

Boise chamber wants tax for public transit

Local half-cent sales tax would be used to improve bus routes, add new kinds of transportation to Valley

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The Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce said Thursday that it supports a higher sales tax in the Treasure Valley to help pay for a bigger, better public-transit system that one day could include commuter trains and streetcars.

The chamber said it favors giving voters in Ada and Canyon counties the chance to tax themselves up to a half-cent more per dollar of sales to pay for public transportation. Better transit would help air quality, provide transportation options for employees and help draw other businesses, the chamber said.

More and more businesses looking to come to the Treasure Valley ask if the area has a good public transportation system, said Nancy Vannorsdel, the chamber's president and chief executive officer.

The Coalition for Regional Public Transportation, a group of business leaders and elected officials who have been meeting since November to study public transportation, approved the proposal in May.

The group is drafting legislation that would amend state law to let Idaho's regional public transportation authorities put local-option taxes on the ballot. The coalition decided that the sales tax is the best way to raise funding for public transit agencies, including Valley Regional Transit.

The coalition's plan would raise the sales tax, now 5 cents statewide, up to a half-cent in the two counties for 20 years. The half-cent increase would generate an estimated \$964 million over 20 years.

Valley Regional Transit would use that money to expand the service hours on major bus routes, start new bus routes in areas that aren't served now, and add other types of public transportation to the Treasure Valley.

The group's long-term vision for a regional transit system includes acquiring an existing rail corridor from Boise to Caldwell that could be used for a commuter rail system and adding high-capacity transit like fixed-guideway streetcars.

"Due to our population growth, the growth in traffic and congestion, and air quality concerns, we need to provide local funding for a better bus system and start going down the road of a streetcar and light-rail system in the Valley as well," said Ray Stark, senior vice president at the chamber.

The coalition hopes state lawmakers will take up the issue in 2007 and put it before voters by November 2008.