in and around the growing Bitter Lake and Lake City Hub Urban Villages. Bitter Lake, Haller Lake, and Lake City are some of the most affordable neighborhoods in north Seattle. According to housing rental data from November 2014, median rent in these areas is more than 25% lower than the Seattle median.¹

Car ownership is also below the citywide average.² In these areas, the share of residents who do not own a vehicle is roughly twice that of most other north Seattle neighborhoods. With a station at NE 130th St, these residents could access light rail 15-20 minutes faster on foot, 6-8 minutes faster by bicycle, and 10-12 minutes faster by bus than they could with stations only at NE 145th St and Northgate.

Furthermore, Lake City and Bitter Lake have some of the highest concentrations of communities of color, low-income households, and English language learners among all north Seattle urban villages.³ Locating a station at NE 130th St increases access to affordable transportation for these communities. This aligns with the goals of Seattle's Race and Social Justice Initiative and the Puget Sound Regional Council's Regional Equity Network and Growing Transit Communities program.

2. NE 130th St is a better location than either Northgate or NE 145th St for non-automobile connectivity. Traffic volumes are significantly lower on the NE 130th St/NE 125th St corridor than on either NE 145th St and Northgate Way NE. This is very unlikely ever to change. Congestion will always be higher on NE 145th St and Northgate Way NE because these two arterials have both north- and southbound on- and off-ramps to I-5, whereas NE 130th St has only a southbound on-ramp and northbound off-ramp. Furthermore, unlike NE 145th St, a NE 130th St station would not include a parking facility, so vehicle volumes on NE 130th St would not increase due to new park-and-ride traffic.

Lower traffic volumes offer two primary benefits. First, it makes NE 130th St a superior option for feeder buses connecting Bitter Lake, Haller Lake, Broadview, and Lake City with light rail. Seattle has several north-south "spines" but few efficient east-west "ribs." NE 130th St is one of the few arterials where buses can effectively extend light rail access further into north Seattle neighborhoods without becoming mired in the congestion of NE 145th St and Northgate Way NE. Given that King County Metro plans to reconfigure its service in response to upcoming stations at UW and Northgate, a similar approach could improve bus-rail connections across this segment of north Seattle, thereby increasing ridership on the Lynnwood Link Extension.

While some Lake City commuters would likely continue to use express buses to downtown Seattle, residents in Pinehurst and other neighborhoods between I-5 and Lake City Way would benefit from light access at NE 130th St. And for all Lake City residents, easy access to light rail via NE 130th St would offer new reliable northbound service for commuters to Shoreline, Mountlake Terrace, and Lynnwood.

Second, lower traffic volumes make NE 130th St a better corridor for safe and direct bicycle and pedestrian connections. The City of Seattle plans to construct protected bike lanes on NE 130th St in 2016. Connecting cyclists from Lake City or Bitter Lake to stations at NE 145th St or Northgate Way NE would require additional cost, result in a longer trip, and place cyclists in a more dangerous, higher-traffic roadway. Pedestrians along NE 130th St would benefit from a quicker, safer, and more pleasant route to access to light rail. Sidewalks east of the station are often buffered from the roadway by a planting strip, and NE 125th St has half as many travel lanes as NE 145th St or Northgate Way NE.

3. Ridership at NE 130th St is underestimated in the FEIS, making the aforementioned benefits far outweigh the minor drawbacks. The FEIS assumes that a NE 130th St station would primarily attract riders who would otherwise use the Northgate or NE 145th St stations, significantly reducing potential ridership

1 Dupre + Scott Apartment Advisors, Inc. (November 2014)

2 2013 5-year American Community Survey.

3 Ibid.

gains. However, this employs a rudimentary conception of a station's ridership area. The FEIS discounts the aforementioned time savings for residents in surrounding neighborhoods that would walk, bike, or ride the bus to access light rail. A 10-minute shorter trip from Bitter Lake to light rail will attract new ridership that otherwise will choose not to use — or will not be able to access — light rail whatsoever. The increased speed and reliability of feeder buses serving NE 130th St effectively increases the ridership area for a station at that location.

Furthermore, ridership estimates in the FEIS reflect a potential rezone at NE 145th St but do not consider potential land use changes at NE 130th St. While current zoning and land uses near the potential NE 130th St station limit opportunities for transit-oriented development (TOD) in this location, the surrounding neighborhoods are broadly supportive of it. As part of the update to the Comprehensive Plan, the City of Seattle is considering designating a new urban village at this station area and could therefore amend land use regulations to facilitate TOD. In the Bitter Lake Hub Urban Village alone, there is capacity for over 10,000 residential units under existing zoning, all within all within a one-mile walk of the station.⁴ Given the challenges of developing TOD, this is a secondary benefit that the Sound Transit Board should consider.

Finally, the drawbacks to providing this station are minor compared to these benefits. Adding a station at NE 130th St would increase travel times on Lynnwood Link by one minute. This is insignificant considering alternate modes of travel. Currently, travel from Lynnwood to downtown Seattle regularly takes over an hour by car in morning traffic and 45 minutes by bus using the HOV lanes — though congestion frequently increases these times. Even with a loss of one minute, light rail would connect these two destinations in under half an hour. From 2011 to 2013, average morning peak hour travel times on I-5 from Everett to Seattle increased 10 minutes due to congestion.⁵ Concern over a additional minute of travel time for light rail should consider that in recent years travel times for single-occupancy vehicles on the I-5 corridor have increased one minute roughly every three months.

In closing, the LRRP sees significant merit to locating a station at NE 130th St because it optimizes non-automobile connectivity and extends transit access to currently underserved neighborhoods where transit dependence is high — with an inconsequential increase to travel time. Given recent and projected growth in and around Lake City and Bitter Lake and their above-average concentrations of marginalized populations, access to regional light rail for those residents is an immediate and direct need. This calls for providing this station sooner rather than later.

Shannon Loew, Chair

Seattle Light Rail Review Panel

Cc: Mayor Ed Murray
Seattle City Councilmembers
Scott Kubly, Director Seattle Department of Transportation
Diane Sugimura, Director, Seattle Department of Planning and Development
Vanessa Murdock, Director, Seattle Planning Commission
Ruri Yampolski, Public Art Director, Seattle Office of Arts & Culture

4 "Development Capacity Report – September 2014." DPD. http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/cs/groups/pan/@pan/documents/web_informational/p2182731.pdf

5 "The 2014 Corridor Capacity Report." WSDOT. <http://wsdot.wa.gov/publications/fulltext/graynotebook/CCR14.pdf>