Road to Nowhere: The State of Public Transportation
Idaho lacks funding and support for public transportation
by Justin Dalme

Benny Ontiveros steps off the bus and grabs his bike off the rack. He finds a shady bench and sits down to wait for his next bus to take him back home. For Ontiveros, waiting is nothing new.

Each day he starts his morning by riding two miles down to 10th Avenue in Caldwell to catch the 6:45 a.m. express bus to downtown Boise. From downtown, he takes another bus to his job up on Federal Way. Overall, Ontiveros estimates that it takes him about an hour and a half each morning to get to work around 8:15 a.m.

But it's in the afternoon, going back home, that Ontiveros spends the most time waiting.

"Right now, when I get to CWI [College of Western Idaho] in Nampa, I've got another 40-minute wait before I can catch another bus that will actually get me going home."

This is the fastest way home for Ontiveros, who used to take a different route. After getting off work at 2 p.m., he wouldn't get home until 6 p.m. But, for Ontiveros and other public transit commuters in the Treasure Valley, there isn't much they can do about the long waits.

"You got to do what you got to do to get back and forth, so it's all on you," he said. "I myself lost my driver's license, so I'm dependent on public transportation. It's pretty reliable. It'd be nice if it was more frequent, but it is what it is."

According to a study by the Brookings Institution in 2011, the Boise-Nampa metropolitan area ranks No. 22 out of the top 100 metropolitan areas in the percentage of jobs that are within 45 minutes of public transportation. But, when it comes to the frequency of public transportation, Boise ranks No. 90. While there is opportunity for public transportation to thrive, the frequency of service may be detracting from that success.

Valley Regional Transit

For Valley Regional Transit, the company responsible for bus routes throughout the Treasure Valley, hearing about more service is a daily occurrence.

"Our customer service probably gets five to 10 requests a day for additional service," said Mary Barker, service development manager for VRT. "We budget so tightly that every minute that we can put out on the road for buses, we've put out on the road. We're pretty much maxed out with what we're able to do with the funding that we have."

Currently, VRT receives money from both local and federal governments, but none from the state. According to Rick Thompson, VRT finance director, the amount
of local funding directly affects the amount of money they receive from the federal government. Last year, VRT received $14.6 million from the federal government, but to get to that number, it's a complex web of figures. For example, the preventative maintenance budget for Boise is a 50–20 match, with the federal government paying 50 percent and the city chipping in the other 20 percent. For operating costs, Boise is too big of a city to receive federal funding, thus being funded 100 percent by the city, Nampa, on the other hand, is a 50–50 match for operating costs. With the addition of more local funding, VRT would be able to receive more money from the federal government, allowing for potential growth.

For now, each year is a financial struggle. With public transportation competing with everything else, like schools, parks, police and fire departments, VRT never knows for certain how much money it will receive from year to year. Currently, VRT receives around $6 million every year from local governments, a figure that Thompson says hasn't changed very much in five years. Paired with the money from the federal government, VRT had total revenues of almost $21.7 million in 2012.

In 2005, VRT put together a Regional Operation and Capital Improvement Plan, a dream plan of how it would like to see public transportation grow in the Treasure Valley. The report shows where VRT would like to be, ideally, six years after implementation. There are figures showing expanded and more frequent bus service and ideas for a commuter rail and downtown circulator. The major hurdle to this six-year plan was—and still is—funding. According to the report, "the Six-Year Plan is tied to the approval of a regional dedicated source fund."

The plan would require a $44.6 million budget for operations and was assumed to begin in 2007. Six years later, the valley has seen little improvement in public transportation.

"We rely on the generosity, in big part, of a lot of the areas that receive service from us. But we are going to move on. You have to have a vision, so if you ever do have that funding in place, we'll be ready to move it in," said Mark Carnopis, community relations and marketing manager for VRT. The problem: There is still no dedicated funding source, which has left both VRT and the public wanting more.

Lupita Connor, a graduate student at Boise State University, rides the bus from Caldwell and Nampa. On the route she takes, the bus only comes once every hour. That long interval between buses has put Connor in a bind when she has arrived late to the stop.

"One day I was desperate and I had to stalk people and beg them for a ride because I had to catch my son from school," Connor said. Another time, she had to chase down the bus on her bike and beg for a ride.

Connor, who also works at Boise State, wouldn't mind seeing more buses every hour, making her daily trip more convenient.

There were attempts in 2007 and 2008 to pass a local-option tax through the Idaho Legislature—a measure that could be used to dedicate funding for public transportation. According to the Associated Press, in 2008 there was opposition from some lawmakers who thought that a local-option tax was just a way for local governments to increase taxes. There was also a constitutional amendment that required 66 percent of voters to pass a sales tax increase. Other legislators viewed local-option taxes as a way for Idahoans to vote yes or no on local needs. But, as in 2007, the attempt to pass a local-option sales tax in 2008 died.

"The last time we did that, the hearing rooms were standing-room-only, in terms of people supporting getting dedicated funding for us [VRT]," Barker said. "They actually had to extend the number of hearings they had. But the bill, I believe, never made it out of committee."

There have been several ways discussed for public transportation to receive dedicated funding, including the gas tax. Currently, the gas tax is dedicated only for roads, so it would require a rewriting of the Idaho Constitution to allow the money to go to public transportation as well.

There have been analyses done to see how else the state could generate revenue for public transportation.

"The last time that analysis was done, the local-option came out as the most feasible," Barker said.

What is a local-option tax? A local-option tax gives cities and counties the ability to create a tax, but only with public approval at the ballot. This can be extremely helpful when trying to fund a regional project such as public transportation. "Many, if not most, of the states in the region have some sort of local-option tax authority," said Stephanie Witt, director of the applied research center at Boise State. "So, our cities and counties are kind of at a disadvantage."

Cities and counties receive most of their income through property tax. This income has to be spread across all the services that cities and counties supply. One thing that a local-option tax can allow is for money to be designated to a specific area.

"In Pueblo, Colo., they have a local-option sales tax of half-a-cent," Witt said. "That money goes only for economic development so they can attract businesses there and build the infrastructure to attract people there."

Cities and counties in Idaho have been lobbying for a local-option tax for about 20 years, according to Witt. So far, there has been no success.

In a public policy survey conducted by Boise State, 56 percent of people support cities and counties having voter-approved local-option tax authority. The numbers were almost the same across all political parties as well. Democrats supported the idea with 59 percent, Republicans with 55 percent and Independents with 66 percent.

But the people aren't the only ones in support of a local-option tax. Witt says that the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce has been in support of a local-option tax for years.

"We are very intrigued by [local-option taxes] and we like the fact that it allows cities to choose the projects that they'd like to have," Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Bill Connors said.

Even with support from the public and the business community, local-option taxing authority just can't seem to gain traction at the Statehouse.

"There is a reluctance, I think, at the state government level, by the party in power, to share power and to leave revenue on the table as an option for people in local communities who can make the decisions on their own and can vote on their own about whether they want to tax themselves," said Rep. Grant Burgoyne, a Boise Democrat who sits on the House Revenue and Taxation Committee.

He added that the beauty of local-options is that the people decide whether they want to tax themselves, unlike state taxes, which only get approved by the Legislature. But if the state taxes too much on the state level, communities and cities are left with no room to tax their people for their needs.

"You've kind of preempted their ability, in local units of government, to work on their own problems and solve their own problems; you've taken their power," Burgoyne said.

He would like to see as much taxation as possible in the hands of local governments and as little as possible in the hands of state governments. For him, communities throughout Idaho are unique and different, and because of that, they should be able to address their needs through local options.

"This idea that the Legislature is somehow wiser and more capable of making decisions for everybody than our county commissioners, our mayors, our city councils

and our school districts, I don't agree with," Burgoyne said.

Public Transportation in the Treasure Valley

Boise Mayor Dave Bieter has long seen public transportation as a need for his city.

Four years ago, Bieter proposed the Boise streetcar. He envisioned a fixed-rail vehicle that would spur economic development downtown. The streetcar would be just the first step in the progression of public transportation in the Treasure Valley.

The result: it failed. After years of feasibility studies, the project could not take off and Bieter was sent back to the drawing board.

Bieter said one of the biggest problems was the funding source. Valley Regional Transit knows very well what the mayor is talking about.

According to surveys by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, out of the 45 states that do receive some sort of state funding for public transportation, Idaho ranks last with $312,000 each year going toward public transportation. Though there is no dedicated funding source, that money goes to public transportation systems across the whole state, with VRT seeing none of it. While Idaho's population has continued to grow, funding toward public transportation has stayed the same.

"Public transportation has to compete with every other use: fire, police, parks, libraries, all the other stuff we have to do," Bieter said. "You just can't grow that kind of system that we want with that limited funding source."

When compared to states of similar population, Idaho still comes up short. Montana, with a population of about 600,000 less than Idaho, receives more than $400,000 for public transportation from its state government.

Other states such as Alabama, Arizona, Hawaii, Nevada, and Utah receive no funding from their state governments.

Where Idaho differs is that cities and counties do not have the ability to install a local-option tax. Only resort towns (fewer than 10,000 people) have the ability to do so. While Utah does not give money out of its state budget for local transportation, Salt Lake City and the surrounding area have a local sales tax that raised $171 million, or 63 percent of the funding for its light-rail transit system in 2010, according to the Utah Transit Authority.

"We are one of only a couple states that don't have either state funding [directly] for public transportation or a local-option," Bieter said. "That's awful."

Since Idaho cities and counties don't have the authority to tax, they have to look elsewhere for money. In the case of the streetcar, Bieter looked toward federal grants.

The major federal grant that the mayor had his eye on was the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant. Specifically geared toward transportation projects, competition was fierce, with awards going only to cities with projects that the government deemed would have the most impact on their respective regions.

Unfortunately for Bieter, Boise's streetcar did not make the cut.

But since Boise applied for the first round of grants, the amount of money dedicated by Congress to the program has fallen from $1.5 billion to just more than $500 million in the last round.

With the amount of federal funding for public transportation—and everything else—being cut, the city may have to look elsewhere.

As far as Rep. Burgoyne sees it, the state government has responsibilities with respect to public transportation in the Treasure Valley. For him, the state, by way of the transportation department, has never seen its role as anything more than a builder of state highways.

Valley Regional Transit officials also see the lack of support on the state's behalf. This spring, VRT announced that it was ready to build a multi-modal transit center in downtown Boise at the intersection of Eighth and Jefferson streets. But unknown to VRT, the Idaho Department of Lands, the group responsible for the piece of land in question, had already rejected VRT's application. VRT followed up with a statement to the Idaho Statesman expressing its disappointment:

"The future of Idaho's economy depends on building an efficient transit system. With this action the State reveals its lack of commitment to transit and a lack of regard for the significant taxpayer dollars invested in this site following the Land Board's concurrence to proceed in May 2012."

At the moment, it appears that Burgoyne is right that the state doesn't see public transportation as its responsibility.

"I think that mindset should change," Burgoyne said. "I think there should be state money going into a public transportation system in the Treasure Valley. The purpose of our transportation department isn't to build roads, the purpose of our transportation department is to move people and goods across our state."

Burgoyne pointed out that the state's investment in improvements to I-84 between Nampa and Boise shows that it recognizes that moving people throughout the Treasure Valley is a state-level function.

Ideally, Burgoyne would like to see a conjoined effort of state and local governments to improve public transportation in the Treasure Valley. But there is one thing that stands in the way of improving public transportation:

"It isn't going to happen without a local-option, he said. "It just isn't going to happen."
I don't know WHAT the "regional transit center" proponents are thinking! How about some regional transit, before you build a "transit center"?! (Many of the "transit centers" in other cities' downtown area are more of a "hobo transit center" than a "transit center."

I believe in public transit; on the few days each year when bicycle transportation isn't feasible, I ride the bus. But rarely does a bus have more than a few riders... which begs the question, "Which comes first, the buses or the passengers?" I like the idea of local-option taxes; the SLC area charges 1/2-percent sales tax, and they've built a very functional bus/train system.

Regarding inter-city transport between Boise and Nampa/Caldwell... if Boise can't get any operating $ from the feds, and Nampa can get 50%, why not run such routes out of Nampa, rather than Boise? (In addition to a possible funding advantage, it's probably safe to assume those routes benefit Nampa/Caldwell residents, more than Boise residents.)

Posted by bikeboy on 09/04/2013 at 11:59 AM

The Tiger grant was almost a done deal. It looked really good, but if memory serves, the loud anti-public trans noises might have chilled the grant on the D.C. side. Our Washington delegation could have worked harder on this for us.

I totally agree that without a reliable local funding option, we will never get a decent bus/rail system in here.

Posted by Yossarian_22 on 09/04/2013 at 2:47 PM

As a daily bus commuter I have experienced buses so full that people had to stand in the aisles. Yes, here in Boise (6 Orchard). The few times per year "bikeboy" rides is hardly representative, many routes have great ridership. And as someone who works downtown I can tell you that there are many times during the day when the sidewalks are so clogged with people waiting for the next bus that we are certainly ready for a transit center. The sidewalk cafes will thank you, and the people trying to transfer from one bus on Main to another on Idaho will thank you, especially those with disabilities. Oh, and there is a police substation planned at the facility, so there will be no "hobo" issues.

Posted by no-car-nelly on 09/04/2013 at 2:56 PM

The most glaring hypocrisy of Idaho's Republican Dictators is lack of "Home Rule" for local governments, especially since the Republican's are forever bitching and moaning about "States Rights" and picking fights with the Federal Government. The Republican Legislature is absolutely adamant that the State's power not be delegated to the people over which they rule.

Posted by Micks on 09/07/2013 at 3:31 PM

Until we stop spending millions of dollars on improving the roads to give the illusion of easy commuting, we will not have good regional transportation. We should maintain roads as they are and divert much of the money into regional transportation. In addition using mass transit should be no-charge at point of use. To help ensure a future for our city, state and nation, we must stop using single occupancy cars for every trip we take within and between cities. This of course would take a complete re-thinking of how we experience getting from one place to another. Which I am sure would be opposed by a majority of people, even those that think they are green.

Funding could come from the same sources that they come from now, only not used in the way they are used now. Why can't Idaho and Boise for once take a lead on how we in America should live. I am tired of seeing report after report showing Idaho at or near the bottom in so many areas.

Posted by Mike Despot on 09/09/2013 at 5:12 PM

"how we in America should live." Sounds like a Despot talking. Streets Roads and highways are the most efficient and liberty inducing "Public Transportation". Individual auto-mobility permits the individual to go anywhere he/she wants at anytime of the day or night without Government Permission or Government bus schedules.

Posted by Micks on 09/09/2013 at 7:31 PM

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