Meridian wants, but can’t fund, more public transit

Most Meridian residents want public transportation options beyond the two intercounty Valleyride bus routes available on weekdays.

A 2010 city survey shows two-thirds of residents place the issue high on the city’s to-do list.

Plans to add more bus routes — and in the distant future a light-rail system — are in place, but funds aren’t. Community Planning Association Executive Director Matt Stoll said.

Idaho is one of two states that doesn’t have a funding stream for public transit, often leaving cities with tough budget decisions. Money for public transportation comes from the same fund that pays for police, fire and park services.

“As we’ve grown there’s been so many things that needed attention,” Meridian Councilman and Valley Regional Transit Board member David Zaremba said. “We’ve had to add police and police facilities. In 1998 we had one little fire station. We now have five.”

Parks are also a priority and, in Zaremba’s opinion, help keep crime down. But he continues to push public transit into the spotlight.

“Keep mentioning to my cohorts, Meridian has to find a way to fund public transportation, because in our surveys, our public wants it,” he said.

In the past, legislators have discussed creating a local option sales tax or a taxing district for Valley Regional Transit, with voter approval, to fund public transportation. Zaremba doesn’t expect new development with these options until at least next year.

For now, Meridian will continue preparing for the future and funding what bus routes it can. In fiscal year 2012, the city allotted more than $120,800 toward Valleyride and retirement center bus operations.

“Those buses are pretty full during the peak usage times,” Valleyride spokesman Mark Carnops said. “A lot of people I talk to in Meridian that call my office are seniors or people that want to know about options getting to medical appointments.”

Valleyride is founding a GoRide Community Link bus system for senior citizens and people with disabilities in the Treasure Valley — and with additional services in Meridian for the general public — set to begin in July. With a reservation, bus service will be available for $1, Carnops said.

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