

Martin Johncox: Growth of the past 15 years is not conducive for transit

READER'S VIEW: Public Transportation

Idaho Statesman, January 23, 2008

By Martin Johncox

I've been following the discussion of local-option taxation and transit in the editorial pages of The Statesman. While I support local-option taxation and transit, there's been little discussion if cities have been preparing their built environment to support transit.

From what I can tell, cities have a spotty record on enforcing the kind of development needed to make transit feasible. This lack of transit-oriented development undermines the cities' otherwise good arguments in favor of local-option taxation.

Transit lacks point-to-point flexibility. To make up for that, people must bridge, on foot or bike, the distance between the transit stop and their destination. To get people to do this, you must build a human-scaled environment, where buildings come right to the sidewalk; things are stacked on top of each other to conserve distance; and homes, offices, shopping centers, schools and other destinations are directly connected with sidewalks.

The best examples of this kind of development locally are from a century ago: the historic neighborhoods and the downtowns of Treasure Valley cities, developed when cars were scarce and the locations of tracks and train stops determined what got built and where. Transit friendly is necessarily pedestrian friendly. But we've built just the opposite in the past 50 years. Giant parking lots, absent of sidewalks, encourage people to drive from one parking lot to the next; subdivisions are fenced from each other and neighboring shopping centers; and very long blocks and cul-de-sacs lengthen pedestrian trips.

In such an environment, people will not walk to the nearest transit stop, even if they could find it. If a train dropped off people by the mall, they would be in the middle of some of the most pedestrian-hostile development in Idaho. Could we expect a rider to catch a train or bus stopping 100 feet from their home, when it's in a shopping center on the other side of a fence and the only other way is a half-mile walk out of the subdivision? No amount of local-option taxation flexibility will fix this. To be fair, it's been less than 15 years since Boise and other cities awoke to the need to build for transit. Indeed, for most of the past century, transit-friendly Main Street America was illegal to build under zoning codes. Only relatively recently have local governments become receptive to Smart Growth principles.

Yet in those past 15 years there's been precious little progress toward enforcing transit-friendly development. Boise's 1997 comprehensive plan was a visionary statement of urban planning that, unfortunately, has not been followed diligently enough to improve opportunities for transit. There are very few examples of shopping centers built in Boise in the past 10 years, for example, that are truly

transit-friendly. Shopping centers still have huge parking lots between the stores and the street. Cul-de-sacs are still common and many subdivisions still have just one or two ways in and out. Pedestrian- and transit-friendly development styles are mandated downtown only.

We've made some improvements, like micro-pathways in subdivisions and pedestrian networks inside parking lots. But from a practical, on-the-ground perspective - and compared to the examples people a century ago bequeathed us - transit remains a vestigial part of our built environment. (See "The Next American Metropolis" by Peter Calthorpe to learn how transit oriented developments can work in modern times.) I fully support the vision for transit in the Treasure Valley and I believe local-option taxation authority should be granted. But we should realize that for more than a decade, we have had the local mandate to require transit-friendly development and have made little apparent progress.

Martin Johncox is a former Statesman reporter who covered local government and urban planning. He is currently a public relations consultant at Alexander and Associates, focusing on land use and public policy.