

Leaders seek local transit tax

Transportation: Voters have to approve measure to expand, maintain public transportation options in Treasure Valley

By Christin Runkle - Idaho Press-Tribune: June 30, 2006

MERIDIAN — A group of local leaders and business people, concerned about the future of the Treasure Valley's transportation system, will pursue a local-option sales tax to improve public transit in the region.

Representatives of the Coalition for Regional Public Transportation said they will ask the Legislature in 2007 to allow the public to vote for a local-option tax to finance public transportation. Revenue from the tax would go toward expanding and maintaining programs such as buses, vanpools, rail systems and park-and-ride sites.

Home Federal Bank CEO Dan Stevens, co-chairman of the coalition, pointed to the Treasure Valley's rapidly increasing population and deteriorating air quality caused by automobile emissions as reasons to pursue expanded public transportation.

"Now we need legitimate, large-scale transit that is better furnished with better assets," Stevens said.

The Idaho Legislature passed a law allowing voters to authorize a transportation authority in 1994.

Voters established Valley Regional Transit, the authority for Ada and Canyon Counties, in 1998, but there was no provision for local funding.

Valley Regional Transit is funded by property taxes, federal funds and fares.

The Coalition for Regional Public Transportation began meeting in November 2005 to explore funding options to meet growing transportation needs of the valley. After studying public transportation in other cities, the coalition concluded that a local-option sales tax would be the best way to raise funds.

Nampa Mayor Tom Dale and Caldwell Mayor Garret Nancolas are among the supporters of the proposal.

"We need the state Legislature's help so we can help ourselves" Dale said. "The state Legislature needs to give us local-option authority so the voters in Ada and Canyon counties can approve a local-option sales tax to fund the public transportation plan."

Stevens said the sales tax has support from local legislators, and the coalition will seek support from legislators state-wide before bringing the transit tax before the 2007 legislative session.

The Board of Directors of the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce has endorsed the proposed legislation.

If the Legislature approves the local-option sales tax, a referendum can go to Ada and Canyon County voters in even-numbered years, starting in November 2008.

The regional public transportation authority would also have the option of holding bond elections, which must pass with a two-thirds supermajority.

Officials are hopeful that Treasure Valley voters will back the local option tax.

"People are pretty sick and tired of the freeway system and the Eagle Roads (of the valley)," said Chuck Winder, co-chairman of the coalition. "The time has come for us to plan for transit for the future."

The recommendation of the coalition includes:

A local-option sales tax at a general election in November of even-numbered years.

A simple majority requirement for passage, with a 20-year sunset clause.

For the initial tax, the amount can be up to a half-penny sales tax.

The local-option tax could provide for a transportation system designed to transport people on local and regional routes, including buses, vanpools, rail, rail corridor, and park and ride.

Tax would build transit options

Valley Regional Transit now provides 30-minute service along Nampa-Caldwell Boulevard and service in south and east Nampa and Caldwell every hour.

The agency provides Nampa-Meridian-Boise service every half-hour during peak hours and midday service every three hours, as well as one peak express trip from Caldwell to Ada County. It does not provide service to Parma, Wilder, Greenleaf or Notus.

Future:

If the local option sales tax is implemented, over the next six years, Valley Regional Transit would run buses along Nampa-Caldwell Boulevard more frequently and would add trips to Ada County.

The agency also would add flex routes in Caldwell and Nampa. Service would be expanded to Notus and Greenleaf, and a Caldwell-Middleton-Star-Eagle-Boise route would be implemented.