

## Boise struggles with limited public transit options

By: Teya Vitu February 10, 2017 1 Comment



Kelli Badesheim, executive director of Valley Regional Transit, speaks with attendees at an open house about proposed service changes in March 2016. Photo by Patrick Sweeney.

Back in the 1920s, you could get from Boise to Caldwell without a car or a horse, and without owning any sort of conveyance. All you had to do was board the Boise & Interurban Railway, which ran a loop that passed through Eagle, Star and Middleton, Caldwell and Nampa and then returned to Boise via through Meridian.

The public transit high-water point in the Treasure Valley ended in 1928, when the Interurban was scuttled – as were rail transit systems around the country in the same time frame.

Boise has never come close to catching back up.

“One of the most telling things about our system map is more what’s not there than what is there,” said Kelly Badesheim, executive director of Valley Regional Transit, the Treasure Valley’s bus service. “We are the largest city with the least public transit.”

Valley Regional Transit has 17 local bus routes in Boise and Garden City, five local routes in Nampa, and five intercounty routes linking Ada and Canyon counties, though no local routes serve Meridian because the city chooses not to pay for local service. VRT has a Nampa-Caldwell dial-a-ride Route 57 and ACCESS paratransit service.

This story is part of an eight-part series on public transportation that Idaho Business Review is running in print and online this winter.

VRT also provides community-based options using a fleet of vans: dial-a-ride in Meridian (operated by VRT), non-profits that provide services to veterans, faith-based transit, senior centers in Kuna, Eagle, Star, Meridian.

“Our biggest growth is community based transportation: ACHD Commuteride, CWI shuttle serve, BSU owns its shuttle service,” Badesheim said.

The bus routes themselves are largely baffling, in no way decipherable without a map. If the routes don’t turn away potential riders, the fact that buses stop running before 7 p.m. rules out a large segment of the service sector that works later into the evening.

“We see it as a good mode of transportation if it is convenient,” said Chase Erkins, a real estate agent at Lee & Associates. “It is more economical. I’d want to ride a bus because I don’t have to park.”

VRT’s ValleyRide bus system has 1.3 million riders a year.

“Other regions our size have 4 to 7 million,” Badesheim said.



Reno had 8 million transit trips in 2015, Eugene 10 million trips, Spokane 11 million trips, according to an Transit Ridership Report by the American Public Transportation Association, a Washington, D.C., organization focused on advancing public transportation through advocacy, innovation and information sharing.

The Urban Land Institute Idaho, which provides leadership in the responsible use of land, decries the minimal presence of public transit in the Treasure Valley and across Idaho

"We don't have a robust public transportation system," said Kent Hanway, chairman of ULI's Idaho chapter. "We are very car centric in this state, and the legislative processes that have been in place for a number of years keep that car-centric view. The gas tax supports the highways for cars, trucks and buses."

Badesheim faces the limited funding on a daily basis.

"Without some sort of dedicated funding, we are going to continue putting our efforts into filling gaps instead of building a more robust regional transit system you see in other regions our size," Badesheim said.

Much improved public transit would be a priceless offering for the Interfaith Sanctuary, the 164-bed Boise emergency shelter for homeless individuals and families, said Jodi Peterson, its co-director.

"Our guests leave our shelter at 7 a.m.," Peterson said. "They have to get to a job, get a child to school, get themselves to school. Every single day our guests have to get somewhere. Without public transit, the only place they can get is where they can get by foot. If they are unable to get to any of these places, they can't do what they need to do. They are stuck."

Peterson's words don't just apply to the homeless. The same message impacts the 15 percent of the Treasure Valley population that falls below the poverty line, and, essentially, directly relates to up to one-third of residents – if not more, said Deanna Watson, executive director of the Boise City/Ada County Authority.

The Valley Regional Transit bus schedules, mostly ending by 7 p.m. and not operating Sunday, let alone the routing, don't coordinate well for people with night and weekend jobs.

"So many jobs are at minimum wage or just over the minimum," Watson said. "A lot walk or try to get a ride with someone or ride a bike."

Other than the intercountry routes, ValleyRide bus routes stop at Five Mile Road/Cloverdale Road.

"With the funding constraints, we are filling the gaps," Badesheim said. "The major gap is most of the suburban areas. In Boise, the span of hours and frequency of service are very limited. Rural counties have nearly nothing."

*Idaho Business Review staff writer Teya Vitu has ridden on at least 14 streetcar systems and at least 16 subway systems across the U.S., Canada and Europe.*

## ABOUT TEYA VITU

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Teya Vitu is an Idaho Business Review reporter, covering commercial real estate, construction, transportation and whatever else may intrigue him in the moment. Join me on Twitter at @IBR\_TeyaVitu.

## ONE COMMENT

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Jordan Morales

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I drive several minutes from Columbia Village to Lucky 13 in Harris Ranch to catch the closest bus into downtown Boise. It's odd to have to do that drive, to say the least.