

March 2013

Equity for All

Including East African Voice in Future Development



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COMMUNITY
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PURPOSE:

The Puget Sound region made a \$15 billion investment in rapid transit. The Growing Transit Communities Partnership was created to maximize this investment by ensuring that housing, jobs, and services are located near transit stations, providing more people with a convenient way to travel. Somali Community Services Coalition (SCSC) aims to highlight the East African communities' priorities, concerns, and challenges regarding future land use and transportation planning near the transit stations in SeaTac and Tukwila. Through conducting research and making recommendations, SCSC's goal is to give a voice to the East African community, which is often underrepresented in local planning and decision making and to ensure that the community is reflected in upcoming development.

METHODOLOGY:

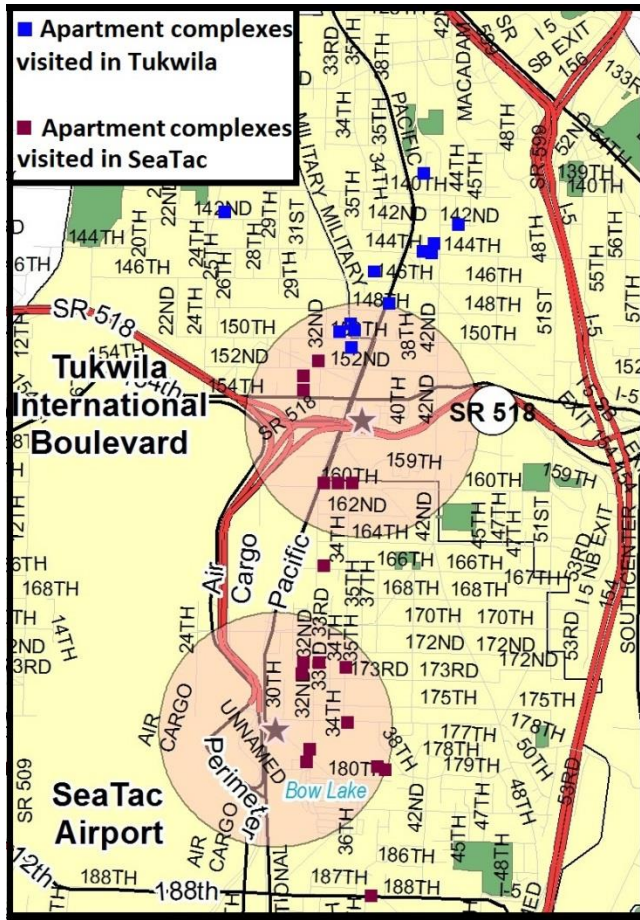
SCSC's two bilingual Data Collectors visited apartment complexes located near the light rail stations in SeaTac and Tukwila to conduct in-person surveys of 100 East African families. Each survey lasted approximately 15-20 minutes and consisted of two parts. The first section collected demographic information and data examining rent and utilities costs, transportation use, employment, and local services and retail that are important to families. The second half of the survey allowed participants to create a narrative about their experiences living in SeaTac and Tukwila and their hopes for future city and transit planning. Participants were compensated with a \$10 Safeway gift card upon completion of the survey.

To develop a greater understanding of the housing challenges many East Africans currently face, SCSC's Program Coordinator interviewed the landlords of 10 apartment complexes in SeaTac and Tukwila. The Program Coordinator asked questions about the apartment complexes and accommodations, the current tenant base, tenant turnover rate, and recent changes in housing demand. These interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted between 10 and 15 minutes.

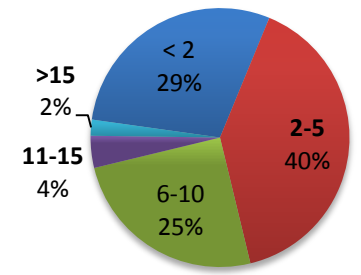
Finally, SCSC hosted a series of five focus groups to examine the specific needs and challenges of youth, elders, women, business owners, and airport workers. These focus groups were held in SCSC's main office and were conducted in English and Somali by the Program Coordinator and Executive Director.

WHO WE SURVEYED

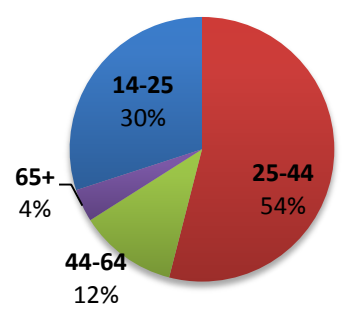
SCSC's Data Collectors surveyed 51 East African families living in SeaTac and 49 East African families living in Tukwila. Of the 100 individuals who completed the survey on behalf of their family, 51 were men and 49 were women. As the following graph illustrates, SCSC sampled a wide variety of ages, with the majority of participants between the ages of 24-45. Both new and long-term SeaTac and Tukwila residents participated in the survey.



Number of Years Living in SeaTac or Tukwila



Ages of Survey Participants



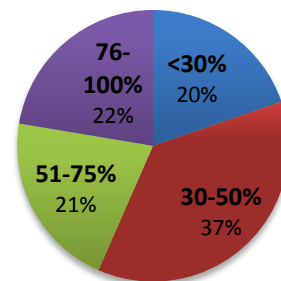
FINDINGS AND TRENDS:

Housing

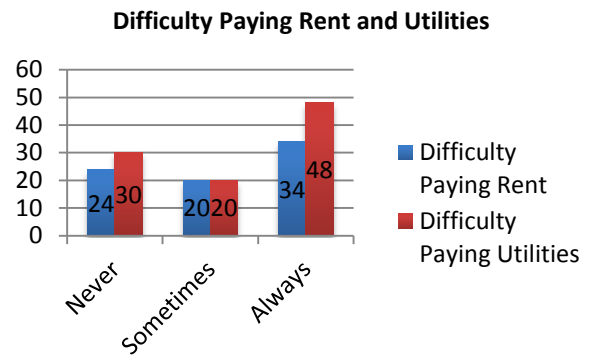
Securing affordable housing is a challenge and a priority for East African families. Of the individuals SCSC surveyed, 98% said that increasing the amount of available affordable housing should be a priority for city planning and upcoming development.

Twenty seven out of 100 families surveyed were receiving either Section 8 or low-income housing. Of the families receiving no housing assistance, 80% reported spending over one third of their income on rent and almost 45% spent over half of their income on rent. Spending such a high percentage of their income on rent is extremely difficult for families. Over 60% of individuals not receiving Section 8 housing reported that their family either “sometimes” or “always” has difficulty paying rent and 70% of individuals reported that their family “sometimes” or “always” has difficulty paying utilities.

Percentage of Income Spent on Rent



Though most of the landlords interviewed reported that they receive up to 90% of rent payments on time, several noted that they have seen families struggle to pay their rent and other important bills. One landlord explained, “most tenants pay their rent on time but the economy is hard and even paying rent is difficult for many families. Utility payments are probably the biggest thing that is late. Tenants pay rent out of their first paycheck of the month and then the other bills have to wait. We are sending late utility notices about every other day.”



Family size

According to the 2010 Census, the average household size in SeaTac was 2.72 individuals and the average household size in Tukwila was 2.64 individuals, both slightly above the national average of 2.58. East African families are often larger than average, limiting their housing options. Of the families SCSC surveyed:

- 26% lived in one bedroom apartments
- 53% lived in two bedroom apartments
- 16% lived in three bedroom apartments
- 5% lived in larger housing units

On average:

- There were between 2 and 3 people living in a one bedroom apartment
- There were between 4 and 5 people living in a two bedroom apartment
- There were between 6 and 7 people living in a three bedroom apartment

However, based on information collected through focus groups and informally, SCSC Data Collectors and staff believe that the actual number of people living in these apartments is much higher. For example, many focus group participants had family members or friends living with them that are not identified in the lease agreement and are unknown to land managers. Families may have felt uncomfortable sharing information with Data Collectors for fear of being reported and losing their housing.

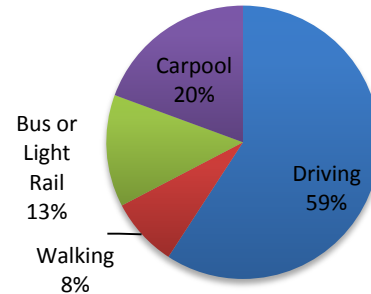
For many families who lack sufficient living space, renting a larger apartment or a house is not an option. A participant in the women’s focus group identified limited living space as a challenge she was facing: “My family is very low income. Right now we’re living in a 3 bedroom apartment but there are 9 people in my family. It is just too small to live. We can’t afford a house and it’s the largest apartment we can find. My husband recently got a job but our rent is still so expensive.”

Of the ten landlords SCSC interviewed, all but one has seen a need for additional affordable family housing in the area. According to the land manager of one of the few apartments in SeaTac and Tukwila that can accommodate large families, “when people call asking for a 3 bedroom unit they usually hang up when I tell them the price. They can’t fit in a two bedroom unit but they can’t afford a bedroom with three units or a house.”

Transportation

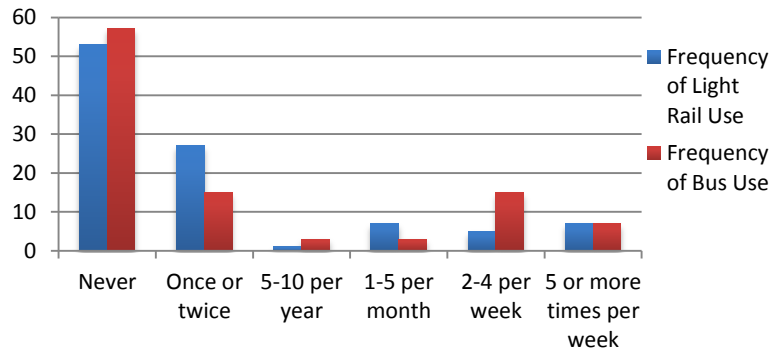
Of the families surveyed, 74% owned at least one vehicle and 79% of individuals surveyed reported that driving or carpooling was their primary mode of transportation, indicating low usage of public transit by members of the local East African community.

Primary Mode of Transportation



Though every survey respondent lived within walking distance to the light rail station, 80% said that they had “never used the light rail” or had only used it “once or twice.” Over half of these individuals said that they do not use the light rail because they prefer to drive instead. Survey results for bus use were similar. Of the 72% of individuals who had “never used the bus” or had only used it “once or twice,” 62% said that using the bus was unnecessary because they could drive wherever they needed to go. Other common reasons for not using public transit were that it is too time consuming or too confusing and intimidating.

Bus and Light Rail Use



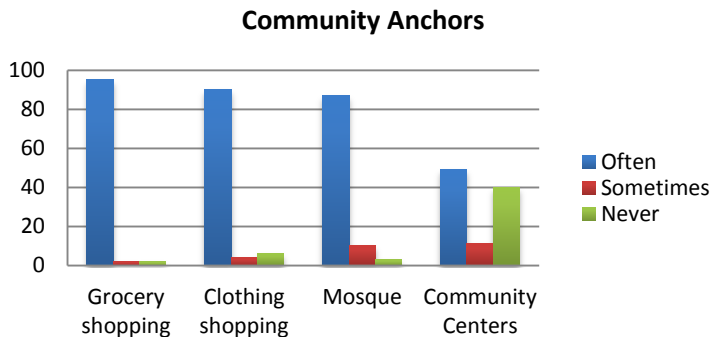
However, there is indication that public transit is becoming more accessible to East Africans, especially the elderly or those who speak little or no English. One Somali elder shared, “more and more Somalis are beginning to use the bus and now there is generally at least one Somali speaker on every bus. Many people don’t understand how to pay, where to get off, and how to stop the bus but it is easy when you can ask somebody. There are several Somali bus drivers too, which is even better.”

Though many East Africans are not utilizing public transportation, easy access to the light rail and buses has drawn other individuals and families to apartment complexes located near the light rail stations in SeaTac and Tukwila. Every landlord SCSC surveyed reported an increase in demand for their apartments since the light rail was built and most reported keeping an occupancy rate of 98-100%. One landlord explained:

“The light rail was a big benefit to SeaTac and Tukwila. We have a great location, by the freeway and light rail station. I don't have to advertise at all. Not online, not even outside. I used to put up a big sign and balloons and take them down every day but I don't even do that anymore. It's too much of a hassle. Now I have so many people coming in here every day looking for an apartment. I have been able to raise my deposit.”

Another landlord echoed, “There has been an increase in demand because residents enjoy the area and it is super close to the airport, 99, I-5, and public transportation. It is really easy to access wherever you need to go. People from out of town have been moving here because it is easy to get into downtown but it isn't in the center of the city.”

Why is living in SeaTac and Tukwila important?



Residents identified access to retail as highly important when choosing a place to live. Over 95% of survey participants shop for groceries in SeaTac or Tukwila and 94% shop for clothing in either of the two cities. This is important but what is even more crucial is the proximity of culturally appropriate shopping options that can accommodate dietary restrictions and unique clothing requirements. Of the

families surveyed, 70% shopped at East African owned grocery stores that sell halal meat and other hard to find food items. Furthermore, 60% of survey participants shop at Bakaro Mall (a Somali clothing mall located in SeaTac), or other clothing stores that are specifically designed for East Africans.

Survey and focus group participants also identified the proximity of places to worship as an important factor when choosing a place to live. Tukwila is home to the Abu Bakr Mosque, the largest mosque south of Seattle, and SeaTac is home to Masjid As Salam. It is crucial that Somalis and other East Africans live near to the mosque so that they can attend mandatory Friday prayer. Abu Bakr and Masjid As Salam are also extremely important community gathering spaces, housing important meetings and events, community celebrations, and Quaranic classes. Of the individuals surveyed, 97% went to the mosque with regular frequency. According to one mother, “My family moved from Des Moines because Tukwila is closer to the groceries, where we can buy halal meat and it is closer to the mosque. I want my children to attend Quaranic school so it is important that we live within walking distance so that transporting them there isn’t difficult.”

Over half of the individuals surveyed had visited community centers such as SCSC and Refugee Women’s Alliance (both located in SeaTac) to receive assistance. According to focus group participants, living in a community in which one can receive culturally and linguistically appropriate services and assistance is important, especially for newly arrived refugees, asylees, and immigrants who need help accessing benefits, finding employment, making appointments, and enrolling in English classes. More established members of the East African community also utilize services of community centers to prepare resumes and find employment, receive referrals, and apply for citizenship. Local community centers also have a vital role in supporting youth by providing native language academic assistance, free summer camps, and organizing educational excursions throughout the greater Seattle area.

Another aspect that draws East African families to SeaTac and Tukwila is the abundance of customer service and labor jobs in the area. Many East Africans work at the airport, Southcenter Mall, or in other local service industries. Of the individuals SCSC surveyed who were employed, 71% work in SeaTac or Tukwila and 67% have family members that work in the two cities. If these families were displaced, many might be unable to keep their jobs due to challenges with transportation costs and time constraints.

Opportunities for Youth and Community

In the narrative portion of the survey, 36% of respondents expressed their desire for free, accessible sports fields and youth programming. Soccer is an important part of East African culture but many youth expressed that they rarely have the opportunity to play. One youth explained, “I really would like to be able to play soccer but there aren’t any fields near my house that are free. There aren’t any teams to join for free either. I would also like to play basketball but there aren’t any courts that I can use.” There are many sports fields in SeaTac and Tukwila but most require paying a fee as high as \$100 per hour, making play cost prohibitive. Other less expensive or free fields are outside of walking distance for many families, making them inaccessible to youth who do not have transportation.

Elders and parents also shared this concern. One focus group participant said, “There aren’t enough gathering spaces for youth, so they get in trouble. We need a soccer field and other sports facilities to keep young people engaged. We also need a space for youth and families to come together. There seems to be a big disconnect between generations and I am worried about kids losing their culture growing up in the United States.”

Additionally, participants in the elder focus group explained that they do not have access to many services that they need or opportunities that they desire. One elder explained, “A huge problem in our community is a lack of ESL education for elders and adults. I know there are many programs in the area but none provide transportation and all are too far away to walk. We hear about these programs all of the time but we won’t be able to start going until someone can pick us up and take us back home.” Another elder also shared similar concerns about not receiving crucial services and lacking transportation: “Sometimes it is hard for elders to connect with the community. We need news from home, and need to be able to get to the mosque, grocery stores, community centers, and restaurants. A ride program would be better to get around.” Ride programs, such as the Hyde Shuttle exist, but there does not seem to be much awareness about them in the East African community.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is crucial that as the cities of SeaTac and Tukwila continue to grow and develop, the large East African community’s needs and priorities are reflected in future city development surrounding the light rail stations. To promote equitable development, SCSC puts forth the following recommendations:

1. ***Include plans for affordable housing in upcoming development:*** Additional affordable housing opportunities should be made available in SeaTac and Tukwila. Living in the area is important for many families who have ties to the larger East African community, East African stores, the mosques, schools, community centers, and local employment. Without additional affordable housing opportunities, some of these families may be forced to relocate.
2. ***Develop additional housing for large families:*** The housing developments in SeaTac and Tukwila must reflect the growing and changing populations in the cities. In order to reflect the East African population in the area, additional affordable housing must be built that can accommodate large families.
3. ***Increase oral outreach about public transit, including the light rail buses, and ride programs:*** Survey results suggest that many East Africans do not utilize public transportation. Survey results

also reveal that 48% of individuals learn about resources and services available in their community via word of mouth. More oral outreach and education must take place in order for the East African community to maximize their use of public transportation and other transportation resources, such as the Hyde Shuttle. This is especially important for seniors and individuals with disabilities, who qualify for transportation assistance but may not be benefiting from it.

4. **Support immigrant-owned businesses:** The cities should make efforts to ensure that immigrant-owned businesses are not displaced in favor of larger businesses. Furthermore, the cities should offer protection or assistance to immigrant-owned businesses in future development to accurately reflect the large and growing immigrant population in the area. These businesses not only provide important services and goods in the area but they also provide employment for immigrants and refugees, many of whom are not fluent in English and who do not have a strong educational background.
5. **Ensure that community members have continued access to places of worship and community centers:** Places of worship and community centers play a vital role in the lives of East Africans living near the light rail stations in SeaTac and Tukwila. The cities should help ensure that their residents continue to have access to culturally and linguistically appropriate services and facilities throughout upcoming development.
6. **Increase opportunities and access to recreation and community building activities:** To reflect the needs of youth and other community members, plans to create sports fields and other recreational activities should be incorporated in future development. The cities should also focus on increasing accessibility to existing fields and programs by reducing or eliminating fees for low-income youth wanting to use sports fields nearby their homes.

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