

NORTH SOUND TRANSPORTATION ALLIANCE

2019 REPORT

ACCOMPLISHMENTS & CHALLENGES FOR 2020



Prepared by the Whatcom Council of Governments
314 E. Champion Street
Bellingham, WA 98225
(360) 685-8385
melissa@wcog.org



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INTRODUCTION TO NSTA

The North Sound Transportation Alliance (NSTA) is a coalition of citizens, elected officials, and agency staff from Washington State's five northwestern-most counties: Whatcom, Skagit, San Juan, Island, and Snohomish. NSTA strives to improve ways for people to travel in the region by pursuing the following objectives:

1. Collect travel and system data to identify needs
2. Improve regional connections and sustain and expand services
3. Enhance mobility through sustainable, equitable, and innovative transportation solutions
4. Inform the public about transportation services to enhance awareness of the regional transportation network.



Participation in NSTA is voluntary and stakeholders meet several times a year to identify needs, align collaborative efforts, and advance strategies to improve the transportation network.

History of NSTA

NSTA started in 1996 as a collaboration between interested citizens and private sector transportation providers, non-governmental organizations, elected officials, and governmental and planning bodies in the North Puget Sound area. Because many of its initial meetings were held at the Farmhouse Restaurant in Skagit County, the group was originally named "The Farmhouse Gang."

Since inception, participants have overseen numerous initiatives and projects to advance NSTA goals. Projects completed prior to 2018 include a regional transportation governance study, an intermodal connections and commuter study, a traveler information kiosk system for the North Puget Sound, an inter-county transit service, and a business case for passenger-only ferry service between Bellingham and Friday Harbor.

In 2017, to better reflect the growing scope of the coalition and participation by a broader range of constituents, the group renamed itself the North Sound Transportation Alliance.

Governance

A Steering Committee consisting of staff from transit agencies, regional transportation planning organizations (RTPOs), county councils, the WA State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), specialized transportation interests, and other agencies oversees the scope of NSTA activities. The Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG) manages the program. Since 2017 there has been no dedicated funding for NSTA efforts. Funding for administration of NSTA is provided by WCOG.

PARTICIPANTS

NSTA consists of participants from a wide range of jurisdictions, public agencies, and private interests. These organizations share an interest in improving transportation around the five county region and represent a spectrum of expertise. Participation is voluntary.

JURISDICTIONS

Nearly thirty different jurisdictions participate in NSTA, including the State and the **cities** of Arlington, Bellingham, Blaine, Burlington, Coupeville, Everett, Langley, Marysville, Mount Vernon, Mukilteo, Oak Harbor, Sedro-Woolley, Snohomish, Stanwood, and the towns of Friday Harbor and La Conner. The **counties** of Island, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom also participate, along with their Commissioners and other elected officials. In addition, the **Indian tribes** of the Lummi Indian Business Council, Nooksack Indian Tribe, Samish Indian Nation, Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe, the Stillaguamish Tribe, the Tulalip Tribes of Washington, and the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe also participate. **Ports** and **utility districts** from all five counties also actively participate.

TRANSPORTATION AGENCIES

A broad range of transportation agencies are involved in NSTA. In addition to **state** representatives from WA State Department of Transportation, WA State Ferries, and the WA State Transportation Commission, there are the **regional transportation planning organizations** of Island RTPO, Puget Sound Regional Council, Skagit Council of Governments, and the Whatcom Council of Governments. The **transit agencies** include Community Transit, Everett Transit, Island Transit, Skagit Transit, and Whatcom Transportation Agency. Multiple **ferry advisory committees** contribute their expertise to the forum, and other **transportation-related groups** include San Juan Rideshare, San Juan Transit, and the Transportation Choices Coalition.

HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS

NSTA's focus on the relationship of health and transportation depends on input from key stakeholders from the medical field who can speak to the issues of individuals in need. Participants include but aren't limited to Airlift Northwest, Community Action Skagit County, Hopelink, Island County Human Services, Island Senior Resources, Lopez Island Fire & EMS, Medstar Transportation, North Sound Accountable Community of Health, Northwest Regional Council, Opportunity Council, Orcas Island Fire & Rescue, San Juan County Fire Department, San Juan County Health & Human Services, Skagit County Public Health, Skagit Population Health Trust, WA Health Care Authority, WA State Department of Health, WA State DSHS, Whatcom County Health Department, and the WhidbeyHealth Medical Center.

NGOS & NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Non-governmental organizations, non-profits representing trails, rail advocacy groups, and educational organizations include All Aboard Washington, Cascade Bicycle Club, Cascadia Center/Discovery Institute, Pacific Northwest Trail Association, Skagit County Veteran's Affairs, Washington Bikes, and Western Washington University,

PRIVATE SECTOR

Many individuals come who have no business affiliation. Others come with a transportation or healthcare-related business interest including Airporter Shuttle/Bellair Charters, All American Marine, BNSF Railway, Nichols Brothers Boat Builders, San Juan Journal, Sunrise Services, The Tulip Festival, and Victoria San Juan Cruises. The **Chambers of Commerce** and **economic development councils** from all five counties also participate.

GOALS IN 2018 & 2019

5 FOCUS AREAS



HEALTH & TRANSPORTATION

People with limited transportation options due to age, income, or disability face various challenges in getting to and from medical appointments, emergency calls, and pharmacies. In 2018 and 2019 NSTA stakeholders identified the relationship between access to healthcare and transportation as a critical issue and made it a priority to brainstorm ways to address these challenges.



FERRIES

Ferries are a critical component of the NSTA transportation network and a key focus area for stakeholders. In 2018 and 2019 NSTA participants considered many aspects of operations including electrification of ferry systems, passenger-only routes, examples of ferry service around the Puget Sound that are working to provide additional service and emergency service, and the sustainability of WA State Ferries into 2020 and beyond.



TRANSIT

NSTA's long-term support of the inter-county connector services between Whatcom, Skagit, Island, and Snohomish Counties continues to be a primary priority of the coalition. Work in 2018 and 2019 continued to develop strategies for supporting these growing routes in an equitable way. NSTA also looked at other projects that could improve transit connectivity. Pilot projects and studies have been prioritized for further attention.



ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION

The NSTA region includes hundreds of miles of trails used by bicyclists, hikers for recreation, commuting to work, and other activities. Active transportation modes are a critical part of any transportation network encouraging exercise, accessibility, and enhancing community and transit connections. In 2019 NSTA initiated a regional trails inventory to identify opportunities for improved connections.



PASSENGER RAIL

NSTA has always had an interest in improving passenger rail service between Seattle, WA and Vancouver B.C. In 2018 and 2019 several meetings were held to discuss opportunities to advance WA State Department of Transportation's (WSDOT) Rail Plan and the goal of a third Amtrak Cascades round-trip between Seattle and Bellingham.

HEALTH & TRANSPORTATION



The critical relationship of transportation to healthcare was highlighted by NSTA in 2017 and has subsequently been a focal point. NSTA continues to prioritize strategies to help people challenged by age, income, or disability to get to and from healthcare-related facilities without a car in a safe and timely manner.



TOP FIVE STRATEGIES

Workshops and prioritization exercises determined the following projects have the greatest envisioned impact for the region with consensus on feasibility and completion (based on scope and cost):

1. 2-1-1 call center expansion to include direct links to transit agencies and other transportation service providers
2. Universal broadband for the entire five county region
3. Study of on-demand transit feasibility for the five counties
4. Study of the feasibility and effectiveness of flyer stops on I-5 and corresponding park-n-rides
5. Implement and/or expand mobile medical health clinics

TIMELINE

○ SEPT. 8, 2017

Preliminary workshop held to answer three questions: what healthcare-related trips are being made in the five county region? What health-related transportation needs are NOT being met? And how do we improve coordination of health-related transportation services?

○ SEPT. 14, 2018

Second workshop held to examine case studies of existing multi-agency health and transportation partnerships; review available and missing data resources needed to develop defensible cost-benefit measures; and to review the thirty solutions identified in 2017 to find 3-5 projects to advance based on feasibility, size and scope of impact, and the availability of a champion.

○ MAR. 8, 2019

Webinar held in March to review the top five health a transportation priority project identified and discuss status of two projects pushed forward to their importance for both health and transportation, and transit improvements - a first mile/last mile feasibility study, and an I-5 flyer stop feasibility study.



FERRIES



NSTA participants support a robust ferry system for connecting the island and shoreline communities of our five-county region and beyond in the spirit of the former Mosquito Fleet that was established at the turn of the 20th Century. NSTA strives to support more than maintaining the existing WA State Ferries system - it hopes to see service grow to accommodate future demand.

Through workshops in 2018 and 2019 the following objectives were identified:

1. Analyze existing and needed ferry connections in the region.
2. Increase passenger ferry traffic.
3. Support alternative services such as interfacing with transportation network companies to improve last-mile access for travelers without vehicles.
4. Improve connections between ferries, transit, and rail.
5. Focus improvements on forecasted ridership growth in a sustainable manner.

TIMELINE

○ APR. 13, 2018

The Focus on Ferries workshop developed a list of action items to address three questions: how do we make “door to door, not shore to shore” happen; how do we accommodate and plan for future ridership growth; and how do we address ferry service sustainability as a community?

○ OCT. 18, 2019

The Ferries and Transit Workshop looked at the WA State Ferries Long Range Plan and actions on its recommendations; the Puget Sound Regional Council Passenger Ferry Study overview; case studies of key ferry and transit connections; and held a panel discussion on developing a service for ferry and transit connections.



TRANSIT

NSTA TRANSIT GOALS

Through two workshops, participants were asked to describe an ideal regional transit system and what what services that system would prioritize. Based on feedback from those workshops, identified strategies were prioritized based on presumed cost effectiveness and overall impact of the service.

HIGHER PRIORITY

1. Flyer stops on I-5
2. Increase intercounty connector frequency
3. On-demand transit
4. Coordinated fares
5. Bus meets ferry on ferry time
6. Legislation to fix cross-jurisdictional barriers

LOWER PRIORITY

7. Cross-county paratransit
8. Expanded paratransit
9. Off-board fare system



WE NEED TO SUPPORT INTERCOUNTY TRANSIT CONNECTIVITY NOW MORE THAN EVER.

The intercounty connector and connections to rural and county transit systems provide an important and well-used regional service. NSTA transit workshops identified and prioritized several strategies for improving or augmenting the NSTA region transit network.

TOP 10 FEATURES OF AN IDEAL REGIONAL SERVICE

1. Highly integrated/holistic (universal branding)
2. Dedicated, sustainable funding source
3. On-time performance
4. Reliable frequency/multiple options
5. Inclusive - equitable, accessible, affordable
6. Comfortable and inviting
7. Connectivity with other modes (door to door)
8. Reduces single-occupancy vehicle trips
9. Not fossil-fuel based
10. Speedy

TIMELINE

- OCT. 5, 2018
- OCT. 18, 2019

The Regional Transit Conference asked the question, what does good county connector service look like to you?

The Ferries and Transit Workshop looked at case studies of key ferry and transit connections and held a panel discussion on the preferred standard for ferry and transit connections.

ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION



NSTA participants worked through a five-step exercise to answer the following questions about active transportation (trails, bicycling, walking, and the use of mobility devices): Why is active transportation and trail development important for our region? What are the key factors to successful multi-regional trail system planning? Who can contribute to achieving these goals and must be included? How must we organize and distribute responsibility to achieve these goals? And what projects can we accomplish to achieve these goals?

TOP FOUR GOALS

1. **Transportation** - safe and connected pathways
2. **Public health** - equitable access to nature and cultural sites
3. **Community vitality**
4. **Environment** - including positive climate change impacts

FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Key principles that NSTA stakeholders identified for a successful trail system development project that would span the NSTA region are listed below:

1. Build relationships early with stakeholders from multiple jurisdictions
2. Have a pragmatic approach
3. Consider available funding opportunities for all user groups
4. Identify barriers, connection points, and key trail destinations
5. Focus on intermodal connections
6. Have a long range vision
7. Good signage and communication about the network
8. Have good leaders for the effort



TIMELINE

○ APR. 26, 2019

The Trails & Active Transportation Workshop developed a list of prioritized active transportation goals that can be used to identify future project strategies. The workshop also identified those regional trail and active transportation projects that have the potential to be a regional connector.

PASSENGER RAIL



REGIONAL RAIL PRIORITIES

NSTA has long advocated for improved intercity passenger rail north of Everett. Priorities include a third round-trip Amtrak Cascades train between Seattle and Bellingham at a minimum; consideration of a station at Blaine, WA; and improved intermodal connectivity between passenger rail and other modes (including transit and ferries).

NSTA will continue to get updates from WSDOT's Rail Office on operations, the State Rail Plan, and to high speed rail initiatives.

NSTA is also working with other groups including All Aboard Washington and the Cascadia Center to stay abreast of key

22%

Of Amtrak Cascades ticket revenue comes from city pairs including Vancouver B.C.

(WSDOT Amtrak Cascades Annual Performance Report 2018)

rail initiatives and to promote rail travel in the region as an alternative to car travel.

TIMELINE

○ SEP. 13, 2019

The Regional Rail Conference discussed state rail initiatives that impact rail travelers north of Everett and looked at opportunities and challenges to advancing NSTA's long-standing interest in adding mid-day passenger rail service between Seattle and Vancouver, B.C.

OTHER MEETINGS



STEERING COMMITTEE MEETINGS

NSTA has an active Steering Committee with representation from local elected officials including County commissioners and councilors; general managers from the transit agencies of all five Public Transportation Benefit Areas (PTBAs); staff from the Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs); and representatives from WSDOT, WA State Ferries, SNOTRAC, and other transportation-related organizations. These stakeholders meet several times a year to direct the activities of the NSTA forum and to share information to advance regional transportation efforts.

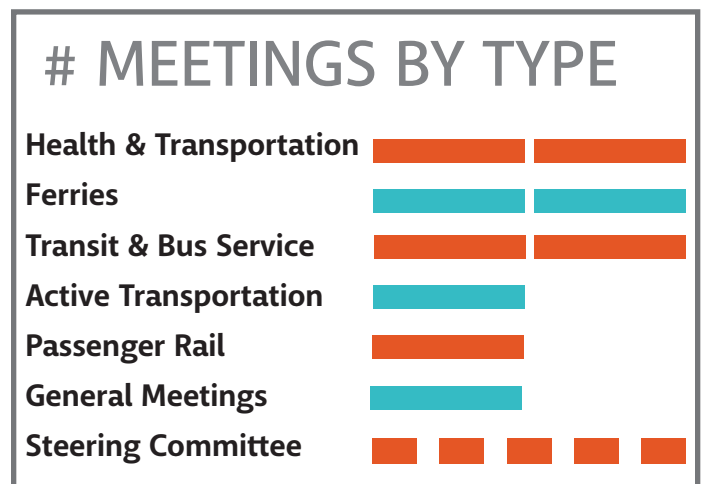
The NSTA Steering Committee also oversees project funding when funding is available.

Over the last two years members of the Steering Committee over the last two years have discussed adding more state-level elected representation to encourage more leadership from them in the ongoing NSTA efforts. This will be discussed further in 2020.

GENERAL MEETINGS & LEGISLATIVE FORUMS

General meetings have typically been centered around hosting an annual Legislative Forum in December that serves the dual purpose of informing stakeholders and elected officials of NSTA activities over the year and giving state representatives and senators an opportunity to interact with citizens, local elected officials, and staff on transportation issues.

Typically these larger meetings are held once a year, although in 2019 it was too difficult to find a date that worked for enough legislators. A new strategy will be discussed for 2020.



VALUE OF THE EFFORT



EXPENSES

(Paid for by Whatcom Council of Governments)

2018

Melissa Fanucci time (rounded): \$32,000

Meeting hosting costs (approx.): \$550

2019

Melissa Fanucci time (rounded): \$33,000

Meeting hosting costs (approx.): \$550

DELIVERABLES

2018

5 Reports

6 Meetings

2019

6 Reports

8 Meetings

Funding for NSTA administration originally came from a grant received by Skagit Council of Governments (SCOG) in 2006 for \$112,500. Through careful management of the grant these funds were able to sustain administration of NSTA through 2017.

Additional funding has been identified for individual NSTA projects - a business case study of passenger only ferry service between Bellingham and Friday Harbor, a traveler information kiosk system, a regional transportation governance study, and more. However no other funds for administration of the forum itself have been identified.

After funding was expended, WCOG agreed to continue its role as lead agency administering NSTA as part of its commitment to coordinating regional planning. However, after two years, it is clear that this current level of effort is beyond the intention of the initial commitment. WCOG cannot continue to support NSTA activities at this scale. This leaves several options available:

- 1. Reduce effort in 2020** - WCOG will continue to administer NSTA but reduce the number of meetings and reports.
- 2. Fund 2018/2019 effort** - Have partner agencies contribute to support the same level of effort expended the last two years.
- 3. Provide additional funding to provide follow-up on initiatives** - Even if funding is provided to maintain 2018/2019 levels, there isn't enough staff time available to follow through on initiatives and research discussions brought up during sessions. Additional funding would be needed to either hire staff or a consultant to advance specific actions.
- 4. Have another organization take the lead** - Another agency may be able to provide a similar level of effort at a reduced cost.

THE FUTURE OF NSTA

2020 AND BEYOND

CHALLENGES

1 FUNDING

NSTA has not had administrative or project funding since 2017. Currently, any costs associated with administration or meetings is incurred by WCOG as part of its UPWP planning efforts. This limits meetings and outreach efforts to a minimum level.

If there is interest in following through on the ideas, research initiatives, potential for subgroup planning teams, and other actions in recent workshops, more funding must be identified.

FUNDING NOTE: A survey sent to Steering Committee members in 2019 showed almost universal support for funding administrative efforts, and a majority supported dues, but few were willing to pay more than \$100-\$500 annually.

2 STAFF TIME

NSTA is primarily run by a single WCOG staff member as a portion of her work load. This ties into the funding issue and limits the ability of projects being followed through or more work being accomplished that has been identified.

If there is interest in specific projects or objectives, a consulting team would be a better option for follow-on activities given the limitations of staff time amongst NSTA stakeholder agencies.

3 PROJECT IDENTIFICATION

For the past two years, NSTA has been working to narrow a list of potential priority projects that could be submitted to RTPOs for inclusion on project lists, legislative funding requests, and other applications to showcase how NSTA participants have a common vision and objective. Concerns about jeopardizing funding requests for ongoing transit services have been expressed.

In 2020, it is hoped a project list can be created as a minimum deliverable.

PROJECTS NOTE: Two projects have become clear priorities in 2019 - first mile/last mile connectivity and I-5 flyover study as being possible solutions for challenges across multiple modes. Developing cost estimates and scopes is pending.

4 LEGISLATIVE SUPPORT

State legislators from NSTA counties have requested projects to advance from NSTA and concrete ways to show their support of initiatives. **To provide a deliverable and gain their support, it is important to have a concise list of priorities that we can act upon in 2020.**

QUESTIONS FOR 2020

2020
AND
BEYOND

There are several questions for the NSTA Steering Committee to consider for the 2020 work plan. Overarching questions include:

Is the value of NSTA in the process of the discussions themselves, in deliverables that may come from these discussions, or both?

Should the efforts of NSTA stay the same, increase in the future, or decrease?

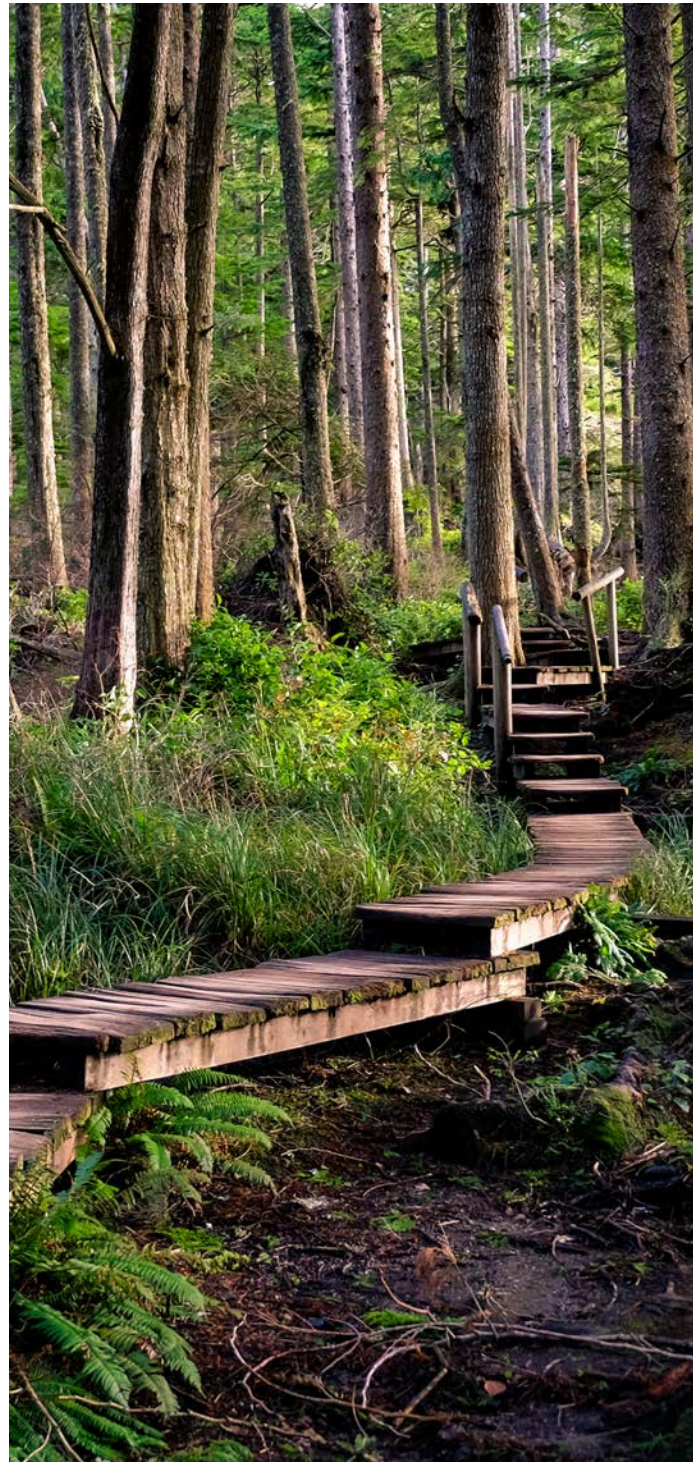
Other specific questions include:

MEETINGS

1. How many should there be in 2020?
2. Should meetings continue to have a thematic approach?
3. Is it valuable enough to have a meeting with no follow-up in terms of project, or prioritization, or deliverable?
4. Is there a better way to engage state-level elected officials at these meetings and encourage attendance and participation?

PROJECTS

5. How does NSTA advance a project prioritized scoping exercise with cost estimates?
6. How does NSTA advance new pilot project ideas without jeopardizing funding for ongoing transit requests?
7. How does NSTA advance a project list that doesn't compete with RTPO lists, TIPs, and all the other project lists that are made around the region?
8. Who makes the request for the project(s) and would oversee any funding received?





NEXT STEPS

HOW DO WE CONTINUE NSTA EFFORTS WITH A STRONG VISION AND MINIMAL FUNDING?

DETERMINE THE 2020 LEVEL OF EFFORT

Given that the 2018 and 2019 levels of effort are not sustainable without additional funding, and that moving forward on initiatives would also take more staff time or more funding, the Steering Committee needs to determine what level of effort to proceed with in for 2020 - scale back efforts to what can be accomplished with existing resources, fund 2018/2019 levels, or fund a greater effort that moves projects and research forward?

Once that is determined, a meeting schedule and work plan should be developed as soon as possible for 2020 to share with NSTA stakeholders.

REDEFINE THE NSTA STRUCTURE

NSTA has been restructured in the past. In recent years there has been discussion of looking at ways to better incorporate its activities into regional planning efforts, how to encourage more statewide legislative engagement through their active participation at a Steering or directorial level, and possibly consider a more formal structure to the NSTA forum into a coalition similar to SNOTRAC.

The Steering Committee should initiate this discussion then possibly bring it to the larger forum for further input in 2020.

CONSIDER DELIVERABLES

NSTA has great strength in idea-sharing, collaboration, and meetings. That said, many within NSTA have expressed interest in seeing more projects, project lists, and other action items come out of NSTA efforts in 2020 to realize results from the work of the forum. This will be dependent on the level of effort identified by the Steering Committee and funding available, and will guide the work plan of 2020.