



MEMORANDUM

To: Transportation Commission

From: Thomas Valdriz, Principal Transportation Planner

Date: July 22, 2026

Subject: Transit Needs Study Status Update

RECOMMENDATION:

Staff recommends that the Transportation Commission receive a status update on the Transit Needs Study (TNS), including progress on existing conditions analysis and public outreach. Staff also request Commission feedback on a preliminary set of potential transit service improvements for further evaluation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- Staff will provide an update on the Transit Needs Study, including key findings from the existing conditions analysis, an overview of public engagement efforts, and emerging themes from this work.
- Staff are seeking Commission feedback on an initial list of potential solutions and areas that may warrant deeper study in the next phase of the project.
- This discussion serves as an early touchpoint in an ongoing analysis. At the Commission's next meeting, members will have an opportunity to review and comment on the draft existing conditions report.

BACKGROUND:

The City of Kirkland's Comprehensive Plan envisions a complete and equitable community where people who live, work, and visit can reliably access amenities and opportunities¹. High-quality, affordable, and accessible public transit service is necessary for the City to achieve this vision and meet its related mobility and land use goals, as described in the Comprehensive Plan's Land Use² and Transportation³ Elements.

¹ Link to City of Kirkland Comprehensive Plan:
<https://kirkland.municipal.codes/CompPlan>

² Link to the City of Kirkland Comprehensive Plan Land Use Element:
<https://kirkland.municipal.codes/CompPlan/3>

³ Link to the City of Kirkland Comprehensive Plan Transportation Element:
<https://kirkland.municipal.codes/CompPlan/5>

Since 2019, Kirkland's transit service providers have faced ongoing financial pressures, operational challenges, and significant shifts in rider travel behavior that have led to widespread service reductions throughout the region. While travel patterns have largely stabilized post-COVID, funding and operational challenges have persisted, limiting transit agencies' ability to keep pace with growing community needs.

Study Scope of Work

The Transit Needs Study identifies Kirkland's current (2026) and future (2044) transit needs by examining how community members experience today's transit system, analyzing land use and travel patterns to identify key gaps, evaluating potential new transit service options, and developing an actionable transit service strategy to guide City investment and advocacy. The Transportation Commission received a briefing on the draft study scope for the TNS on April 23, 2025⁴. Commission feedback was shared with the City Council at the June 3, 2025 Study Session⁵, and Council finalized and approved the study scope on September 2, 2025⁶.

The TNS builds on recent outreach by pairing learnings from previous public engagement efforts and up-to-date travel and land-use data. This study focuses public engagement efforts around focus groups and other targeted methods to deepen understanding of previously identified opportunities and needs, while also identifying new, emerging ones as conditions change. This approach honors past community input while creating space uncover remaining gaps in access and service. Staff shared a summary of and received feedback on the public engagement approach from the Transportation Commission on April 22, 2026⁷.

Anticipated Timeline

Task	2026				2027	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
Public Engagement						
Data Gathering & Existing Conditions						
Land Use Analysis						
Needs Assessment / Gaps Analysis						
Transit Service Options						
Recommendations						
Final Report / Adoption						

Anticipated Touchpoints with the TC (D) (I) (D) (D)

⁴ Link to April 23, 2025 Commission Agenda Item:
<https://www.kirklandwa.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/boards-and-commissions/transportation-commission/2025/04-apr-23/transit-needs-study-memo.pdf>

⁵ Link to June 3, 2025 City Council Agenda Item:
https://www.kirklandwa.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/city-council/agenda-documents/2025/june-3-2025/3a_study-session.pdf

⁶ Link to September 2, 2025 City Council Agenda Item:
https://www.kirklandwa.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/city-council/agenda-documents/2025/september-2-2025/9b_business.pdf

⁷ April 22, 2026 Commission Meeting materials:
https://www.kirklandwa.gov/files/sharedassets/public/v/1/boards-and-commissions/transportation-commission/2026/04_april-22/transit-needs-study-memo.pdf

DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS:

Staff are gathering and analyzing land use and transportation data to better understand how Kirkland community members experience the current public transit system and to begin exploring opportunities to enhance transit service in the future. Work on this effort is ongoing, and the following takeaways are intended to aid in the Transportation Commission's next discussion scheduled for September 2026, where the Commission will review the existing conditions report and have a more robust discussion.

Initial Takeaways from Existing Conditions Analysis

Attachment 1 contains some of the key takeaways thus far as part of the development existing conditions analysis report.

1. Shifts in Transit Ridership Since the COVID-19 Pandemic
 - Weekday ridership is 24% lower today than pre-COVID levels
 - Weekend ridership is 55% higher today than pre-COVID levels
2. Weekday Travel Patterns (All Modes)
 - 46% are within Kirkland (Kirkland to/from Kirkland)
 - 54% are outside Kirkland city limits (Outside Kirkland to/from Kirkland)
2. Additional Transit Service Investment is Warranted
(*per King County Metro service guidelines*)⁸
 - 28% of Kirkland residents live in areas where additional transit service investment is warranted today.
 - By 2044, 32% of Kirkland residents will live in areas where additional transit service investment is warranted, based on planned service expansions⁹.

Public Engagement Update:

Staff have engaged thousands of community members from priority populations through focus groups and targeted outreach since the study kicked off in Q1 2026. Additional direct engagement efforts are planned in the coming months. A summary of engagement activities are provided in Attachment 2.

Preliminary Suggestions for Enhancing Transit Service:

Public Engagement participants have identified several gaps in the transit network that affect accessibility and usability. Early themes include opportunities to improve both current and future transit service.

1. **Opportunities to improve transit services today**
 - Support transit service providers in improving riders' perceived safety, security, and comfort.
 - Increase and amplify messaging about existing transit services to help riders and potential riders feel confident navigating the system.
 - Explore ways to foster a broader culture of transit ridership within the community.

⁸ King County Metro Service Guidelines (2021)
<https://kingcountymetro.blog/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/King-County-Metro-Service-Guidelines-July-2021.pdf>

⁹ King County Metro Long-Range Plan (2021)
<https://metrotransit.net/en/connects/>

2. Opportunities to improve transit services in the future

Explore options for achieving transit service levels that meet or exceed the standards set by transit service providers, including ways to:

- Improve transit speed and reliability, especially during peak hours when buses are delayed by congestion.
- Increase transit service hours to make transit a more convenient alternative to driving.
- Advocate for or pursue new local transit options to improve connections between neighborhoods currently without transit service.
- Advocate for or pursue new direct (no-transfer) transit options connecting Kirkland to Downtown Seattle or other major regional destinations when such routes significantly improve travel time or overall convenience.

Feedback Requested

Staff requests Transportation Commission feedback on:

- Are there additional opportunities to improve transit service that are not reflected in the preliminary findings?
- Are there any opportunities listed that should not be carried forward for further review?
- Several participants expressed interest in direct service from the Kirkland Transit Center to Downtown Seattle. Previous discussions with King County Metro indicate that such a route may not offer significant travel-time advantages over riding Route 255 and transferring to Link at UW Station, due to downtown surface-street congestion.

Should a direct Downtown Seattle service be studied further to better understand potential benefits?

- Does the Commission have any questions for staff to explore to support further discussions?

NEXT STEPS:

Staff will continue with community engagement efforts and will develop a draft existing conditions report for the Commission to review at the next scheduled touchpoint in September 2026. At this meeting, the Commission will have an opportunity to review the existing conditions document, summaries of public outreach efforts, and will discuss some initial ideas on strategies for the Administration to consider to enhance transit service in Kirkland.

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment 1. Transit Needs Study: Existing Conditions Analysis Update

Attachment 2. Transit Needs Study: Public Engagement Update