City transportation action plan declares streets are not just for car

By: Teya Vinu June 20, 2016

Boise’s Transportation Action Plan lays out a vision for mobility equality. Its authors believe people who want to walk, ride, or take public transit should have as much access to those options as they do to driving. Photo by Erika Sather-Smith.

Boise’s Transportation Action Plan lays out a street network with equal access for cars, bicycles, pedestrians and public transit.

Boise doesn’t own its streets, making it a rarity among American cities. They’re owned by the Ada County Highway District. The TAP works off transportation plans from regional transportation-oriented agencies such as ACHD to spell out the city’s vision for transportation.

“We don’t start over with the plan,” said Daren Fluke, the city’s comprehensive planning manager. “A lot of good work has been done. We are taking that and putting a razor focus on Boise. ACHD asked us, ‘What is your vision for transportation?’”

The Boise focus is on equity in mobility on streets, rather than moving motorized vehicles quickly.

“The takeaway to me is people deserve a choice in mobility,” Fluke said. “If you choose to ride a bike or walk or take public transit, you ought to have equal access the way cars do.”

The city posted the plan online in May and in the coming months will present its vision to the community in a variety of different ways.

To prepare the plan, the city tailored elements from ACHD’s Livable Streets Design Guide and Complete Streets Policy; Valley Regional Transit’s Valleyconnect; Communities in Motion 2040 from the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho; and the city’s Blueprint Boise comprehensive plan.

The plan recognized mobility priorities for four distinct “place types:” downtown, mixed-use corridors, compact neighborhoods and suburban neighborhoods.

“We did recognize that different place types are not all homogenous,” Fluke said.

For downtown, the focus is on being able to get around by parking only once, a concept that could also apply at Boise Towne Square, he added.
“The key component is you have to have other ways of getting around downtown,” Fluke said. “(The proposed) bike lanes on Idaho and Main is one. This is about building a bike system for the eight to 80 demographic. That’s why we’re so interested in the protected bike lane. Parking protected is the gold standard.”

Parking protected is when the bike lane is between the curb and parked cars. Bike lanes are pertinent across the city, and ACHD has installed some 280 miles of bike lanes across the county.

“We need a connected system. We have a bifurcated system,” said Karen Gallagher, a city transportation planner. “It’s the connection of the system that is still piecemeal. (Adding sidewalks and bike lanes on) Emerald and Americana is really helpful. That will connect to downtown and the Central Bench. It’s an important corridor to Meridian and southwest (south of I-84, west of Cole). ACHD is working with us to create a more connected system.”

Fluke added, “Everybody in Boise should live near a low-stress bike network.”

In suburban Boise, some neighborhoods immediately adjacent to shopping centers lack sidewalks or bike lanes.

“My mother-in-law and father-in-law live within a half mile of Cole and Fairview with WinCo and Albertsons,” said Mike Journee, spokesman for Boise Mayor David Bieter. “They would not feel comfortable getting on a bike or walking.”

Gallagher illustrated how people living north of Interstate 84 have “problem accessing” all the commercial activity a half mile to the south at Five Mile and Overland without a car. The plan calls for sidewalk improvements within a quarter mile and bike lanes within 1 mile of activity centers, and bike lanes on all arterial roads within a half mile of schools. Public transit is another pillar of the transportation action plan. The city of Boise supplies about half the budget, $6.5 million, for Valley Regional Transit, Journee said.

“If a bus runs only once an hour, is it a real option?” Journee said. “If it stops running at 6 p.m., is it a real option?”

The plan prescribes designating three “best-in-class” bus routes and improving frequency, hours of operation, bus stops and other factors on those routes. Often times, bike lanes or public transit are talked about independently. The transportation action plan seeks to coordinate all modes of transportation.

“A shift of thinking is to not talk about those things in silos but as a system,” Journee said. “These are things that will make our city more livable.”

The plan acknowledges limited funding.
“We want to prioritize projects a little differently,” Gallagher said. “We’re not looking for a bigger piece of pie, just a bigger say in how the pie is cut.”