King County Metro Transit: expanding its role from service provider to mobility manager

Agency:	King County Metro
Location:	Seattle, WA
Service Area:	King County, WA
Modes:	Bus, Rideshare, Vanpools, Paratransit services, Sound Transit's regional Express bus service, Link light rail in King County, Seattle Streetcar, Water Taxi
Community Context:	King County Transit Advisory Commission, including residents, businesses, and other stakeholders appointed by the King County Executive and approved by the King County Council (formed by nine members representing the districts).
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OVERVIEW

King County Metro provides a wide range of transportation options for the King County. It operates the region's largest bus network, vanpools, paratransit services, and several programs to promote ridesharing. It also operates Sound Transit's regional Express bus service and Link light rail in King County, along with the Seattle Streetcar.

Metro has a long history of innovations that expand the traditional transit services, from launching a vanpool program in the 1970s, to incubating car-sharing and bike-sharing programs in the 2000s. The more programmatic efforts to engage with the new mobility landscape began in 2016, with the agency moving from its role of service provider towards a broader role where it proactively leverages services to deliver better mobility for the region.

The strategic research initiatives and service pilots considered in the Innovative Mobility Program are guided by the long-term plan Metro Connects, which reflects the King County Metro Transit's vision for bringing people more services, more choices and one easy-to-use system over the next 25 years (2040). Initiatives include on-demand first/last mile services, shared employer shuttles, discounted flexible carpooling, and priority car share parking.

Additionally, Metro supports the King County Mobility Coalition, an initiative that brings together transportation service providers, transit agencies, customers and funders to facilitate the coordination of King County special needs transportation to better serve the community.

LEADING CHANGE

The engagement of high-level leadership has been key to advance mobility management in King County. The commitment of the General Manager of King County Metro and his vision for the agency of taking a

bigger role in the transportation landscape have encouraged and empowered the agency to innovate. Moreover, the support of the county government helps Metro to communicate and generate buy-in for its new projects. To illustrate, the King County Executive spoke in his last state of the county address about the innovations in which Metro is working on to lead a new mobility strategy.

The champion for the mobility management efforts in Metro has been the Assistant General Manager of Planning & Customer Services. She is heading the initiatives to expand services and the agency's internal changes to better address mobility challenges, ensuring they are aligned with the work of other public agencies and the long-range vision for the region. One recent change was the restructuration process that brought the work on innovation and new services under the same umbrella as the regular transit services, establishing one single Mobility Division to better coordinate and advance mobility management in the region.

Crucial elements to lead change effectively are a clear long-range vision and an understanding of the region's needs and the changes that are taking place in the transportation industry. The combination of these elements has enabled leaders to identify trends and changes, recognize what requires to be adapted, and guide the development of programs and pilots to leverage that and achieve the agency's broader goals.

Trying things that have not been developed before has also required leaders to be willing to take risks and change the status quo. Many transit agencies deal with institutional and historic practices that have been defined for the "pre-mobility" world, so advancing mobility management usually means breaking away from those institutions and facing certain level of uncertainty and risk for doing things differently. Leaders in Metro understand that and have taken a learning by doing approach to figure things out in this moment of change.

Furthermore, the agency has cultivated the ability to collaborate. As Metro's approach to mobility management considers more tailor-made services, it requires a deeper understanding of both community' needs and the alternatives that can be integrated to meet those specific needs. Leaders must work closely with all the jurisdictions that Metro serves to listen the needs of the different communities, collaborate with a broad range of stakeholders, and build partnerships with service and technology providers to expand and enhance mobility options.

INTEGRATING MOBILITY SERVICES INTO THE COMMUNITY

Getting Started

King County Metro is recognized nationwide by its innovative transit services. The agency seems to have embraced the mobility management concept several decades ago, back in the late 1970s when it went out of its way to develop a vanpool program and install the first bike racks on the coaches. While the vanpool program was a first attempt to expand choices, recognizing fixed routes could not be the solution for everyone, the bikes initiative advanced the idea of multimodality and integrated trips. Metro has also been engaged in the Transportation Demand Management (TDM) realm since the 1990s, developing programs aimed at influencing the behaviors of riders, particularly commuters, to choose transit, ridesharing, biking or walking instead of driving alone; and has also led policy changes including the Commute Trip Reduction law, which requires employers to encourage their workers to use share services and public transit options. Other two initiatives developed in the 2000s illustrate again the agency putting its neck out in creating new

sustainable and efficient modes for people to get around: Metro was the incubator for Flexcar, the car sharing service provider that Zipcar ended up buying, and for the Pronto Bike Share service in the city of Seattle, which prepared the way for the success of the city's current free floating privately-operated bike share services.

When TNCs emerged, Metro proactively approached them to work together to further advance mobility in the region. The city of Seattle and the city's Department of Transportation were also very engaged in these efforts, encouraging and supporting the agency to try new things. Metro commissioned a study to explore how to regulate and leverage shared-mobility options and began working on grants applications and partnerships with new mobility providers to serve peripheral communities that have less access to transit. These first projects proved to be long and challenging processes. Traditional approaches for procurement and contracting were not suitable for the new services and partners, and contract negotiations extended for long because of disagreements on conditions and legal terms among parts.

Metro has learned from these experiences, adjusting its internal processes while continue advancing its projects. A second phase of the study was developed to characterize the new mobility landscape in the region and figure out the best way to channel the new opportunities brought by new technologies, TNCs and newfound interests in the public transportation industry. The report enabled the agency to identify key areas of innovation and both the opportunities and risks associated with each one of them. Based on those key areas, an Innovative Mobility Agenda was created to guide the projects, pilots and research in which the agency is working on today.

Building Connections

Collaborations and partnerships are at the center of the idea of mobility management in King County Metro. As the Innovative Mobility Program Manager stated, "mobility management to me really means that ability to bring different groups together and create a concerted vision of what that mobility future should be". In this line, the agency is organizing a Regional Mobility Summit precisely to have additional discussions with a wide range of stakeholders.

The biggest cities within King County and DOTs have been really engaged and committed to advance mobility in the region. In Metro, as in many transit agencies, collaboration with jurisdictions and departments of transportation that have the direct control over the right of way has always been relevant. As Metro has no jurisdiction over that key asset, the agency has had to talk to cities for decades to, for example, figure out bus stops and find segregated lanes and other types of tools to make its services more efficient. Nowadays however, with the emergence of TNCs and the upcoming arrival of automated vehicles, the need for collaboration is stressed. These kind of services and technologies might add congestions and have other implications for transit, and so public agencies must partner to find the best strategies to use road infrastructure and the urban space in the most efficient way and in favor of communities.

Labor is another of Metro's main partners, that is highly interested in understanding the impact of new mobility services on jobs and workers to find opportunities and solutions for the new mobility challenges. Labor has been supportive of the work of the agency, and Metro is thinking about how to preserve that relationship and nurture more direct conversations to leverage changes to the benefit of all.

The agency is also working with technology and mobility service providers to identify what opportunities are there, what the changes of new services mean, and how can transit agencies and they build something together in order to complement, improve and integrate the choices for people to move across the city. Many companies have reached out to Metro to pitch their ideas, which have allowed the agency to hear the market, be aware of new opportunities, and incorporate that input into their decisions.

Moving forward

The long-range plan of Metro, Metro Connects, envisions multimodality and mobility as key characteristics of transit services in King County. It talks about access to transit solutions, how to manage the park and parking infrastructure, and the role of Transportation Demand Management to promote reliable, easy-to-use, safe, flexible and accessible transportation options. The plan presents a challenge to the agency to really adopt a new culture of innovation.

Using Metro Connects as general policy guidelines, the Mobility Innovation Program as a framework and the internal knowledge and expertise of the organization, Metro is exploring what opportunities to pursue, developing pilots, and incorporating the learnings from that experiences. Trying out things has been important to generate momentum and then be able to leverage that momentum to move things forward. The agency has adopted a practical approach to identify what projects to develop based on the resources available and the open opportunities. They work closely in this process with key partners such as the Seattle DOT or Sound Transit to align efforts and leverage resources to maximize economies of scale and achieve their common goals. Along time, as the number of projects and demands grow and the Mobility Innovation Program matures, the agency has started to set up more tools and frameworks to prioritize and manage their initiatives.

A relevant part of the efforts is concentrated in first and last miles services. While public transportation is good and efficient in the center and denser parts of the city, in most suburban and peripheral locations access to it can become a challenge, as people must walk long distances or drive to a park & ride facility to get to transit. One of the pilots that is in place is a car-sharing service aimed at providing access to transit without relying on car ownership and improving the productivity of the parking facilities. Parking spaces are reserved for free floating car share vehicles, and people can park or take a shared car to connect to or from a bus or other transit service. The agency is also working on a partnership with a private technology and service provider to launch an on-demand first/last mile pilot by which customers within a 2-mile radius from high-demand park and ride facilities can request, using a smartphone app or a call center, to be picked up and share rides that connect them quickly to transit. In another research project supported by the FTA's MOD Sandbox Grant Program, Metro partnered with Sound Transit and LA Metro to explore the viability and comparing the experiences among the Puget Sound and Los Angeles regions in using TNC services to provide first/last mile solutions for access transit stops. With these pilots, the agency is gaining experience procuring, planning, and managing the provision of services by private sector providers, and collecting primary data to analyze the long-term feasibility of these models.

Responding to community needs, Metro also developed a shared employer shuttles program. Companies in the region, such as Amazon in downtown Seattle and Microsoft in Redmond, were providing their own shuttle services for their employees, that did not allow to consolidate trips and ended up doing trips with some empty seats. By offering a regional coordinated service, Metro was able to group workers going to

the same area, increasing the efficiency of the routes and maximizing the use of the space in the trips between suburban and urban locations.

Throughout the development of its Innovative Mobility Program, Metro has understood that moving from the current situation to the future that it envisions is a long path. As new technologies, mobility services and the entire public transportation industry evolves, much of the day-to-day work of the agency is to figure out the path and the gradual steps that need to be taken to move mobility forward. Part of those steps is precisely to begin with smaller pilots, with a certain level of flexibility to let them grow into its own in an organic way. Pilots help to indicate the path not only to implementation, which has proven to be quite challenging, but also to better understand new services and how to work with the private sector, adjust internal processes and the design of services for meeting customer expectations and the broader goals of the agency, and to start gathering the data to reimagine a mobility managed future in a more full-fledged way.

The lack of data is one of the biggest challenges for planning this type of projects and reconceiving the agency's assistance. For instance, TNCs tend to be very protective of their data, and that limits transit and planning agencies' ability to be creative about how these services could complement or become an integral part of transit networks. This is the reason why in many of the pilots and programs developed by Metro an integral piece of the agreements is having a strong data sharing arrangement in place. Data sharing tends to be a challenge, but the agency is committed to engage in discussions to find solutions to any concerns. The partnership with carshare providers, for example, is a data driven agreement, where companies are allowed to use the parking spaces in exchange of providing the data of all trips and permitting Metro to do surveys to users in order to understand when and where people use the service and assess customer experience. As the diary of data from pilots is developed, Metro will be able to inform strategic decisions and review its long-range plan to better adapt for the changes that are going on in the industry and enhance services for the community.

Evaluating success

Metro's long-range plan has a series of outcomes and values that guide the development of the pilots, which include improving safety, addressing equity and social justice concerns and providing excellent customer service. Metro considers these bigger picture outcomes to establish the goals for its initiatives and tries to translate them into metrics according to the specific program or pilot.

For instance, one of the important outcomes pursued with the first/last mile pilots in parking facilities is reducing greenhouse gasses emissions. Therefore, the team do not only track ridership but also vehicle occupancy rates and vehicle miles traveled. Additionally, the agency is thinking about metrics associated with safety and equity, to evaluate dimensions such as users' perception of safety of the service and check if additional discounts for low-income populations are needed or if services are accessible for people of different language proficiencies.

COMMUNICATION, OUTREACH AND MARKETING

As Metro incorporates new elements and more innovative concepts, it has had to find new ways to talk about them. For that, having a long-term plan with clear outcomes and policy goals has been a helpful tool to keep a consistent and coherent discourse in which all the changes and programs are linked to that vision.

One of the main messages to the public is that Metro is moving from its role of a transit provider to more broadly be a mobility provider. The core of the transit network continues to be a fixed route transit system, but open to be complemented by new services to provide more flexible options. Therefore, the communication strategy tries to strike the balance between traditional transit services, innovation, and new business models. Engaging stakeholders and particularly users and communities have been challenging in this first years, as Metro has been focused on understanding the opportunities and how to leverage technologies and new services in favor of mobility, but no big projects have been yet implemented.

Disadvantaged communities are one of the main audiences of the communication and outreach efforts. Many innovations in the mobility space in the last years have left behind some of the most disadvantaged populations. Communication can help to connect communities with this new range of services and explain more complex service concepts to make them accessible to all. The agency is working on how to engage with them to bridge the gap between the innovation and those that have access to it.

For the upcoming pilot of the on-demand first/last mile service to connect to transit, the agency is developing a thoughtful marketing strategy to reach the community, including mailers, paid ads and digital and social media. They also plan to have a big event with county officials and private company's executives for the roll out the service, and expect to get plenty of media attention that would help to raise awareness about the new program.

PROJECT/PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

Advancing projects from idea to implementation has proven to be a challenging task. While new technologies, data capabilities and business platforms open new opportunities, they also demand to do things differently in an environment where innovations advance faster than adjustments in regulations and internal processes within public agencies and even within private companies.

Metro has experienced and learned from these kinds of difficulties through the development of its projects. On the one hand, there are processes in which the agency need to catch up, to get leaner, more efficient and flexible to try new things. There are old models that have been tried to be imposed on new industries, particularly regarding procurement processes and contracting requirements, that have been designed to hire more "traditional" services such as building a road or consulting for a study. Contracts with technology and mobility service providers, however, require different conditions and structures, so the agency is now adjusting these practices to make the work with partnerships smoother.

Innovative projects also require more engagement and collaboration among internal departments and other public agencies or jurisdictions. County lawyers, for example, who are the attorneys on traditional projects, are used to do certain kind of deals and they know the milestones within the development of a traditional project. But when the project is about a new topic, then not only is difficult to write in a contract but also the project may rub itself against existing regulations or demand interpretations of those

regulations that are not readily available. Therefore, the agency will need to work alongside this larger community to adopt models that best fit for new initiatives, assessing the risks and value involved so that new models maximize the potential of new opportunities within the acceptable level of risk.

On the other hand, innovative companies have also demonstrated to have their own challenges. Metro has experienced lengthy contract negotiations, that keep going for more than eight months and do not always end successfully. Many companies have not worked with public agencies or just with smaller jurisdictions that have other requirements and conditions, so partnerships are about trying new thing at both ends. There is a lot of innovation that is being asked of private providers as well, not on the technology side but regarding the ways in which they can collaborate with the public sector and what that means. Besides the scope of the service, financial and data sharing terms, that are complex issues by themselves, agreeing on the general legal terms of the contract also takes time. Both parts must reach a common understanding of the role of the private partner, which is not always clear. Many companies, for example, think of themselves as technology companies rather than transportation providers, which has a series of implications in terms of liabilities and contract language. Moreover, although partnerships are being developed with one transit agency, conditions can set precedent for the company's national or international operations. Therefore, conversations go beyond project managers, and contracts require strategic analysis and decisions that involve legal teams, risk management support and higher levels leadership from the companies. And that takes time.

Additionally, generating a partnership that builds on a long-term vision and considers the broader goals of the agency has proven to be a difficult task. Metro has decided there are certain principles that they are not willing to compromise, and that set higher requirements for collaborations. One of them is equity, and that means some services must, for example, be accessible for people of different abilities or language proficiencies. Data sharing is also a relevant part of the agreements, as Metro wants to have the capacity and flexibility of analyzing the data and incorporating it into their planning models. Defining these clear principles has been part of the learning process of Metro. Some long negotiations with private providers have not ended up in partnerships precisely because of disagreements in this type of conditions.

To communicate these principles clearly and to allow companies present any issue from the beginning, in the RFP for its most recent pilot Metro included a draft of the contract. Many companies demonstrated attention, including, interestingly, the ones that had previously opposed similar conditions. The company that was awarded the service agreed to a rich data sharing agreement protocol among the other requirements. However, the contract negotiation process, once again, has been a lengthy process.

In this new mobility landscape, there is a process of adaptation from both the public and private sectors, and persistence is key to sustain those efforts over time. Agencies must consider time to generate awareness, buy-in and a shared vision with collaborators to build effective and sustainable partnerships. The mobility management paradigm is a lot of community building and how all parts involved think about challenges and opportunities strategically. This is different from the traditional approach to transit because before, one service planner could go to the next door and find another service planner that would tell him how whatever x route has been planned for how many decades. It is also different from the business as usual for innovative companies, that need to find new ways to work with the public sector for common goals. Now there is not many examples to look, both for public agencies and private sector companies. This is why the ability to work collaboratively and bring actors together to exchange experiences, lessons learned, and best practices is so important.