

## Got Transit?

When we built the interstate highway system, gas was a nickel a gallon. The system encouraged people to rely on personal vehicles for transportation. Our nation and world have changed drastically since then. What should transportation look like to reflect the world we live in today?



Transit is typically the local transportation of people by public conveyance, and the vehicles and system engaged in such transportation. Transit systems provide low cost mobility for people who do not, or cannot, operate a motor vehicle because of personal choice, income, disability, youth, or old age. An important characteristic of affordable transit service is that it provides regular access to as many destinations as possible.

The average American family that has to use a car to run errands and to get to work or school spends 19% of its household budget on transportation, including gas, insurance, and other costs associated with car ownership and use. If they had easy access to transit services, transportation costs would add up to only about 9%.

In Idaho, the average driver spends 5.7% of income on gas, compared to the national low of 3.2% and high of 7.9%. The high cost of car use is not the only issue. People who can't drive are often stranded if the place they live doesn't offer other transportation choices.

The Treasure Valley is growing rapidly: over 30 new vehicles are added each day to the Valley's roadways. Road expansion to accommodate more cars is becoming more expensive, and emissions from vehicles are a significant source of air pollution in the Valley. Riding the bus, carpooling, walking, biking, and using other transportation can help stretch transportation resources (such as road capacity), improve air quality in the region, and help those who cannot drive get around.

## Local Transit Resources

**Valley Regional Transit** (<http://www.valleyride.org/>) is the region's public transportation authority. Valley Regional Transit operates in Ada and Canyon Counties providing fixed-route services in Boise, Nampa, Caldwell, and Garden City; inter-county transportation routes between Ada and Canyon counties; and has over 860 bus stops in the Treasure Valley. Paratransit services are available in Nampa, Caldwell, Boise, and Garden City. Paratransit is a door-to-door service for people with special needs within a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile of a fixed route.



**Treasure Valley Transit** (<http://www.treasurevalleytransit.com/>) is the rural transit provider for eight counties in and around the Treasure Valley. Treasure Valley Transit provides approximately 8,400 trips per month with 16 vehicles and a staff of 22.

**Ada County Highway District Commuteride** (<http://www.commuteride.com>) is best known for its vanpools, but it is also tasked with promoting transit, vanpooling, carpooling, bicycling, and walking. One of the services that Commuteride provides to help ease traffic congestion is ride matching (<http://www.rideshareonline.com/>). It provides an easy way to find others in Washington or Idaho who are interested in sharing their commute in a carpool or vanpool, or who want to share a ride to a game, festival, or other public event.



## Who's Using Transit?

There are several key factors that influence transit ridership, including fixed bus stop locations, parking availability, and cost of driving. A convenient bus system and good transit connectivity also increase ridership.

Transit ridership in Idaho was up 16% statewide in March 2009 compared to the previous year. In the Treasure Valley, Commuteride and Treasure Valley Transit's ridership increased by 6%. Between October 1, 2008, and April 1, 2009, Valley Regional Transit provided 852,442 passenger trips, an increase of 23.8 % compared to the same period in the previous year. Valley Regional Transit

attributes the increase in large part to the installation of fixed-location bus stop signs in 2008 and the growth in public interest prompted by the rise and fall of fuel prices.



## Coming Attractions

**Multimodal Center-** The development of a “multimodal” transportation center located in downtown Boise is underway. The term, “multimodal,” refers to the concept that the center would eventually host multiple “modes” (types) of transit options. Federal funding opportunities as well as local government matches have helped pave the way for the multimodal facility that will act as a core for transportation activity. Initially, the center would mainly host buses, but it would also have facilities for bikes and parking. Eventually, the system will be a hub for buses, street cars, and even high capacity transit systems such as rail. The multimodal center would function as a center of activity with transportation information, retail, bike storage, public art, and other service facilities. The project is on-going; visit <http://www.compassidaho.org/prodserv/specialprojects-tvhcts.htm> for project status updates.

**Boise Circulator-** In connection with the multimodal center, a downtown circulator would move people to and from major downtown destinations. The circulator would run a circular loop through downtown Boise and eliminate the need for single occupancy vehicle trips around the central business district. It would establish a base for public transportation expansions and integrating buses, trolleys, and streetcars. City officials are working towards getting federal funds to pay for up to half of the infrastructure costs, the remainder of the funding will come from local sources such as a special downtown property assessment district, called a local improvement district (LID), tax increment financing, and parking revenues. However, an LID cannot be used to pay for the circulator’s operating and maintenance costs of about \$1 million to \$1.5 million a year. For information about the streetcar, please see <http://boisestreetcar.org/>.

**High Capacity Transit Corridor –** Traffic in the I-84 corridor is expected to double in the next 25 years. An analysis of possible east-west alignments will examine alternatives to the interstate, and will consider various transit options, including high-occupancy vehicle lanes, passenger rail, bus rapid transit, and transportation system management strategies.

## Challenges and Opportunities

Public transit systems face challenges in meeting a multitude of needs. Speedy and reliable service, regular stops, and flexible schedules can increase ridership. Land use strategies, such as mixed-use land development, transit-oriented land use strategies, and pedestrian and bike-friendly streets can all promote transportation choices. Identifying appropriate transit locations such as parks, schools, and major employment centers will enhance accessibility to the system.

Those who need transit the most, such as people with disabilities, the elderly, youth, and people with low incomes, may not be able to use it due to barriers such as limited hours and days of transit operations, lack of routes, or lack of sidewalks and pathways leading to a bus stop.

There are several steps transit agencies can take to narrow the gaps for transit needs, including better coordination of transportation resources, and introduction of new technologies, such as reader boards or text messages to enhance information and service delivery to transit users.

Identifying a variety of funding strategies is also critical for providing transit systems that work effectively to serve the public. Across the country, fare box revenues on average cover 40 percent of system operating costs. Transit systems, like roads, typically rely on funds from federal, state, local, and private sector sources. In Idaho there are very limited state funds for transit and no local dedicated source of funding which reduces federal funds as well because each dollar of federal funding requires either a 50 percent or a 20 percent local match, depending on the way the funds are spent.

As the Treasure Valley grows, and lifestyles change, the need for transit will grow as well. In 5, 10, or 20 years, will Treasure Valley citizens be able to say they've "got transit"?