Planners look at walking, biking options on Chinden Blvd.

By: Teya Vitu May 13, 2016 Comments Off

Lori Porreca, Tom Laws, Garden City’s Jenah Thornborrow and Mark Wasdahl spoke about the bike/pedestrian challenges on Chinden Boulevard at the Idaho Walk Bike Summit. Photo by Teya Vitu.

High-speed Chinden Boulevard is not the place for walkers or bikers. Sidewalks and crosswalks are rare, and bike lanes nonexistent.

But a team of federal, state and local transportation and planning officials have spent the past year assessing Chinden and proposing a handful of projects to start improving the state highway for pedestrians and bicyclists.

The on-the-ground assessment of Chinden Boulevard was the subject of a breakout session May 12 at the first Idaho Walk Bike Summit. About 100 people attended the summit at the Boise Centre.

There are four projects in planning stages: Adding a walkway to the Chinden portion of Lady Bird Park to match a walkway on Glenwood; building sidewalks from 50th Street to Kent Lane and from 42nd to 50th streets; and adding a pedestrian crossing at 43rd Street, said Tom Laws, bicycle and pedestrian coordinator at Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho.

The assessment, led by the Federal Highway Administration’s Idaho Division, included other recommendations for the road through Garden City, such as narrowing traffic lanes, adding bike lanes, and installing many more pedestrian street crossing and sidewalks. But COMPASS is focusing on the first set in the hopes of finding funding for them in coming months, Laws said.

Then it comes down to the Idaho Transportation Department to schedule the work. If funding is secured, that could happen in the next one to five years, ITD senior planner Mark Wasdahl said.
A bike lane in downtown Boise. Planners and transportation policymakers got together this week to talk about making Chinden Blvd. safer for bicyclists and pedestrians. Photo by Erika Sather-Smith.

Laws anticipates the sidewalks will be built in bits and pieces.
ITD will mill off the top layer of asphalt and repave Chinden this summer from I-184 to nearly Eagle Road, but bike lanes or changed lane widths will not be part of the restriping, Wasdahl said.

Bike lanes for Chinden are a much more nebulous matter.
"There are differing opinions," said Lori Porreca, FHWA’s Idaho Division community planner. "There isn’t consensus. Some folks think there should be bike lanes on Chinden. Other people think (bikes) should be accommodated on the surrounding street network. How that ends up is what is ITD’s vision and what is Garden City’s vision.”

ITD, which has jurisdiction of Chinden, also known as U.S. 20/26, isn’t warm to the idea of bike lanes. Wasdahl said bicyclists rarely use Chinden and when they do, they use the sidewalk.

The Chinden bike and pedestrian assessment grew out of the National Bike and Pedestrian Safety initiative, which asked each state to pick one corridor for an on-the-ground assessment by walk, bike and vehicular teams. Chinden was selected from 15 Idaho road corridors under consideration because it’s not well-suited now to biking or walking.

“IT was a great example of a lot of problems,” said Porreca, who noted there are few sidewalks between I-184 and Glenwood. At several intersections, crosswalks, sidewalks and pedestrian push buttons are not well-aligned.

“In development, you think in terms of a quarter mile (for crosswalks). In terms of crossing the street, we’re talking even less,” Porreca said.

Porreca and Wasdahl both noted people would rather walk on the asphalt next to the sidewalk rather than the side that comes right to the curb on Chinden from I-184 to 36th Street.

“It was very loud with fast-moving cars,” Porreca said. “People felt unsafe on the sidewalk.”

Porreca said the on-the-ground assessment of Chinden helped transportation and planning officials think of alternatives to driving.

“It brought these jurisdictions together,” Porreca said. “They don’t always communicate in a way to address these issues. It brought more attention to the project.”

Porreca said the problems on Chinden are common barriers for bicyclists and pedestrians in many cities.