Cascadia High-Speed Rail
Frequently Asked Questions

1. Where will the stations be located?

The 2019 Business Case Analysis, prepared by the Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT), evaluated eight locations: Vancouver, B.C.; Seattle, WA; and Portland, OR, with a combination of stops in Surrey, B.C.; Bellingham, Everett, Tukwila, Tacoma, Olympia, and Kelso, WA. Where stations are located will be the result of a robust public engagement process.

2. What is the proposed alignment?

Selecting a route will be the result of a robust public engagement process once the project receives funding. Planning, engineering, and other technical analysis will provide information to the public and decision makers about the system's benefits and impacts.

3. How long will a trip be between Seattle and Portland or Seattle and Vancouver?

A trip between Seattle and Portland or Seattle and Vancouver will reliably take approximately one hour on the ultra-high-speed system. Today those same trips take at least three hours by car or air.

4. How many times a day will the system run?

WSDOT's 2019 Business Case Analysis assumed between 21 and 30 daily roundtrips between Portland, OR and Vancouver, BC., including both express and local service options. The number of trains, travel time between stations, and station locations will be the result of a robust public engagement process and technical analysis.

5. How many people will ride the system?

WSDOT's 2019 Business Case Analysis projected high demand for faster trips between Vancouver, BC and Portland, OR with more than three million annual trips on an ultra-high-speed system. This compares to 2.6 million personal miles traveled on I-5 in 2019.

6. Will it be safe?

Travel by rail is one of the safest modes of travel with some of the lowest accident rates per mile of any mode. Automobiles result in more than 7 passenger deaths per billion passenger miles compared to virtually none by high-speed rail, according to the 2019 Business Case Analysis. Japan has operated high-speed rail since 1964 and achieved an impressive record of no fatalities or serious injuries.

7. When will it open?

WSDOT's 2019 Business Case Analysis assumed the ultra-high-speed system would be operational by 2040. Based on recent Northwest and national projects, planning, alternatives analysis, and environmental review for the more than 300-mile corridor could take as long as 10 years. How long construction takes will be determined by the alignment, number of stations, and other factors.

8. How will the system integrate with local transit and Amtrak?

Stations at existing rail stations and transit hubs will create first- and last-mile connections to existing buses, commuter rail, and light rail systems. It will also connect to Amtrak trains to points not directly served by the ultra-high-speed system, such as routes south and east of the corridor.

9. How much will the project cost?

WSDOT's 2017 feasibility study estimated the cost between $27 and $42 billion (2017$) based on estimated costs per mile and assumptions about the type of construction (i.e., at-grade, tunneling). Additional planning, route development, and engineering is needed to update the cost estimate. In comparison, WSDOT estimates that adding a lane in each direction of Interstate 5 through the state would cost approximately $108 billion (2018$).

10. How much will it cost to ride?

It is too soon to know how much it will cost to ride the system. The cost of a ticket will be based on a variety of factors, such as stations, number of trips per day, and type of service (local versus express).

11. Won't the cost to ride the train be so expensive that it will be unaffordable to most people?

The 2050 Cascadia Vision report found that more than 50% of Cascadia residents are housing cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on a place to live. Lower-income households spend nearly 16% of their take-home income on transportation, according to The Pew Charitable Trusts. An ultra-high-speed system will provide a faster, more affordable, and reliable trip for people and connect them to good-paying jobs and more affordable housing, making our region more equitable for everyone. Our region also strives to increase access to public transportation through reduced fare programs like King County's ORCA Lift for low-income households.

12. How do we know there won't be the same problems as California high-speed rail?

Learning lessons from other infrastructure projects will be an important part of developing the project. One early lesson from the California high-speed rail project is the importance of robust public engagement with all communities and stakeholders early and often. This will be one of the first steps after the project receives funding. The University of Washington recently completed a study that examined lessons learned from other high-speed rail projects.

13. There are so many transportation needs, why invest in a new ultra-high-speed system?

We must continue to invest in transportation, maintain the system we have and plan for the future. We expect nearly 4 million more people moving to the Cascadia region by 2050. If we don't act, our current problems —congestion, housing affordability and climate change — will only get worse.

14. Are there other options that won't cost taxpayers as much?

With an expected 30% increase in our megaregion's population over the next 30 years, we need more capacity in our transportation system. The capacity of a high-speed rail line typically exceeds the peak capacity of a four-lane interstate highway or a two-runway airport. WSDOT estimates building enough lanes to address just today's congestion would require as much as a $2.50 per gallon gas tax increase.

15. Will high-speed rail take the place of airplane trips between Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver?

It's not a choice between an ultra-high-speed system or airplanes. With nearly four million people moving to the Cascadia region in the next 30 years, we need capacity in all modes of travel.

16. How will high-speed rail contribute to carbon emission reduction?

The Cascadia region is expected to grow by nearly 4 million more people by 2050 and the sustainability of our region depends on being able to travel without contributing to climate change. High-speed transportation will reduce the need to expand Interstate 5 and connect urban centers, encouraging greater density, walking, biking, rolling, and riding local transit.

17. Would investing in Amtrak instead of high-speed rail mean greenhouse gas reduction sooner?

Investments in both high-speed rail and Amtrak will help to address our current challenges of congestion, housing affordability, and climate change and the nearly 4 million more people who will call our region home by 2050. As the project is planned, station locations will be chosen intentionally to provide easy connections to existing rail, transit, and airports.

In addition to developing a high-speed system, WSDOT is preparing an Amtrak Cascades Service Development Plan, which will describe possible investments for improving the service over the next 20 years. A draft plan is expected to be completed by November 2023 and will inform future funding decisions by the Washington State Legislature.

18. Will there be an independent review of high-speed ground transportation?

In 2022 the Washington State Legislature directed the Joint Transportation Committee to conduct an independent review of the past studies on high-speed ground transportation. The Environmental Justice Council established by the Washington State Legislature will also provide recommendations on programs funded by the Climate Commitment Act.