Bus or train? Downtown Boise circulator group close to suggestion

Mayor Bieter prefers a $111 million train option, but its cost and history are complications

Even if a stakeholder group agrees with Bieter, the City Council has to sign off and public support is needed

Bieter says federal money is essential

The latest proposed route for a potential new Downtown Boise transit system. Provided by city of Boise
His persistence unquestioned, Boise Mayor Dave Bieter is about to test his powers of persuasion.

In 2008, Bieter championed a plan for a rail-based system that would enhance public transportation in and around Downtown. He ran into widespread opposition from business leaders and, at best, a lukewarm response from the public. The streetcar plan went nowhere.

Eight years later, Bieter still isn’t hiding his preference for a rail-based Downtown transit system.

The question is how many people he can convince that he’s right — that the benefits of some kind of train circulator between Downtown and the Boise State University campus are worth $88 million more than a bus system.

Two years ago, Boise rebooted the circulator conversation, carefully avoiding endorsements of specific vehicle types and routes. In recent months, though, in conversations and public events, Bieter has restated his support for a train and hinted at ways the city might pay for it, perhaps with only minimal impact to taxpayers.

Meanwhile, a group of Downtown employers, government leaders, quasi-government leaders and others has been studying the topic. The group is expected to make a final recommendation next month on the best route and vehicle for a Downtown circulator system, said Mike Journee, Bieter’s spokesman.

The train would cost far more upfront — $111 million, compared to $23 million for new buses — and 50 percent more to operate, according to estimates put together with the help of an engineering consultant. But the same estimates predict the rail system would attract 300 more riders per day and induce long-term economic development worth close to $600 million.

An apples-to-apples comparison of the bus system’s economic development benefit was not available.
The path to building a train is much more difficult than convincing a few community leaders of its merit, though. The City Council and public have to agree.

After the stakeholders make their recommendation, the city will introduce it to the public through open houses and other engagement events. Sometime in late summer or early fall, Journee said, the council would consider it.

Then there’s the matter of paying for it. If a train is the city’s choice, Boise will need to come up with more money than it can realistically put away in savings under today’s conditions. Journee said the city will look at sources of money that include parking revenue, voluntary contributions from businesses and other large institutions close to the track, tax-increment financing — a technique commonly used by urban renewal agencies — and the establishment of local improvement districts.

Federal grants are essential, he said.

One grant would cover up to 70 percent of the new system’s cost. Even if the city won it, though, more than $33 million would remain unpaid. That’s almost four times the cost of the city’s new Bown Crossing library branch and enough to develop dozens of parks.

Journee said Bieter doesn’t believe money from local-option taxation — a small hike on the sales tax rate inside city boundaries — will be necessary to pay for the Downtown circulator.

However, Bieter would like a local-option tax to be available for a broader expansion of the transportation system throughout Boise and the rest of the Treasure Valley.

Since the Idaho Legislature has steadfastly refused to allow cities this option, Bieter has suggested an alternate route: making it a statewide ballot initiative.

If that measure passed, the city could then ask its own voters to raise their taxes for improvements to the transportation network.

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COMPARISON: WHAT DO PROJECTS IN BOISE COST?

General fund: $203 million

Rail-based Downtown circulator (estimate): $111 million

Bus-based Downtown circulator (estimate): $23 million

Main library branch renovation or replacement, three most recent options: $38 million to $50 million

Bown Crossing library branch: $8.63 million

Bond for firefighter training facility and four upgraded or relocated fire stations: $17 million