

Editorial board: Time to fix I-84 is now

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- Alx George/IPT

Numerous potholes received emergency repair starting Jan. 11 from the Idaho Transportation Department along Interstate 84 between Nampa and Caldwell.

Editor's Note: *The Idaho Press-Tribune typically reserves its editorials for the Opinion page. However, because this issue is so important and the timing is so crucial, we have elected to put this opinion on the front page of today's paper.*

The time for dawdling, fighting and nitpicking over Interstate 84 in Canyon County is over. The time for finally fixing it is now.

Thank goodness for late-session skirmishes in Idaho's dysfunctional House of Representatives. As distracting and annoying as they have been throughout this unproductive legislative session, Canyon County has one last opportunity to bring some needed funding to expand Interstate 84.

Our legislators are taking full advantage of the extension of the session, which was on track for ending Friday. According to Rep. Brandon Hixon, a \$300 million transportation funding bill will be introduced on Monday that will include a combination of GARVEE bonding, a two-year surplus eliminator (unallocated money from the general fund) and a set-aside of 1 percent of sales tax revenue.

It's an attempt for a March Madness "buzzer beater," for sure – the kind made for the likes of Maryland's Destiny Slocum, the former Mountain View High School star who rocked the sports world with her recent 70-foot swisher. Passage of a funding bill through both chambers during the final days, or hours, of a legislative session is a tall order. But it is worth a try, and there are actions that Canyon County residents can take to make it happen.

"We do not want to adjourn without a transportation bill," said Rep. Robert Anderst. The Canyon County delegation is committed to keep trying until the last gavel drops.

Nothing such as this could get through without leadership. And this is where Nampa's Rep. Brent Crane, the House assistant majority leader, comes in. As one of the top leaders of the Idaho House, he has built up a lot of political capital for his years of service. It's time for him to spend some of it.

No doubt, our legislators will be working overtime to make the case of funding to their colleagues. Hixon said that as of Friday, there were 46 co-sponsors to the latest funding bill. That's encouraging.

The need for improvements on I-84 is not just a local issue, although many of the motorists who put up daily with this traffic jungle are from Canyon County. The interstate highway, through Canyon County, is a gateway from the West and an essential part of the state's economy. Fertilizer and seeds for Eastern Idaho come through Canyon County. Raw materials for Micron in Boise and Chobani in Twin Falls are delivered on I-84 through Canyon County. Retail goods for the shopping centers in Pocatello and Idaho Falls are shipped along I-84 in Canyon County.

Workers from Canyon County, who are employed with companies such as Micron and Scentsy, help feed the economies in Boise and Meridian. It's baffling how senators from Ada County, who helped defeat a funding request in the Senate last week, couldn't see the big picture about I-84 through Canyon County. Four other Ada County senators voted "yes" to the funding proposal, so it's not totally a lost cause from the great state of Ada.

Hixon also is asking constituents to turn up the heat on this issue by calling or emailing legislators. So let's get busy.

The Caldwell Chamber of Commerce has weighed in on the issue with a letter signed by 21 Canyon County business leaders. The letter is on target with its perspective.

"This stretch of road remains inadequate and over capacity for the more than 40,000 vehicles that use it daily," the letter states. "The Legislature's practice of 'kicking the can' down the road is simply a recipe for disaster and will directly impact economic growth in our area and the state of Idaho."

We applaud the efforts of House members in this last-ditch effort, and the Canyon County legislators in both chambers for their commitment to this vital issue. But we

remain sorely disappointed with the action of the Idaho Senate, which blew an opportunity to salvage something positive from this dismal session. By a 20-15 vote, Idaho senators turned down a \$320 million funding bill — spitting in the eyes of Canyon County residents who live with the I-84 nightmare, while ignoring the importance of I-84 to commerce and the economy of the entire state.

Opposing lawmakers offered lame excuses, and no solid reasons, for their short-sighted votes. The plan would have used mostly bonds that are available for new projects, with repayment coming through future federal highway dollars. Yes, it would mean going into debt, which goes against the conservative grain of many legislators. But it's about the only practical way for Idaho to get funding for a project such as I-84. If legislators insist on waiting until the state has the cash to pay for expansion, it will never happen.

Our Canyon County senators, thankfully, voted for the funding bill, and we'll give props to all — Jeff Agenbroad, Abby Lee, Todd Lakey, Patti Anne Lodge and Jim Rice.

In a telling sign of how important this is, Canyon County's legislators are solidly and unanimously united behind this issue, which is something Lodge (in her ninth term) hasn't always seen during her time in the Legislature. Canyon County's legislators are among the most conservative in the Idaho Legislature, but they are not automatic "no" votes on everything as in past years. And they know that Canyon County, and the state's economy, will be hamstrung without expansion of I-84.

If House members are successful with their 11th-hour efforts, and a bill gets back to the Senate, there will be an opportunity for redemption. Our senators will need to work even harder, especially with their neighbors in Ada County, to produce a positive result.

It's worth reminding everyone that taking care of this now is based on conservative principles of the proper role of government and the wise investment of tax dollars. How much more expensive will this project be in three years? Five years? Ten years? This isn't just rampant liberal government spending. Allowing I-84 through Canyon County to remain in its deplorable condition is a dereliction of duty.

We urge everyone who is reading this editorial to reach out to state legislators and the governor's office and let them know that this has to happen now. We can't afford to let this go on any longer.