

A champion for Treasure Valley transit is ready to roll

February 10, 2017

As we pored over [Cynthia Sewell's comprehensive report Sunday on the state of Treasure Valley public transportation](#), we realized how long our community has been spinning its wheels.

We want to see progress on a transit system for the future. But the main headline on the Statesman's front page story — “Boise's population booms, but people aren't getting on the bus” — summed up the situation and concluded with a familiar refrain: There are too few routes and service hours because there is too little money to expand either.

Those of us with bicycles, vehicles and gas money know we can get almost anywhere around Boise today in 10 to 20 minutes, and we know that charting a bus trip to these same destinations using present resources might take three to four times longer — that's if the buses even went where we wanted to go, and if we were traveling inside the hours of 6 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. weekdays (with a few later exceptions).

But that's not the point. The point is we are going to continue to grow as a region — population estimates go as high as 1.2 million people in the Treasure Valley over the next 20 to 25 years. Unless we get our public transportation act and systemwide infrastructure together, we're going to be overtaken by gridlock and other assorted problems — all of which we have a chance to prepare for today.

The sobering conversation among our editorial board members was not without moments of optimism. Sewell's piece documented the successes in Spokane, Wash., and Eugene, Ore., similar-sized cities where citizens and elected officials

have ponied up to make their transit systems workable and affordable. Successful systems either have access to generous amounts of state transportation funds or they use some form of local option tax to pay their way.

Idaho ranks last among 45 states that receive state support — at 19 cents per capita. By comparison, Washington spends \$7.50 and Oregon \$8.23. So it's easy to come to the conclusion that the Treasure Valley transit dreams need more money. What's harder is figuring out how, and who, could begin to champion some of the baby steps and larger, long-lasting moves to get us where we believe we need to go.

After we reached out to stakeholders, we were pleased to learn such a person with transit and local government experience exists, a person willing to step on the gas and commit to getting something done.

Elaine Clegg — the past chair of the Valley Regional Transit (VRT) board of directors and current president of the Boise City Council — is ready to roll. She made it a point during her VRT tenure to study what it would take to create “a reliable, 15-16 hours per day/7-day a week bus system with 15-minute frequencies on premium corridors and service across the valley.”

Kudos to Clegg. She has yet to nail down the funding methodology for the estimated \$15 million to make it happen, and she fully understands the uphill nature of her challenge to secure buy-in. But she shares the details in [a Guest Opinion she authored](#) for us that appears on Page 4C today, and as a related story for our online editions.

Of course, there are miles and miles to go before these ideas routinely rumble out of our brand-new Downtown Boise transit station — not to mention convincing people to get on board and ride. And along the way, we need to know the money we are already spending is being used wisely by VRT before we commit to more.

But we would all be wise to get behind Clegg and any efforts to plan our public transportation options. There's not likely to be any rail, light rail or other transit pipe dreams until we first establish the beachhead of an efficient, reliable bus system.