Downtown Boise transit options coming into focus

A proposed route is emerging

Stakeholders studying the proposal haven’t decided whether a bus or train would be better

The bus would cost less, but would bring less economic benefit, according to a consultant

A proposed route is the closest thing to a recommendation to come out of a series of stakeholder meetings on revamping Downtown Boise’s public transportation system.

To be clear, the stakeholders — Downtown employers, government leaders, quasi-government leaders, etc. — aren’t recommending the route yet. But in five meetings over the past two years, something resembling a consensus has bubbled to the surface.

The proposed route is a T-shape circuit that runs north-south between the Boise State University’s main campus and Main Street. The east-west branch runs along Main and Idaho streets between 15th Street and Broadway Avenue. A tail route on University Drive extends from Capitol Boulevard to the BSU Student Union Building.

The stakeholders who are studying this system — termed the "Downtown circulator" — will meet at least one more time in the next couple months, said Jim Pardy, a Boise Public Works Department staffer who’s overseeing the circulator process for the city. The goal is to reach an agreement on a final recommendation.

First, they need to decide whether a new transit system is in Downtown’s best interests. If so, they will recommend a preferred route and whether the vehicle that travels the route should a bus or a train.

Each mode has tradeoffs. The train would cost far more upfront — $111 million, compared to $23 million for new buses — and 50 percent more to operate yearly, according to estimates put together with the help of an engineering consultant. But those same estimates predict the rail system would attract 300 more riders per day and induce much greater economic development.
The city will introduce the stakeholders’ recommendation to the public, Pardy said, through open houses and other engagement events. After that, the plan would be taken to the City Council for approval.

The city is far from deciding the nuts and bolts of a new Downtown transit system, such as how to pay for it, if that’s what the stakeholders recommend.

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