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TOP STORY

'A balancing act': How city leaders, roads and schools deal with Meridian's population influx

By Holly Beech hbeech@mymmeridianpress.com Aug 23, 2017



Vehicles pass under the Meridian Road Interchange on Interstate 84 during the interchange rebuild in 2014.

MP file photo

Gary and Merilee Andrew bought their dream home in south Meridian last fall thinking the future development next to them would be capped at two houses per acre, based on the zoning map.

On Tuesday, Meridian City Council approved annexation and zoning for that new subdivision, Sky Mesa, with zones that allow up to four and eight houses per acre.

"We feel like we've been lied to," Merilee Andrew said regarding the developer's plans.

"Put yourself in our spot," homeowner Doug Wheeler told the City Council. "This is our investment. This is our retirement."

Meridian City Council faces decisions like this almost on a weekly basis.

"It just breaks your heart," Councilwoman Anne Little Roberts said.

But, she added, the developer has property rights, too.

"So we really have to go with, what does the code say, and what does the comprehensive plan say," Roberts said.

The city, using community input, creates a comprehensive plan and future land use map to guide how land is zoned. The zoning determines which projects are principally allowed in an area — such as four houses per acre in an R-4 zone — and which projects would need additional approval from the council.

The future land use map is subject to change, especially in a rapidly growing place like Meridian.

"It's a balancing act," said Carl Miller, a principal planner with the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho.

On the one hand, Miller said, cities want to provide security about what future growth will look like so people feel comfortable buying a home or opening a business.

On the other hand, he added, no one could have predicted how quickly Meridian would grow. Meridian, approaching 100,000 people, had fewer than 10,000 people in 1990. It's the only city in the country to see such growth in an area of fewer than 1 million people, Miller said.

"Things happen," he said. "So cities need to be able to have that flexibility."

The comprehensive plan is the city's best estimate of how it will grow in the future, but the plan isn't perfect, said Bruce Chatterton, who retired this month as Meridian's Community Development director.

"When one anticipates development, what an area is going to be like in the future, we're never always going to be completely right about that," Chatterton said. "That's why, you know, those plans can be amended."

Those changes to the plan can be jolting for homeowners — something Meridian Mayor Tammy de Weerd experienced years ago when a subdivision was built behind her house.

"I know what our citizens are saying," she said. "I had the open field behind my house."

The city can't deny projects arbitrarily, which could get it in legal trouble. Developers can appeal in district court what they see as an unfair land use decision.

Meridian has only faced one land use appeal since 2004, in which it prevailed, city attorney Bill Nary said.

When it comes to annexing and zoning land or amending development agreements, the City Council has a lot of discretion to say yes or no, Nary said.

The council has less discretion, however, when the land is already zoned and the application aligns with that vision.

"It's got to be a little bit more specific than, we just don't like it," Nary said.

Concerns about traffic and crowded schools often come up when a development is proposed. But the city of Meridian doesn't have jurisdiction over either of those.

"We can only have findings to deny something based on things we can control," Nary said. "If you were to deny it simply because there wasn't a school available — when you have no ability to address that — I would be really concerned that the court's not going to address that as a valid reason."

SCHOOLS

Growth is not a new challenge for the West Ada School District, spokesman Eric Exline said. The district's 20-year average growth rate is over 1,000 new students a year.

Exline said he doesn't think the Meridian City Council's rate of approving growth is creating a problem for the school district.

"We put a lot of energy and work into keeping up with growth, but it's not a new phenomenon for us," he said. "It's something that as a school district we've created systems and processes to deal with."

West Ada's student population is nearing 40,000 — close to breaking into the top 100 largest school districts in the United States, Exline said. This includes not only Meridian students, but students from parts of surrounding cities and Ada County.

School districts — unlike cities, counties and highway districts — don't collect impact fees from developers. The only way to pay for new schools is to ask taxpayers to approve a bond. Idaho is one of two states that requires a two-thirds majority vote for a bond to pass.

West Ada voters have approved six of 21 bond requests since 1957 — adding up to almost \$455 million for school construction projects and land acquisition. The district has also received some donated elementary school sites from developers.

Still, schools are crowded. Rocky Mountain and Mountain View high schools in Meridian, both built for 1,800 students, each have an estimated 2,400 and 2,300 students, respectively.

The overcrowding doesn't impact class sizes as much as it does common areas, Exline said. The district is able to add portable classrooms and use classrooms that were meant to be empty during a teacher prep period.

But the district can't add more parking, hallways or lunchrooms.

"At Mountain View if you go there at lunch, you will see kids sitting on the floor all over the place eating. There isn't enough room in the cafeteria. The hallways are jampacked," Exline said. "At Rocky Mountain ... kids who need to get out of the parking lot, you can watch them running out of the building."

For years the district has asked lawmakers to provide another mechanism to pay for school construction, including impact fees. That idea, however, hit pushback from the development and real estate industries.

The danger of making impact fees available to every taxing district is the potential increased cost of homes, said Republican Sen. Chuck Winder from Boise, who serves as co-chairman of the Public School Funding Formula Interim Committee.

However, funding for school construction and maintenance is an issue the state must address, he said.

"We as a Legislature really do need to take a really serious, deep-dive look at and figure out, how we do fund our school construction," Winder said. "And it may take some additional funding from the state."

LOCAL ROADS

The local roads in Meridian are managed by the Ada County Highway District, and the state highways by the Idaho Transportation Department. These agencies review development applications and make recommendations about needed road improvements related to growth, but the Meridian City Council has the final say on approving projects.

"We wish we had enough money to get ahead of development, but we don't," ACHD Commissioner Kent Goldthorpe said. "We have such high growth in Treasure Valley that we will never get ahead of congestion."

Goldthorpe isn't against the growth — people have a right to buy and develop land, he said. The highway district's relationship with Meridian, he added, is one of the best in the Treasure Valley.

Justin Lucas, ACHD planning and programs manager, said the highway district does a good job responding to the land use decisions made by Meridian City Council.

Rather than deny a development because of road issues, the district tries to find a way the developer can mitigate impacts, Lucas said, such as adding another lane or putting in a stoplight. Developers pay an impact fee to the highway district — similar to what's paid to the city for public safety and parks — to offset the costs of servicing the new growth.

ACHD collected \$20.7 million in impact fees in fiscal year 2015-16. Of that, 31 percent came from projects in Meridian.

Developers also help improve transportation by adding bike lanes, sidewalks and streetlights, Lucas said.

REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION

Ada and Canyon counties face a transportation funding shortfall of \$150 million a year, according to the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or COMPASS, the regional planning agency.

"We're struggling," said Toni Tisdale, a principal planner with the agency. "Everybody in the nation is struggling to keep up with both maintaining the current system and growing."

That said, the transportation system will keep up with population growth, she said. It will just be more crowded than before.

"Once an area gets to be a larger, urban area, that's something that you find, is congestion," Tisdale said.

Even as the Treasure Valley's traffic increases, it's still manageable.

"A lot of the people that are moving here are coming from the western cities — Seattle, San Francisco, L.A. This is a walk in the park compared to those cities," said Miller, a COMPASS planner with a focus on demographics.

Still, that doesn't make the congestion any easier for longtime residents.

"For people that have been here for several decades, this is a lot of growth and a lot of congestion on the roads that they're not used to," Miller said.

Miller said he sees a lot of good things happening in Meridian in terms of how the city is growing. The city is identifying areas for infill development, building up a more diverse housing stock and attracting employers.

Having jobs closer to where people live helps reduce traffic, Tisdale said.

"Meridian and Nampa have done a really good job in bringing some of the jobs out closer to where people are living," she said.

In Ada and Canyon counties, roughly \$500 million is budgeted for transportation upgrades through 2021 using largely federal and some local dollars, according to COMPASS. That doesn't include some locally-funded projects.

COMPASS is also applying for federal grants and other funding, and the agency has talked with lawmakers for years about allowing communities to pass a local option tax, which would help fund public transit.

Idaho is one of only two states that doesn't have a designated funding source for public transit, Tisdale said. COMPASS is starting to plan for light rail between Boise and Caldwell, but that is still years out. The 28-mile system, based on national estimates, would cost \$560 million to \$1.7 billion, Miller said.

STATE HIGHWAYS

The Idaho Transportation Department faces hundreds of millions of dollars in budget shortfalls each year, spokeswoman Jennifer Gonzalez said.

"And that's not just in southwest Idaho, that's across the entire state of Idaho," she said.

The department is pleased, though, that Legislature increased funding from the gas tax and registration fees in recent years, she said. That revenue goes toward maintaining the existing infrastructure.

Lawmakers last year approved revenue for expansion projects. One of the projects that benefited, Gonzalez said, is the widening of Highway 20/26 (Chinden Boulevard) between Locust Grove and Eagle roads, set for 2021.

Like the highway district, ITD also works with developers before a project is built to try to mitigate traffic impacts.

For example, CenterCal Properties improved and widened South Eagle Road when it built The Village at Meridian. The state will reimburse CenterCal with some of the sales tax revenue from the Village tenants. This is called a STAR agreement, or Sales Tax Anticipation Revenue.

"We are working well with the resources and with the funding that we have available to us," Gonzalez said. "At this time, it is a focus on preservation and maintenance."

GROWTH'S IMPACTS

If it feels like Meridian is in a hurry to grow, that's because of the flood of development applications coming down the pipeline, Chatterton said.

"People have a right to apply, they have a right to ask," he said.

Meridian annexed 4.5 square miles of land from March 2014 to March 2017, according to planning staff, growing the city's land area by 16 percent.

When the city annexes land, it's making a commitment to provide excellent service to those future residents and businesses, Councilman Joe Borton said. That's expensive to do, he said Tuesday when he voted in favor of increasing property taxes in next year's budget.

If the city doesn't want to raise taxes, Borton said, the alternative might be to stop approving growth so quickly.

Even though growth brings challenges, it also brings the benefits of jobs, services and a diverse housing market, Chatterton said.

"There are places around the country that have instituted sort of 'go slow on growth,'" he said. "Most of those places probably haven't liked the results for their local economy."

Leaders with the city, highway district and ITD urge residents to get involved in the planning process and give their input.

Merilee Andrew, the homeowner next to Sky Mesa, said she appreciated the public hearing process. The developer of Sky Mesa, Boise Hunter Homes, did make changes to the project in response to homeowners' concerns.

"I'd never stepped foot into a City Council meeting until about a month ago," Andrew said. "I just didn't think it was going to matter, no one was going to hear. And I've been pleasantly surprised with the process that's been taking place."

DEVELOPING MERIDIAN

For the month of August, the Meridian Press has taken a deeper look at development in Idaho's fastest-growing city in our "Developing Meridian" series.

Meridian's population is closing in on 100,000 residents, almost triple its size in 2000.

The growth isn't expected to stop anytime soon. Meridian's community development department is planning for 162,800 residents by the year 2040.

In each edition this month, the Meridian Press explored four major areas of Meridian's growth:

- Aug. 4: Multi-family housing
- Aug. 11: Commercial and downtown development
- Aug. 18: Single-family housing
- Aug. 25: Growth policies and impacts on roads, schools

The complete series is available at mymeridianpress.com.

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