

Treasure Valley leaders face off on the future of public transit

By: Teya Vitu February 3, 2017 0



Buses can be far and few between across the Treasure Valley. Photo by Pete Grady.

The population of the Treasure Valley is expected to grow from 640,000 to 1 million by 2040, and by who knows how much more in the decades beyond that.

Many public officials agree that the roads and parking aren't adequate to handle them; road expansion, increased bus service, or even light rail will be required to get people where they need to go. But they don't agree on how or when to create a system capable of moving hundreds of

thousands of people.

The deck is not stacked hugely in the Boise region's favor when it comes to public transit, experts say. For one thing, there is no dedicated funding mechanism in place or even on a distant horizon to build a transit system for the future.

For another, rural Idaho has little appetite for public transit needs in the Treasure Valley, and even legislators across the state's most populous corridor don't all sympathize with expenditures for public transit, said state Sen. Chuck Winder, a Boise Republican.

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

Beyond all that, Boise does not have a vibrant public transit culture as other western cities have started to develop.

And even if a billion dollars were to drop onto Boise's lap tomorrow, transit projects built across the country over the last few decades show that least 10, if not 20 or more years will pass before anybody can ride the system.

In the meantime, any available real estate has been gobbled up in droves over the past 20 years, and whatever is left is getting claimed by developers. Future transit could revolve around the remaining rights-of-way, necessarily linear rights-of-way.



"When you face a million people, if we wait until 2040, we probably wait another 20 years to get the system you want," said Matt Stoll, executive director of COMPASS, the metropolitan planning agency for Treasure Valley. Stoll especially has bus rapid transit in mind for State Street if the funding became available. "We're crippling ourselves if we don't preserve a right-of-way. Right of way will cost twice as much (in the future)."

The Urban Land Institute Idaho has a keen interest in using public rights-of-way for means of transportation without a car, said Kent Hanway, chairman

of ULI's Idaho chapter.

"There's a lot of work being done to talk about what that looks like, and trying to make it less auto-centric," Hanway said. "That's a hard discussion to have in Idaho."

Not all that long ago, government transportation departments focused on cars and trucks, period. Bicyclists and pedestrians were viewed with contempt, mere distractions that got in the way of moving motorized vehicles as quickly as possible.

These days, public transportation, pedestrians and bicyclists are embraced by road agencies. The Idaho Transportation Department has a Bicycle Pedestrian Advisory Committee overseen by a senior ITD transportation

planner.

Idaho Transportation Department, master of freeways and state highways, oversees federal dollars for public transit in rural areas.

The Ada County Highway District, as implied by its name, is charged with building and maintaining nearly all the local streets. Yet ACHD has its 40-year-old Commuteride program with 800 commuters riding vans to and from neighboring counties. ACHD has also built some 280 miles of bicycle lanes and it, too, has a Bicycle Advisory Committee.

From 2008 to 2010, Boise Mayor David Bieter pushed for a downtown circulator in the form of a streetcar. The streetcar idea never gained traction but has never gone totally away either.

“While the need for a downtown circulator is easily understood, the question remains for many as to whether the circulator should take the form of a streetcar” was the 2010 summation of the Boise Streetcar Task Force in its feasibility study.

The Idaho Business Review in a number of articles will explore public transit as it stands today, the future needs and challenges, and how public transit fits into modern society across the country.

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.

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