

# ORCA for All

ORCA for All envisions a near future when every resident and every worker in Seattle and King County has an unlimited transit pass in hand, making it easy to choose public transit.



We believe that mobility is a human right. We also know that a rapid shift to low-carbon modes of transportation is urgently needed to avert climate catastrophe.

Our region can lead in realizing this vision and set an inspiring example for other cities and counties around the country. Success will require action by governments, employers, and individuals. This fall, we are calling on city and county leaders and employers, especially large employers, to step up.

## The Challenge

Over half of Seattle commuters still drive alone to work.<sup>1</sup> The Seattle Squeeze has led to cars jamming bus lanes, slowing down buses.<sup>2</sup> With half of the city's greenhouse gas emissions originating from passenger transportation,<sup>3</sup> and carbon emissions rising,<sup>4</sup> our region won't reach its climate goals unless we prioritize making public transit the first choice for more residents.

Seattle and King County have successes to build on. Our region is one of the few in the country where transit ridership is increasing, thanks in large part to voter-approved investments in transit service and infrastructure.<sup>5</sup> We also have a strong foundation of policies and programs that help employers to do their part by providing subsidized transit passes, and taking other actions that incentivize employees to choose non-drive-alone commute options. Working with the non-profit Commute Seattle, for example, Seattle has made progress particularly in the Center City area, where the percentage of drive-alone commutes fell from 35 percent to 25 percent between 2010 and 2017.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/traffic-in-seattle-2018-fewer-cars-bicyclists-and-walkers-more-transit-riders-and-carpoolers/>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/not-so-rapid-ride-bus-commuters-vent-about-their-slow-trips-through-pioneer-square/>

<sup>3</sup>[http://durkan.seattle.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SeaClimateAction\\_April2018.pdf](http://durkan.seattle.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SeaClimateAction_April2018.pdf)

<sup>4</sup><https://www.kuow.org/stories/climate-leader-seattle-s-carbon-emissions-on-the-rise>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.govtech.com/fs/transportation/Seattle-Houston-Buck-Declining-Bus-Ridership-Trend.html>,

<https://www.citylab.com/transportation/2018/05/seattle-the-city-that-respects-the-power-of-the-bus/559697/>

<sup>6</sup><https://commuteseattle.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2017-Commuter-Mode-Split-Survey-Report.pdf>

But Seattle and King County commuters' habits aren't shifting nearly fast enough, and there's another problem: The way transit benefits are distributed is highly inequitable. High-paid workers are the most likely to receive employer-subsidized transit passes, while people working lower wage jobs, part time, or on a contract — people who are also more likely to lack access to wealth, struggle with housing costs, and be women and people of color — are more often left to pay the full fare.<sup>7</sup> A survey conducted by the Transit Riders Union also found that lower-wage workers are more likely to be disciplined for being late to work due to traffic or a late bus or train.

We can start to address both of these problems — climate emergency and inequity — by adopting new policies that will result in many more workers receiving employer-subsidized transit passes, focusing especially on lower-wage and part-time workers.

## The Solution

Transit benefits work. Multiple studies have shown that when employers subsidize transit for their employees, this has a significant effect on employees' commute choices, increasing transit usage and reducing drive-alone commutes.

To accelerate employer provision of transit passes, and to ensure that lower-wage and part-time workers are also getting this benefit, the City of Seattle should take a first step as soon as possible by mandating that large employers offer all their employees a transit subsidy of at least 50 percent, or if feasible 100 percent.



The City of Seattle, King County, and other public agencies also need to do their part. While government employees generally receive full transit benefits, this is not the case for many thousands of workers, in sectors ranging from human services to construction, who are employed through contracts with the city, county, and public agencies. This fall, Seattle and King County should commit to the goal of full transit benefits for all workers employed through public contracts, and create a roadmap to achieving this goal.

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<sup>7</sup><https://www.psrc.org/sites/default/files/travel-survey-story-2017-employer-benefits.pdf>

# Transit Benefits Work

When transit is useful, affordable and encouraged, people will make it their first choice. Data from Seattle and across the country demonstrate that subsidized transit pass programs that remove the cost barrier to buses and trains are effective at encouraging people to take transit rather than drive.

In Columbus, Ohio, the Metropolitan Planning Organization, the City of Columbus and the downtown business improvement district collaborated to provide all 44,000 downtown employees a transit pass starting in June 2018. In the first year of its implementation, transit ridership has doubled downtown<sup>8</sup>.

*"We find that employees who were provided free or subsidized transit pass had 156% higher odds to commute on transit... compared to their counterparts"*

The Atlanta Regional Household Travel Survey uncovered similarly striking effects: "We find that employees who were provided free or subsidized transit pass had 156% higher odds to commute on transit, but employees who were provided free or subsidized parking had 71% lower odds to commute on transit, all else equal, compared to their counterparts."<sup>9</sup>

*"Universal transit passes are usually extremely effective means to reduce the number of car trips in an area"*

San Francisco and the Bay Area were early adopters of Commuter Benefits Ordinances like the one passed in Seattle in fall 2018, which mandate employers to provide at least a pre-tax benefit if not a subsidy. These programs have demonstrated a more moderate but still

significant impact: "In the first year of the Bay Area program, 2.1 percent of people who worked for qualifying employers reported increasing their transit use because of their new benefits. As a result, 44,000 people took 4.3 million fewer commutes by car, a reduction of 86 million vehicle-miles traveled."<sup>10</sup>

The 2008 Seattle Urban Mobility Plan emphasized the effectiveness of unlimited transit passes as a commute trip reduction strategy: "Universal transit passes are usually extremely effective means to reduce the number of car trips in an area; reductions in car mode share of 4% to 22% have been documented, with an average reduction of 11%. By removing any cost barrier to using transit ... people become much more likely to take transit to work or for non-work trips."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.columbusunderground.com/downtown-bus-ridership-has-doubled-over-past-year-we1>

<sup>9</sup> Ghimire, R., & Lancelin, C. (2019). The relationship between financial incentives provided by employers and commuters' decision to use transit: Results from the Atlanta Regional Household Travel Survey. Transport Policy, 74, 103–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tranpol.2018.11.005>

<sup>10</sup> <https://transitcenter.org/publication/who-pays-for-parking/>

<sup>11</sup> Best Practices in Transportation Demand Management, 2009 Seattle Urban Mobility Plan. [https://www.ctc-n.org/sites/www.ctc-n.org/files/resources/07\\_seattle\\_best\\_practices\\_in\\_transportation\\_demand\\_management.pdf](https://www.ctc-n.org/sites/www.ctc-n.org/files/resources/07_seattle_best_practices_in_transportation_demand_management.pdf)

# Commute Choices Matter

Achieving Seattle's climate and public health goals and building a city that is fair and equitable for all depends on shifting how Seattle residents and workers travel around the city.



## Public health impacts of pollution & driving

The pollutants from the tailpipes of the cars on our region's roads and freeways are more likely to be breathed in by people of color who have been priced or pushed out to neighborhoods closer to freeways and busier roads.

Researchers from the University of Washington and Minnesota found that residents of color were a third more likely to be exposed to transportation-related airborne pollutants that white residents.<sup>12</sup>

Washington residents of color, seniors, and people with disabilities also make up a disproportionate number of those killed by traffic violence while walking or biking.<sup>13</sup>

Changing these racist outcomes of our transportation system depends on getting more Seattle residents and employees to shift away from driving and towards public transit and other modes.

## Greenhouse gas emissions and climate change

Seattle's greenhouse gas emissions are rising, not falling. We are not on track to meet the goal of carbon neutrality by 2050 stated in the city's Climate Action Plan, let alone the more urgent goal of eliminating carbon pollution by 2030 established in the city's Seattle Green New Deal Resolution.

Over half of Seattle's greenhouse gas emissions come from passenger vehicles.<sup>14</sup> The Mayor and City Council need to act with urgency, this year, to get residents out of cars to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change determined that to prevent catastrophic warming, greenhouse gas

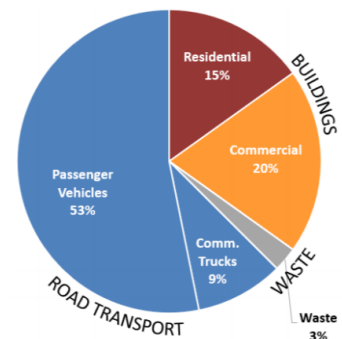


Figure 2: Seattle's 2016 core emissions by sector.

<sup>12</sup> Lara P. Clark, Dylan B. Millet, and Julian D. Marshall. 2017. [Changes in Transportation-Related Air Pollution Exposures by Race-Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status: Outdoor Nitrogen Dioxide in the United States in 2000 and 2010](https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP959). Environmental Health Perspectives 125:9 CID: 097012 <https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP959>

<sup>13</sup> Washington State Department of Transportation. Active Transportation: Annual Safety Report. March 2019. <https://www.wsdot.wa.gov/publications/fulltext/graynotebook/gray-notebook-Mar19.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> City of Seattle Office of Sustainability & Environment. 2016 Seattle Community GHG Inventory. [https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/OSE/ClimateDocs/2016\\_SEA\\_GHG\\_Inventory\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.seattle.gov/Documents/Departments/OSE/ClimateDocs/2016_SEA_GHG_Inventory_FINAL.pdf). February 2019. GHG Emissions in King County: 2017 Inventory Update, Contribution Analysis, and Wedge Analysis. July 2019 <https://your.kingcounty.gov/dnrp/climate/documents/201907-KingCounty-GHG-Emissions-Analysis.pdf>

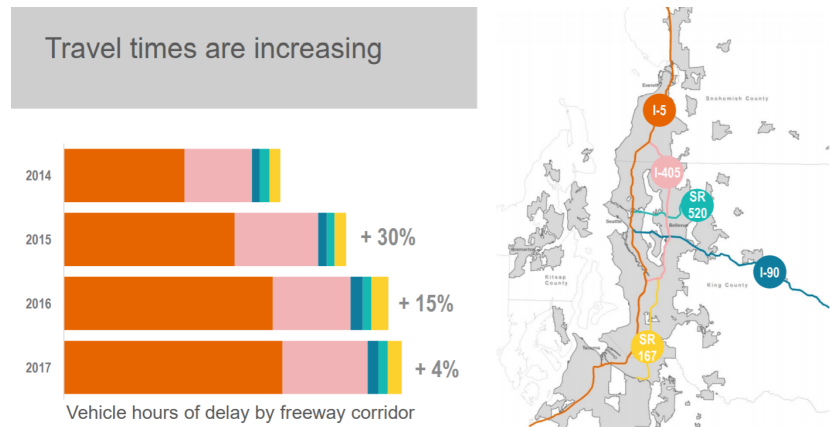


pollution must be reduced by 45 percent from 2010 levels by 2030, and 100 percent by 2050.<sup>15</sup> The City of Seattle's Climate Action Plan identifies that the city is not doing enough to meet its goals, and that transportation emissions have not budged since 2008.<sup>16</sup>

The consequences of inaction are already apparent today. Warmer stream waters and less snow pack have led to plummeting salmon runs, endangering native Orcas who rely on salmon as their main food source<sup>17</sup>. Encouraging transit use is one of the most effective ways that we can quickly reduce emissions and protect the namesake of our transit card.

## Traffic congestion

Seattle residents currently face some of the worst traffic in the county. At peak times, commutes along I-5, I-405, Mercer, and Denny can take hours. Delay on the region's freeways has increased by 49% since 2014. Those hours stuck in traffic mean missed appointments, late arrival to childcare, and less time with family and friends. That delay is also estimated to cost the region \$3.1 billion a year, hurting our economy.<sup>18</sup>



Source: PSRC Vision 2050 Growth Trends [https://www.psrc.org/sites/default/files/v50\\_trends\\_final.pdf](https://www.psrc.org/sites/default/files/v50_trends_final.pdf)

But this delay also doesn't fall equally amongst those in the region. Punishingly long commutes are disproportionately borne by residents of color with low paying jobs, who are unable to afford homes close to their work. These workers and their families also pay a larger portion of their income on commuting than families with jobs netting higher incomes.<sup>19</sup>

Our stand-still traffic and the impacts on lower-income commuters who face the brunt of it are the result, in part, of policy decisions by elected officials and large employers. Local governments can make new policy decisions, like requiring that large employers subsidize transit passes, to incentivize and encourage transit ridership. Today it is a moral imperative that we make this shift rapidly to lower greenhouse gas emissions, improve workers' quality of life, and make our region's transportation system more equitable.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Global Warming of 1.5 °C. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15>. October 2018.

<sup>16</sup> City of Seattle Climate Action Plan. [http://durkan.seattle.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SeaClimateAction\\_April2018.pdf](http://durkan.seattle.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/SeaClimateAction_April2018.pdf). April 2018.

<sup>17</sup> United States Environmental Protection Agency. Chinook Salmon. <https://www.epa.gov/salish-sea/chinook-salmon>

<sup>18</sup> Blethen, Ryan. Seattle Times. Seattle Area Traffic Congestion is among the worst in the country study shows. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/seattle-area-traffic-congestion-is-among-the-worst-in-the-country-study-shows/>. August 24, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Tu, Janet. Seattle Times. Low Pay and Pricey Commutes Often Go Hand in Hand. <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/economy/low-pay-long-pricey-commute-often-go-hand-in-hand/>. August 2015.

# Seattle Workers Love Transit Benefits



About a third of all workers in the Seattle region receive free or subsidized transit passes from their employer.<sup>20</sup> Seattleites who receive transit benefits love them. Subsidized transit passes allow them to avoid traffic, reach more of the City, and save money.

But don't take it from us. In Seattle Transit Riders Union's survey of 700 workers and residents in the region, riders shared personal stories of how removing part of the cost barrier to transit made them

happier and their lives better. Seattle Transit Riders Union asked, **"What would it mean to you if your employer provided a free unlimited ORCA pass?"** Here's some of what we heard, from people who already get this benefit and from people who don't:

*I currently have this and it means the world for me and my commute*

*I'd be in heaven*

*It would be amazing! I am on a fixed income and rent is killing me and my husband.*

*its soooooooo appreciated when they do offer it (i've worked for 3 companies and now all 3 have provided that benefit). makes it more likely for me to use it*

*Happiness*

*I would use it and sell my car*

*I would save \$100+/month and it would be more incentive to work for the company*

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.psrc.org/sites/default/files/travel-survey-story-2017-employer-benefits.pdf>

*I already have this from my employer. It is a fantastic relief and makes me feel like I'm making great pay, since I don't have to spend a large portion on transit fares.*

*Pretty groovy*

*It would mean my grocery budget would be much less tight.*

*It's great mine does so in all honesty it's a near necessity for me. There isn't really an excuse for employers in this region to NOT offer it.*

*My employer does, and it's honestly one of the most amazing benefits.*

*I would use public transit even if it were slightly less convenient than driving*

*It would mean everything, I could afford to go out and not just only from home to work.*

*I'm very happy to have one; I never think twice about taking the bus or light rail.*

*they do, and I LOVE it! It encourages me to use public transit both for my work commute and in my personal life*

*They do and it's fantastic. It means that there's no second thought about grabbing a bus or train, no scrounging for change or hunting for an ORCA machine.*

# Unfair Fares: Commute Inequity

The opportunity to get a subsidized transit pass is tantalizing to those who fall just beyond the reach of the region's current transit subsidy programs:

***“[It would] save me money, I make just too much to get the low income bus pass and it would help my financial situation a lot.”***

- Seattle transit rider who works at a local fast food chain

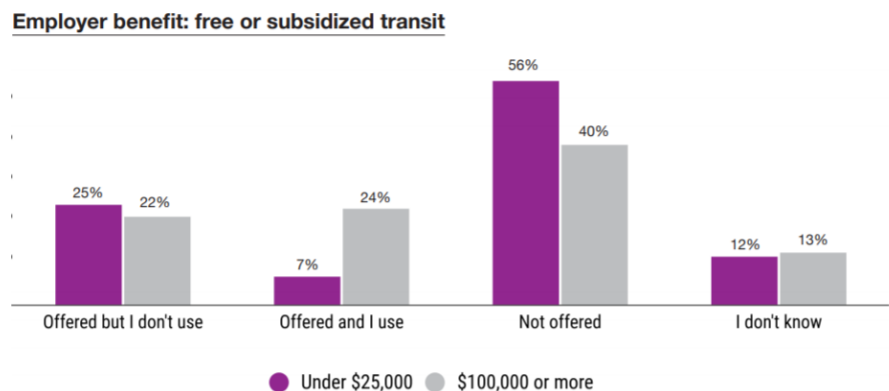
The inequity of which jobs provide transit passes and which don't also came out in the responses to our survey:

***“It's been SO helpful to me. I find it ironic, though, that I'm given access to free transportation with my first job where I'm making what's considered a living wage in Seattle. This is not to say that I don't love my Orca card! I'm immensely grateful for the privilege and I love that it gets a few of my colleagues to take the bus rather than drive in. However, my previous job was as a server at a restaurant. I desperately needed free transit then - I could barely afford my Orca Lift - and yet didn't have access to it.”***

- Seattle transit rider who works as a UX writer

Workers with lower wages who would most benefit from subsidized transit passes are the least likely to receive them. Puget Sound Regional Council's household travel survey found that lower income workers were less

likely than higher income workers to be offered free or subsidized transit<sup>21</sup>. This matches trends in other large cities, where low wage workers are the least likely to be offered transit benefits.<sup>22</sup>



In the Transit Riders Union's survey of around 700 Seattle workers and residents, over

85% of respondents with income over \$100,000 reported transportation benefits, while only around half of respondents with income under \$50,000 reported transportation benefits. Our survey also suggested that lower-income workers are far more likely to be disciplined for being late to work due to traffic or a late bus or train.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.psrc.org/sites/default/files/travel-survey-story-2017-employer-benefits.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> [https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/81911/Hamre\\_AK\\_D\\_2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/bitstream/handle/10919/81911/Hamre_AK_D_2018.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)



# Proposal #1: New Transit Benefits Legislation

There are already a number of programs that assist and encourage Seattle-area employers to shift how their employees get to work:

**King County Metro Business Passport & Business Choice Programs** enable employers to purchase transit pass products for their employees, including unlimited transit passes at a price much lower than the individual retail price.

**Seattle's Commute Trip Reduction Law & Program** mandates that employers with 100+ full-time employees arriving at a single worksite between 6-9am take steps to reduce drive-alone commuting, including conducting a survey of employees every two years.

**Small Business Incentive Program** is a new state-funded pilot that offers small business or non-profit employers with fewer than 100 employees a 50% match to purchase transit passes.

**Seattle's Commuter Benefits Ordinance**, which passed in fall 2018 and goes into effect in January 2020, will require businesses with 20 or more employees to offer their employees the opportunity to make a monthly pre-tax payroll deduction for transit or vanpool expenses.

These programs are great, however they leave some huge gaps. In particular, many lower-wage workers are unlikely to ever get a subsidized transit pass because of one of these programs.

## Proposal:

- Strengthen Seattle's Commuter Benefits Ordinance by requiring that employers above a certain size subsidized transit for their employees.
- This could be a tiered requirement, with the largest employers required to cover 100% of the cost of transit passes and smaller but still large employers required to cover 50%.
- Include part-time and temp workers as well as full-time workers.
- Be flexible about ways employers can comply with the requirement, while also ensuring that the benefit is easy to access for workers.
- Study ways the City can further assist and encourage medium and smaller employers to provide transit subsidies for their employees, without creating undue financial burdens.

We believe this is the most efficient, effective, and cost-effective way to get more transit passes into the hands of Seattle commuters, improve equity in the distribution of transit benefits, and rapidly shift away from drive-alone commuting and towards public transit.

## Proposal #2: Transit Passes for Contract Workers

The City of Seattle and King County provide fully-subsidized transit passes for all direct employees of the city and county. This practice is consistent with the city's and county's sustainability and equity goals.

However, thousands more workers are employed through city and county contracts. These include construction workers on public works projects and employees of human service providers, among others.

Many of these workers do not receive any transit subsidy. The result is a two-tier system, where direct public employees receive full transit benefits, but indirect employees do not. This is not only inequitable for these workers, it also contributes to our region's rising carbon emissions, pollution, and traffic congestion.

### Proposal:

- We ask the City of Seattle and King County to adopt as an official goal that workers employed through public contracts should receive transit benefits. Establish a timeline and take steps towards achieving this outcome, such as:
- Review and study the current landscape of contracted workers to assess the different types of contracts and departments involved; the number of workers employed through each contract and whether they are currently receiving any transit benefits; which categories of workers should be prioritized for receiving transit benefits; and different possible strategies for ensuring that these workers receive transit benefits.
- For construction workers, add a provision for transit benefits in the Community Workforce Agreements that govern labor agreements for large public works projects.
- For human service providers, consider offering a transit benefits grant based on the estimated number of employees funded through their contract with the city or county, but conditional on the contractor offering transit benefits to all its employees.
- Gather information, engage stakeholders, and identify possible funding, with a goal of taking action in a big way on this issue by fall 2020.

Through these contracts and the public funding provided, the City of Seattle and King County have influence over and responsibility for these employees' conditions of work. The city and county should make it a priority to ensure that all workers employed through public contracts are receiving transit benefits comparable to those received by government employees.

# ORCA for All vision statement

We believe:

**Mobility is a human right.** Transportation connects people to housing, shelter, jobs, food, healthcare, education, friends and family, cultural and faith communities, recreation and civic life— all the things humans need to live with dignity and to flourish. For the many who depend on public transit, especially in low-income communities and communities of color, access to a robust public transit system is both a need and a right.

**Climate crisis demands urgent action.** Half of Seattle's rising carbon emissions come from passenger transportation. Over half of commute trips in our city are still made by driving solo, including a quarter of commute trips to downtown. A rapid shift to low-carbon modes of transportation is needed to avert climate catastrophe.

Living up to these principles will require aggressive investment in infrastructure for transit, biking, walking and rolling; expansion of transit service that is frequent, reliable, fast, serves all neighborhoods and runs 24 hours a day; new disincentives to driving alone; and massively more affordable housing to halt the suburbanization of poverty and shorten the distances people must travel to meet their needs.

But another, equally vital piece of the puzzle is ensuring that all people are enabled, encouraged, and incentivized to use our public transit system. **ORCA for All envisions a near future when every resident and every worker in Seattle and King County has an unlimited transit pass in hand.**

Our region can lead in realizing this vision and set an inspiring example for other cities and counties around the country. Success will require action by governments, employers, and individuals.

We call on **governments** to:

- Implement reduced or free fares such that cost is not a barrier to anyone, and continually work to remove all other barriers and inequities that may impede transit access based on language, race, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ+ status, immigration status, housing status, neighborhood, age, ability or disability.
- Ensure that all workers employed by governments or public agencies indirectly through contracts are offered transit benefits comparable to those received by direct public employees, with a focus on service providers and trades.
- Strengthen Commute Trip Reduction laws and make them about climate change and equity, not just about peak-hour congestion. Encourage and if necessary require more employers to subsidize transit for their employees, while taking into consideration the differing abilities of employers to absorb these costs based on size and industry.

We call on **employers** to:

- Offer employees the opportunity to make a monthly pre-tax payroll deduction for transit or vanpool expenses, in compliance with Seattle's new Commuter Benefits Ordinance that goes into effect on January 1, 2020.
- Subsidize transit, preferably in the form of an unlimited transit pass, for employees— *lower-wage workers as well as higher-paid workers, part-time and temp workers and independent contractors as well as full-time workers.*
- Refrain from disciplining workers who are late to work due to a late bus or train.

We call on **individuals** to:

- Make the choice to use low-carbon modes of transportation whenever possible.
- Make sure your employer is complying with the Commuter Benefits Ordinance, and talk to your co-workers about asking for a transit subsidy if your employer does not already offer one.
- Join TRU and the ORCA for All campaign as we use our collective power to push governments and employers to make the systemic changes that are most effective in shifting individuals' habits.

Together we can achieve ORCA for All!

## Signatories:

350 Seattle 500 Women Scientists Seattle ATU 587 Casa Latina Catholic Community Services Levelup Washington LGBTQ Allyship MLK Labor OneAmerica OPEIU Local 8 PROTEC17 Puget Sound Advocates for Retirement Action Real Change Puget Sound Sage Seattle Subway Seattle Tech for Housing Seattle Transit Blog Seattle Women's Commission SEIU 1199NW SEIU 925 SEIU 925 IHME Pro Staff Union SEIU Local 6 Sierra Club Socialist Alternative Teamsters 117 Tenants Union The Urbanist	Transit Riders Union UAW 4121 UFCW 21 UW Housestaff Association Washington Community Action Network Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility Working Washington/Fair Work Center  <b>Candidates:</b>  <i>for Seattle City Council:</i> <b>Lisa Herbold</b> (District 1) <b>Phil Tavel</b> (District 1) <b>Tammy Morales</b> (District 2) <b>Mark Soloman</b> (District 2) <b>Egan Orion</b> (District 3) <b>Kshama Sawant</b> (District 3) <b>Shaun Scott</b> (District 4) <b>Dan Strauss</b> (District 6) <b>Heidi Wills</b> (District 6) <b>Andrew Lewis</b> (District 7) <b>Jim Pugel</b> (District 7)  <i>for King County Council:</i> <b>Girmay Zahilay</b> (District 2) <b>Abigail Doerr</b> (District 4) <b>Jeanne Kohl-Welles</b> (District 4)
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