Political elite block Boise transit hub

Land Board members and staff say they're holding out for a better deal, though no one's proposed any other improvement to the lot at 8th and Jefferson.

On April 1, State Reps. Brent Crane and John Vander Woude told Mayor Dave Bieter they were against a proposal to build a transit hub across the street from the Capitol. They weren't alone in their opposition. Bieter said Crane told him there were other state leaders who didn't want "those people" near the Statehouse. Bieter said Crane was talking about bus riders.

But "those people" wasn't a reference to bus riders, Vander Woude told the Statesman May 24. Instead, Crane was talking about homeless people and panhandlers that transportation hubs tend to attract. "What do you normally see when you go to a bus terminal?" Vander Woude said. "Does it become a collection point, a shelter, even a homeless place where people will park because there's a lot of people coming through for panhandling or whatever?"

Crane declined to comment on the April 1 meeting, saying negotiations with the mayor's office continue. Bieter said he hasn't heard from Crane since the meeting.

HOW DID IT COME TO THIS?

Valley Regional Transit, which operates the public transportation system around the Treasure Valley, has tried for the past six years to build a "multimodal transit center."

In addition to a hub for buses, car sharing, bike sharing, vanpools, taxis, airport shuttles and other public transportation, plans for the transit center envision a few floors of privately managed stores, offices and apartments above the nearly $12 million facility.

A $9.5 million federal earmark and $2.4 million pledged by Boise's urban renewal agency would pay for the center. Private money would pay for any retail, office and residential space.

The Gardner Co., developer of the tower at 8th and Main, wants to see a transit center in Downtown Boise and wants to get involved as a consultant or owner, chief operating officer Tommy Ahlquist said. Other Western cities, including Salt Lake City and Portland, have proven similar concepts in their own downtowns, Ahlquist said. If the 8th and Jefferson proposal dies, he said, the Gardner Co. might look at buying Downtown property and building a center on its own.

So far, every attempt to find a Downtown home for the transit center has met with failure as neighbors and the general public objected to it. At first, the parking lot on the southwest corner of 8th and Jefferson streets held promise. Valley Regional Transit and the Department of Lands, which manages the lot, worked together on the
The transit agency conducted an environmental assessment - at a cost of $130,000, most of which a federal grant covered.

A Valley Regional Transit document promoting the center describes its appearance as "clean public space," "attractive" and "architecturally significant."

But the hub's appearance is exactly what brought the 8th and Jefferson proposal to a halt. By early 2013, a familiar resistance had surfaced. This time, it wasn't just from neighbors. Lawmakers, in town for the legislative session, were telling Department of Lands Director Tom Schultz they didn't want the transit center near the Capitol.

In a May 1 letter denying Valley Regional Transit's application, Schultz said "numerous members of the Downtown Boise business community, as well as members of Idaho's executive and legislative branches," worried the hub would "swell the amount of traffic and congestion and diminish safety near the Capitol, and could harm the block's historic character."

Vander Woude said he discussed the transit center with a few fellow legislators. He said he told Schultz it was a bad idea.

The 8th and Jefferson lot is one piece of 2.4 million acres scattered across the state that the Department of Lands manages for various beneficiaries, including K-12 schools, charitable institutions and the University of Idaho. The Idaho Constitution requires the department's board - five of the state's most powerful elected officers known collectively as the Land Board - to sell, rent, trade and otherwise use the land "in such manner as will secure the maximum long-term financial return" for the beneficiaries.

Money from the 8th and Jefferson lot goes to Idaho State University and Lewis-Clark State College.

Idaho Secretary of State and Land Board member Ben Ysursa agreed with Vander Woude that attracting large numbers of homeless people and panhandlers to within a few hundred feet of the Capitol building would be inappropriate.

Ysursa also agreed with Department of Lands Director Tom Schultz's May 1 letter denying Valley Regional Transit's application for the hub.

Bieter rejected the notion that the center would be a magnet for panhandlers and homeless people. He said the city, which last year contributed more than $5.6 million to Valley Regional Transit, hopes to place a police station in the transit center building - a tenant he believes would discourage loitering and other problems.

One reason for including retail, office and residential space above the transit center is to distinguish it from common bus terminals, Ahlquist said. Schultz denied Valley Regional Transit's application early in the process, so no firm business plan had been worked out. Nor has the Department of Lands analyzed the financial return the transit center would yield.

Valley Regional Transit Executive Director Kelli Fairless is convinced the hub would be a net benefit to the Department of Lands endowment. "We believe that it's a good project," Fairless said. "As much as anything, it's been a misunderstanding about what the project is going to be, what it would look like and how it would interact with the neighborhood."

*Bus station 2*
One possibility is for the endowment to own the building as well as the land. In that scenario, the department would sign long-term leases with developers who would, in turn, sub-lease space to other tenants.

Such an arrangement would increase the amount of money going to Idaho State University and Lewis-Clark State College from the 8th and Jefferson lot, which currently generates income by renting parking spaces. In addition, the endowment's property would be more valuable due to a new multimillion-dollar building.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Land Board members and their staff said 8th and Jefferson isn't the only piece of land to consider. The Land Board manages several other properties in the vicinity. Two of them - 10 Barrel Brewing Co.'s location in the Sherm Perry Building at 9th and Bannock and the Garro Building at 816 W. Bannock - are on the same city block as the 8th and Jefferson lot.

The Land Board must take into account the way one property's improvements might affect the value of the others before approving the change, Schultz and Ysursa said.

The state Constitution requires the Land Board to manage endowment properties to the benefit of "the institution to which granted." The three properties on the 8th and Jefferson block don't, exactly, belong to the same institutions. The 8th and Jefferson lot is managed entirely for the benefit of Idaho State University and Lewis-Clark State College. Income from the Sherm Perry and Garro buildings is split. Three-quarters goes to the two colleges. The remaining 25 percent goes to a different institution: State Hospital South in Blackfoot.

Still, management of the 8th and Jefferson lot should take the other properties into consideration, Schultz said. After all, the colleges would absorb the majority of any impact from development there.

SHORT- VS. LONG-TERM VALUE

Furthermore, Ysursa pointed out the "long-term" aspect of the Land Board's responsibility. Just because the transit center would bring in more rent income and add $12 million worth of improvements doesn't mean it's the best move in the long run, he said.

"I'm not clairvoyant," Ysursa said. "I don't know what might go on at that corner there, but those are issues."

There have been no proposals for other projects at 8th and Jefferson, but Ysursa and fellow Land Board member Brandon Woolf believe the department can find some that are profitable and more palatable than a transit center. Woolf serves as the Idaho State Controller.

"We could bring in so many other things that could make more than what the parking lot's making," Woolf said. "It could be any number of other projects or pieces that could make more money."

Land Board members Gov. Butch Otter and Attorney General Lawrence Wasden declined to comment for this story. They said the issue might resurface in a board hearing, and they didn't want to contaminate that process.

Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna, also a Land Board member, said through spokeswoman Melissa McGrath that his only knowledge of the transit center proposal was Valley Regional Transit's preliminary presentation last year. He said he had not discussed the proposal with Department of Lands staff, fellow Land Board members or legislators.

*Bus station 3*
It's typical for the staff to handle such issues in their initial stages, McGrath said.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED …

Fairless hasn't given up on convincing the Land Board that the transit center would be a good addition to the 8th and Jefferson lot. "It's just too good of a project to give up on," she said. "It needs to be given a fair shake before I'm ready to give up on it."

Fairless plans to form a citizen advisory committee to weigh in on details of the proposal. She also wants to enlist the help of a private developer and inform people about what to expect from the transit center.

Eventually, she said, she'll take the proposal back to the Department of Lands and work toward a full hearing before the Land Board. There's no drop-dead expiration date on the federal earmark that would pay for most of the center, Fairless said, but the money won't wait forever.

"The only issue is, if we don't get a project actually going forward, the Federal Transit Administration may say, "We're done waiting for you to find a place to put the project,"" she said.