
Start mass transit planning now

*Lawmakers right to focus on more urgent infrastructure needs, but they shouldn’t regard mass transit as an entirely separate issue*

If you read our recent series of articles on mass transit in the Treasure Valley, you probably saw what your local legislators had to say about the issue. In a nutshell, here’s a summary: “Right now we need to focus our transportation efforts on our roads and bridges, and then after we’ve addressed that, we can start to talk about mass transit.”

For starters, it’s good to hear our local legislators acknowledge the urgency with which our transportation infrastructure needs to be addressed. That’s a positive indication that we should expect something constructive to be accomplished at the Statehouse this winter.

However, we suggest it would be a mistake to view upkeep on our roads and bridges as a separate issue from mass transit that would include a robust busing system and, eventually, some form of rail transportation. We in the Treasure Valley should view them as two components of the same issue.

Why do we need to expand intersections that have become heavily congested? Why do we need to repair roads and bridges that have become worn down? Simply put: because there are a whole lot of cars out there using these intersections, roads and bridges.

So look at it this way — if we can reduce the number of individuals driving by getting more and more of those people to use mass transit, we won’t need to expand so many crowded roads and intersections by adding lanes and stoplights to them, and we won’t need to repair worn-down roads as often. You can see how these two issues are intertwined.

Right now the Treasure Valley is somewhere in the neighborhood of 600,000 people. We’re not suggesting that’s big enough to sustain a light rail system and that the Legislature should set aside hundreds of millions to start building one in the next few years. Our lawmakers are correct when they say that the urgent need today lies in our existing transportation infrastructure.

But our region’s population isn’t going to remain stagnant. Within the next three decades, that 600,000 is expected to increase to over a million. If we keep addressing our transportation situation as we have to this point, that’s going to nearly double the number of vehicles out there on the road.

Anyone excited about driving on Eagle Road at 5:30 p.m. on a weekday under that scenario? Anyone?

Idaho needs to start preparing for that population growth now. And we have to accept that a much more prominent mass transit system will have to be part of that plan. Here are the things we should do now as part of the initial phase:

- The Idaho Legislature needs to vote to allow cities to put a local-option tax up to voters. That gives you, the people in each community, an opportunity to decide whether you want to see your drive time
from Nampa to Boise to and from your job to go from 30 minutes to over an hour, or whether you’re willing to pay for a bus system with more times and more stops and, eventually, some form of rail transit.

- Lawmakers can approve a study of $10 million to $20 million that would design a 20-year implementation of a rail system — with the commitment to follow through on it. Again, they need to view this as a piece of the transportation pie, not as a separate pie.
- Businesses need to lobby like crazy for this issue to be taken seriously. It doesn’t do them any good to have their employees sitting on Interstate 84 in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Does mass transit cost money? You bet. Is it going to be self-sustaining? Of course not. But here’s a piece of breaking news — our current roads and bridges aren’t self-sustaining, either. It costs taxpayers money to fix them. Would you rather have all that money going to fix overcrowded roads, or would you rather disperse it more evenly among those roads and a mass transit system that will save you money on gas and vehicle wear and tear?

And a better mass transit system will increase economic activity, which broadens the tax base that helps sustain it.

Statistics, of course, can always be cherry-picked to make mass transit look outrageously expensive. But when the population base is large enough to support it, it works. Reno, Nevada, with a population comparable to the Treasure Valley, has a successful system and could serve as a good model.

Of course, no two communities are exactly alike, and Idaho has challenges some of the others don’t. Nonetheless, the need for a strong mass transit system is only going to increase, so we in the Treasure Valley need to be proactive and start planning now.