

Coming soon: big changes to Eagle Road

Many say it's about time, too

By Cynthia Sewell

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The state's busiest non-interstate road is about to get a makeover. Eagle Road from Overland to Idaho 44 — a seven-mile stretch traversed by up to 50,000 vehicles a day — will get new traffic lights, new medians to divide traffic, new sidewalks and a new 45 mph speed limit to make the road safer.

Eagle Road is the epicenter of Treasure Valley growth and population. It is the only direct connection between the interstate and State Street. It's home to the valley's fastest-growing commercial corridor, and it connects two of Idaho's most-rapidly expanding cities — Meridian and Eagle, both of which have grown fivefold since 1990.

Since 1990, traffic on Eagle Road has grown from an average of 8,226 vehicles per day to 34,794 in 2004. Eagle Road had five of Ada County's 10 busiest intersections when last ranked in 2002.

The road is lined with subdivisions like Hobble Creek, whose residents are eager to see safety improvements — especially the new traffic light at Hobble Creek Drive coming this summer.

Hobble Creek residents have been working with the Idaho Transportation Department for two years, said Scott Henson, Homeowners Association president. "A traffic fatality really galvanized us to work very diligently to see this thing through," Henson said. In November 2002, 19-year-old Aja Licastri died in a crash as she turned left onto Eagle Road from Bristol Heights Drive.

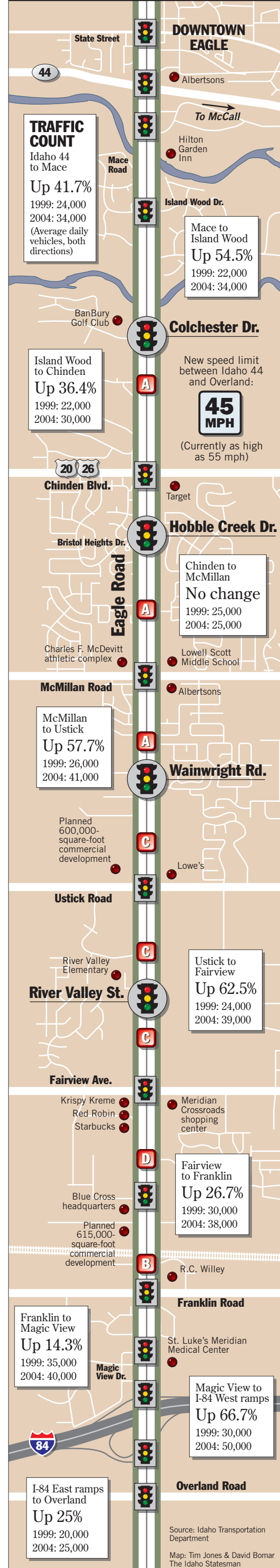
ITD has unveiled the results of a \$425,000 study it began in 2003 to increase safety, improve traffic flow and spruce up the road's appearance. Completing the project will take three to five years.

What will be different?

Look for these changes on Eagle Road within the next five years:

- -Four new traffic signals at River Valley Street, Wainwright Road, Hobble Creek Drive and Colchester Drive.
- -Speed limit reduction to 45 mph from Overland to Idaho 44.
- -Curbs and gutters the entire length; most of the road has neither now.
- -Better signal-light timing using new technology. Yet to be designed or placed:
- Bus pullouts.
- -Pedestrian/bicycle pathways separated from roadway with landscaping.
- -Increased lighting, including bridge lighting at both river crossings.
- -More right turn lanes.
- -Landscaping along both sides of the road and in the median.

BIG CHANGES ARE COMING TO EAGLE ROAD



Q&A Eagle Road goes from country lane to busy city thoroughfare

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What improvements are planned?

Four new traffic lights, curb and gutter and a center median with periodic breaks from Overland to Idaho 44 already are on the project's map. Planned, but yet to be designed or sited, are bus pullouts, pedestrian/bicycle pathways separated from the road, medians and other landscaping along both sides of the road, and new lighting, especially at the two river crossings. Today, most of Eagle Road does not have curb, gutter or sidewalks; there are no bus pullouts or center medians. What started as a country lane through farm country has long stretches without lights.

Why is Eagle Road important?

Eagle Road is the only north-south road in Boise or Meridian that provides a straight shot from Interstate 84 to Idaho 20/26 and Idaho 44, making it a key commuter route to Northwest Boise, Eagle, Star, Middleton and Emmett. Other north-south routes do not have interstate access or do not cross the Boise River. Eagle Road is also part of Idaho 55, which runs from Marsing to McCall to New Meadows.

How did Eagle Road get to be so busy?

Eagle Road started as a country lane through farm land. In the 1930s, Eagle Road north of Fairview was designated a state highway. In 1965, Interstate 84 came through, but Eagle Road did not get an interchange.

In 1990, the Interstate 84 exit and entrance ramps were added at Eagle Road.

In 1998, Eagle Road was widened from two to five lanes.

Three cities are located along Eagle Road: Eagle, Boise and Meridian. Between 1990 and 2005, the population of Eagle and Meridian increased by more than 450 percent. Boise's population grew by more than 60 percent in the same period.

In 1990, Eagle Road between Overland and Idaho 44 averaged 8,226 cars per day. Today, the same stretch averages 34,794 cars per day, making it the state's

busiest non-interstate road. By comparison, Interstate 84 west of Orchard averages 74,500 cars per day.

In 2002 Ada County Highway District ranked the 10 busiest sections of road in Ada County. Eagle Road between Interstate 84 and McMillan Road took five of the 10 spots.

When did the traffic get bad?

Eagle Road has two contrary personalities: a state highway/commuter route and a city road accessing growing numbers of subdivisions, retail and commercial areas. Eagle Road's personality change started in 1998 when it was widened from two to five lanes, prompting a housing and business development boom along the highway's sides. In the last five years, a slew of new businesses sprang up, including Krispy Kreme, Starbucks, The Ram and Lowe's. The Overland-to-Idaho 44 stretch now has 38 intersections or access points and 13 traffic signals.

More large commercial developments and homes are planned for the area, which will increase traffic and access points.

Over the years, the Eagle Road/Interstate 84 area has emerged as the population center of the Treasure Valley.

According to a 2001 analysis from the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, a planning organization for Ada and Canyon counties, the Treasure Valley's population center — an imaginary point with equal population on all sides — was just north of Interstate 84 and just east of Eagle Road. Today, based on the amount of development in Meridian and Kuna, COMPASS estimates the population center to be slightly farther south and closer to Locust Grove Road. (Fun fact: Rural Phelps County, Mo., is the U.S. population center.)

How much will the project cost, and how will it be funded?

The project is still in the design phase. Once the design is complete, ITD can calculate costs.

Federal funds will pay for the improvements. ITD has made Eagle Road a funding priority for its federal money because of safety and congestion issues. More information on costs and funding will be available in a few months.

How did ITD decide what changes to make?

In 2003, ITD started the Eagle Road Arterial Study to determine ways to increase safety and manage traffic more efficiently between the Interstate 84 off-ramps and Idaho 44/State Street.

In February 2004, ITD brought nationally recognized traffic and landscape specialists to Boise for a three-day workshop to offer advice and additional information for determining the best management of Eagle Road.

The workshop included participation from the cities of Boise, Meridian, Eagle, Ada County and the Ada County Highway District, the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho and the Federal Highway Administration.

The study also included public participation. About 300 people attended two public open houses; others attended small group meetings. ITD also sent out regular update newsletters to Eagle Road-area businesses and residents.

ITD finished the \$425,000 study last winter. The agency decided to move forward with the recommendations and this spring started the design phase of the project, now called the Eagle Road Improvement Project.

When will the speed limit be lowered to 45 mph?

That hasn't been decided. Traffic-signal timing and speed limits are linked. ITD must decide how best to proceed with installing new signals, re-timing signals and lowering the speed limit to improve travel efficiency.

How did ITD decide where to place the four new traffic signals?

ITD worked with city planners, engineers and the public to decide on best locations for the new traffic signals. ITD also sought advice from national traffic experts. The deciding factors: areas that were most congested with vehicles trying to turn and proximity to existing traffic signals. ITD will use updated technology and new signal systems to time the lights to keep traffic moving efficiently.

Will the improvements make Eagle Road more friendly for pedestrians and cyclists?

Pedestrians and cyclists are a rarity among Eagle Road's sea of cars. Sporadic,

fragmented sidewalks, limited lighting and a large volume of cars at high speeds make traveling by foot or bike scary. A new bike path the length of the road and separated from traffic is planned but not designed. By lowering the speed limit and adding sidewalks, paths and lighting, ITD hopes to make Eagle Road more amenable to walkers and cyclists.

When will we see results?

The only item planned for this year is a new traffic signal at Hobble Creek Drive south of Chinden Boulevard, which ITD will install this summer.

ITD is still working out a timeline for completing the other improvements over the next three to five years. The project will take that long because ITD wants to do improvements in stages to minimize impact to motorists.

How will my commute be affected by construction?

ITD is still deciding whether to make the improvements by road section or by type of work. If done by section, all improvements would be made to one section at a time. If done by type of work, for example, all new traffic signals would be installed, then all the median work would be done, etc.

ITD has not worked out details on lane restrictions, detours or when construction will take place, but it already has decided to do much of the work at night to limit the effects on motorists. Eagle Road will not be completely shut down during construction.

What has the state learned from Eagle Road?

The history of Eagle Road is a lesson in what happens when traffic access onto and off a state highway is not carefully planned. When state highways have unlimited access, cars turning onto and off the highway create congestion and safety problems. The result is a road that doesn't suit the purpose of an efficient, higher-speed state highway.

State officials say they've learned to exercise more care when siting commercial and residential development along state highways and to be cognizant of the number and placement of access points.

How can I learn more or get involved?

Go to ITD's Web site, www.itd.idaho.gov, and click on 'get involved' to read the Eagle Road Improvement Project spring 2005 newsletter, which includes a map and information on the project. You also can call ITD public affairs office at 334-8005.

— Cynthia Sewell

What do you think about ITD's Eagle Road plan?

- Participate in the conversation on our message board. Go to our story online or go to IdahoStatesman.com/MessageBoards. You must register to participate, but you can browse to see what other readers had to say about this topic. Submissions to The Idaho Statesman may be published or distributed in print, electronic or other forms.