

U.S. to finance 40 percent of light rail extension costs

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P-I REPORTER

The federal government will increase its contribution and finance more than 40 percent of the cost of extending Sound Transit light rail service from downtown Seattle to the University of Washington.

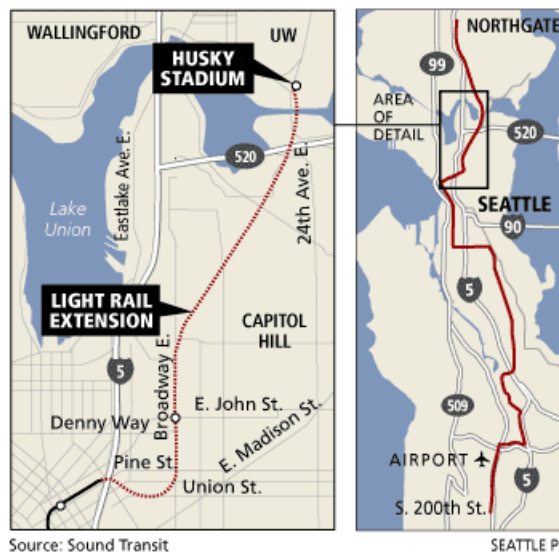
Groundbreaking for construction will be in a few weeks, and work to remove buildings from a Capitol Hill station site will begin this month.

Federal Transit Administration acting chief Sherry Little said Thursday her agency will finance \$813 million of the \$1.9 billion project. Federal approval came, Little said, after her agency insisted that Sound Transit add \$127 million in "contingency" amounts for unforeseen costs of tunneling, "one of the riskier components" of the expense.

Approval of the grant will signal the start of construction of the 3.15-mile line, which will extend through a tunnel under downtown to underground stations, one at Broadway and John on Capitol Hill and the other at Husky Stadium at the UW.

LIGHT RAIL EXTENSION ON TRACK

The federal government said Thursday it will help finance a Sound Transit light rail extension from downtown Seattle to the University of Washington. The 3.15-mile line will extend through a deep-bore tunnel under downtown to underground stations on Capitol Hill and Husky Stadium. The line is scheduled to be completed by 2016.



The line is scheduled to be completed and carrying passengers between the university, Capitol Hill, downtown and Seattle-Tacoma International Airport by 2016. Two other light rail segments are scheduled to open this year, first between downtown and Tukwila and then to the airport, all part of Sound Transit's first stage of development.

A second, separate stage, approved by voters in November, is to extend the light rail system north from Husky Stadium to Lynnwood by 2023 and south to Federal Way by that same year. The second phase also will extend rail to part of Redmond by 2021.

The agency promises the UW line will provide a nine-minute trip from the UW, compared with 25 minutes by bus, and a three-minute trip from the UW to Capitol Hill, compared with 22 minutes by bus. It predicts the line will attract 70,000 daily boardings by 2030, more than 60 percent of the total ridership predicted for that year for the system.

Tunneling work will begin near Husky Stadium later this year and involve evening and overnight trucking of dirt as it's dug from the new shafts. The hauling from Capitol Hill will be during daylight hours, but may require variances from noise limits in both locations as contractors move thousands of truckloads of dirt.

"Truck hauling will be the main impact," said Sound Transit spokesman Bruce Gray. "There's going to be a lot of tunneling going on around here for a while."

Little said her agency asked for and agreed to pay part of a higher cost estimate mindful that the cost of some tunnels nationwide has exceeded initial estimates. Sound Transit's tunnel through Beacon Hill, where trains are to begin running this summer, exceeded the initial estimate by nearly 31 percent because of unstable soil and water discovered after the work began.

Sound Transit officials said the Beacon Hill tunnel work went well but the problems were at the station, which had to be relocated.

Light rail director Ahmad Fazel said additional soil samples were taken in cross-passages along the UW route. Fazel said there should be fewer construction risks on the UW route than under Beacon Hill, though "there's going to be water over there that needs to be taken care of."

UW line stations will be dug down from the surface to a shallower depth to reduce the risk of unstable soil, based on lessons learned from Beacon Hill, Sound Transit officials said.

Steve Kramer, a UW civil engineering professor with knowledge of soil conditions, said soil under hilly areas is dense enough to be amenable to tunnel boring. "It could be a lot worse," said Kramer, who said he didn't have detailed knowledge of the ground in the corridor. "Things can change and change relatively rapidly in a very short space ... it's not something anyone would claim to be done with 100 percent accuracy."

Sound Transit officials said they're confident the budgeted costs will cover what might happen. "It's as well done as humanly possible," said Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels, Sound Transit's board chairman.

The federal grant is scheduled to be paid to Sound Transit through the construction period. Congress must approve each allocation, but officials said an agreement signed Thursday commits the federal government to paying the full grant amount. The \$1.9 billion cost accounts for inflation and financing costs during construction but not the cost of repaying bonds after construction, Gray said.

The tunnel will be dug east from Pine Street downtown, underneath Interstate 5 to the Capitol Hill Station and north to the UW under state Route 520 and the Lake Washington Ship Canal.

Surface-level work will occur at Husky Stadium, at Capitol Hill and at a retrieval pit for tunnel-boring operations at Pine Street. Later this month a contractor, NRC Environmental Services, is expected to begin demolishing vacant buildings Sound Transit acquired at the Capitol Hill station site. That work will continue through the middle of the year.

Once tunneling begins at the UW, trucks will be hauling dirt during evening and overnight hours, after peak commuting times, to prevent clogging rush-hour traffic. Gray said there's no way to avoid evening hauling.

Trucks will enter the UW work site and leave with dirt on Montlake Boulevard Northeast, Gray said, though the rest of the route is yet to be determined. On Capitol Hill, trucks will enter the station site from Denny Way, pick up tunneling spoils and exit it on John Street to get to yet-to-be named disposal sites.

Traffic may be a tight squeeze on Denny and Olive Way as trucks maneuver. New crosswalks may be needed and parking may have to be removed to improve sightlines, Gray said.

Gray said there are no restrictions on night hauling on Capitol Hill, but neighbors "let us know they've got some issues" with it. Details will be worked out with contractors and the city. He could not say how many truck trips will be taken from the work areas but it's expected to be in the thousands. About 12,000 truckloads were taken out of 2-mile-long Beacon Hill tunnels.

Before Thursday, Sound Transit received \$19.6 million in federal cash for initial design work on the UW line. Agency spokesman Geoff Patrick said it expects to receive \$100 million more this year and \$110 million annually from 2010 through 2014, subject to annual appropriations by Congress.

The remaining amounts are expected to be paid in by 2016, the year the line is scheduled to be operating for passengers.

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