

Survey: Treasure Valley residents would like to see more public transit options

By: [Teya Vitu](#) February 17, 2017



A Valley Regional Transit bus drops off passengers in downtown Boise. Photo by Pete Grady.

The Treasure Valley, like nearly all western cities, is designed entirely for automotive transport. Public officials who would like to build substantial, rider-convenient public transit in Idaho face a daunting obstacle: there is no dedicated funding for public transit. Other cities have separate transportation authorities operating and funding transit systems through dedicated local option tax funding – most often in the form of sales tax – or dedicated transit funding through city transportation departments. Yet a survey last year shows that Treasure Valley residents would like to see more public transportation options, and would use them.

“Very often there is a sales tax on the local or state level that provides revenue to public transportation,” said Virginia Miller, spokeswoman for the American Public Transportation Association. “There are other taxes that can be used to fund public transportation, but the sales tax is the most common tax.”



Main Street Station opened in 2016 in downtown Boise. Photo by Pete Grady.

Mayors across the Treasure Valley and the Comprehensive Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, the region's metropolitan planning agency, see the local option tax that many communities use for transit as an ideal funding source for Treasure Valley public transit enhancements.

The sprawl of metro areas in the Treasure Valley is relatively compact. Driving back and forth countless times, Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho employees determined the drive time from downtown Boise to Garrity Boulevard is 18 minutes during the day and only 23 minutes when the Flying Wye clogs up during rush hour.

Given the alternative, most commuters don't have a reason to wait for 10, 20, 30 minutes for a bus to arrive, let alone sit through the stops it makes along the way. Two-thirds of people called in a Treasure Valley Policy Survey said they commute less than 20 minutes to work.

"Compared to Phoenix, Denver, Seattle, the commute isn't that bad," said Matt Stoll, COMPASS's executive director.

In comparison, Boise's brief daily sessions of clogged traffic doesn't add up favorably for public transit. And Stoll isn't thinking about today's math. He's calculating the 2040 commute, when 1 million people are expected to be living in the Treasure Valley.



Matt Stoll

"Currently from Caldwell to downtown Boise, on average, the commute time is about 34 minutes," Stoll said. "By year 2040, we're projecting it will be about a 70-minute commute."

Public transit across America, not just Idaho, is a curious beast. Relatively few people ride it – just half in public transit powerhouse New York City – yet buses and trains are key components in vibrant cities. Nationally, 5.1 percent of the population commutes to work with public transit, according to the Census Bureau's American Community Survey.

Yet "public transit is a part of the urban fabric," said Kâren Sander, an associate at Cushman & Wakefield Pacific, a Boise commercial real estate firm, and former executive director of the Downtown Boise Association. "Vibrant cities have efficient public transit systems, moving people to work, live and play, taking people to and from the urban heart."

Art Guzzetti recalled the drive toward car dependency in the 20th century.

"It didn't work well," said Guzzetti, vice president of policy at American Public Transportation Association, a Washington, D.C., organization focused on advancing public transportation. "It led to sprawling communities that had no soul. When you build communities like that, you have to use a gallon of gas to buy milk."

Even a public transit darling like Portland has 71 percent driving a car and just 12 percent on buses, MAX trains or the streetcar. Only 6.1 percent in that city bicycled to work – and Portland by far had the highest percentage among the 50 largest cities in 2014, according to ACS statistics.

New York City leads the nation with its public transit use; 54 percent of commuters use public transit followed by 37 percent in Washington, D.C. and 32 percent in San Francisco.

“The Census in 2009 said almost half the population don’t have access to public transit,” said Virginia Miller, APTA spokeswoman. “It’s all about having access. It’s all about habit. You don’t start a new habit until you have a reason to start a new habit.”

For example, public transit ridership surged in 2008 as fuel prices hit record levels.

Yet Treasure Valley residents apparently look favorably upon better public transit. At least that’s the finding of a September 2016 [Treasure Valley Policy](#) survey done by Boise State University’s School of Public Service.

Overall, two-thirds of the 1,000 respondents, whether in Ada County or Canyon County, whether young or old, whether Democrat, Republican or neither, agreed that the Treasure Valley could use more mass transit options.

Meridian and Caldwell had the highest proportion of people saying there is not enough public transit. Democrats tallied at 79 percent not enough, Republicans at 60 percent and independents at 64 percent, according to survey results.

Survey respondents echo the mayors along Interstate 84 who all want commuter rail to the western suburbs. Democratic respondents favored rail transit at 77 percent, Republicans at 59 percent.

Using a local option sales tax to build a commuter rail line fell along party lines. Democrats favored the local option tax at 76 percent while Republicans opposed the tax 50-41.

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.