

Our View: Local option tax crucial to transit funding

The Idaho Statesman Edition Date: 04-25-2006

Here we go again.

Local governments want to take one more charge at convincing a reflexively resistant Legislature to allow them local-option taxing authority.

The locals want something simple and sensible enough: They want the ability to ask voters whether they would pay higher taxes for public transportation. They hope, after years of getting nowhere, that 2007 is the year that lawmakers finally say yes.

We're hopeful, too — Treasure Valley public transportation sorely needs a dependable source of money, and we support giving the choice to the voters. We're also realistic about the politics. Here's a roadmap for selling local option, in four steps:

- Step One: Make the case that public transportation is good for business.

Some of the most effective opposition to local option has come from business groups, who oppose higher taxes in general and balk at the concept of patchwork tax rates around the state.

However, businesses also have a vested interest in a functional transportation system that gets employees to and from work. They also cannot afford to ignore the Treasure Valley's air quality problems. Air quality could be the strongest limiting factor facing business growth; if the federal government imposes tougher air pollution restrictions, the rules could affect road construction and permits for business expansion.

For Treasure Valley businesses, a transportation tax may be the lesser of two evils.

- Step Two: Line up a core of legislative supporters.

There's a disconnect between city and county leaders who sound the alarm about the dual problems of traffic and air quality and Valley legislators who don't seem to see their role in finding solutions.

The solution, from the state level, is allowing the authority to propose local taxes. Without it, local governments have no effective method for paying for new transportation systems.

Like community colleges, public transportation is a Treasure Valley need. Lawmakers need to be engaged in the issue — perhaps at the urging of voters who demand, through this year's elections, that the state help break through the gridlock.

- Step Three: Seize the moment.

One of the Legislature's most staunch local-option opponents was a Treasure Valley lawmaker, Nampa Republican Rep. Dolores Crow. As chair of the House's Revenue and Taxation Committee, the starting ground for all tax bills in the Legislature, Crow blocked local-option tax bills. Crow is retiring this year after 24 years in the Legislature.

Rev and Tax will probably remain conservative. However, a change in committee chairs might at least get locals a hearing.

- Step four. Get on the same side.

Local officials will sometimes disagree; it goes with their jobs. But petty infighting among local officials — whether it's about road projects or planned communities — is counterproductive. It threatens to get in the way of speaking with a single effective voice. If local officials can't work on the same side for public transportation, they won't get anywhere with the Legislature.

The arguments for and against local-option taxes haven't changed in decades. The need for public transportation keeps changing; it grows with every newcomer to the Valley. Local leaders won't have an easy time getting local option through a skeptical Legislature, but they are fighting the good fight.