

In search of a painless parking solution

By: Teya Vitu January 24, 2017 0



A No Parking sign in downtown Boise. Photo by Patrick Sweeney.

People drive to downtown Boise to work, one to a car. They park. They always have. They always will.

Or will they?

Sitting at a table seeking alternatives to the single-occupied vehicles streaming into downtown are Valley Regional Transit, the Capital City Development Corp., the city of Boise, the Downtown Boise Association, Boise State University, the Ada County Highway District Commuteride program, Greater Boise Auditorium District, St. Luke's Health System and

Boise Young Professionals.

They call themselves the Transportation Demand Challenge Committee, the challenge being to find ways for people to work downtown without having to park downtown. And tailor solutions based on what could appeal to commuters, said

Kelli Badesheim, VRT's executive director.

"What's missing?" Badesheim said. "What we found out for a lot of people downtown is they are not necessarily 8 to 5 workers. What our solution needs to be is a 24/7 solution."



Kelli Badesheim

The committee over the past half year has interviewed 30 downtown businesses asking such things as number of employees, where they live, is there an interest in alternative parking solutions and, if so, what kind of service.

"Our situation is, our community is heavily single-occupied-vehicle-oriented," said Max Clark, CCDC's parking and facilities director. "We need to provide commuters options other than driving by themselves. What they are is what we are wrestling with."

About 35,000 people work downtown and there are a combined 17,500 parking spaces with CCDC garages, private garages, surface parking lots and parking meters.

Downtown trends heavily toward more people working downtown with 300 more Simplot employees coming downtown, four new hotels on the way, City Center Plaza just completed and another 150,000-square-foot office building anticipated, and dozens of surface parking lots and other undeveloped land ripe for development.

CCDC garages accounts for only 2,567 spaces but these are in downtown's central core and most readily available for public use. Private parking purveyors often follow the CCDC lead, Clark said.

"We think they are about 80 percent occupied," Clark said about all downtown parking. "85 percent is considered full in the profession."

That is because many parking passes are infrequently used but they count as a filled space. CCDC has 1,965 monthly passes issued for 1,673 spaces allocated for monthly spaces but only 65 percent of spaces for monthly parking are typically used during peak hours.

SQUARE FEET

This winter, Idaho Business Review publishes its sixth edition of Square Feet, a quarterly magazine dedicated to commercial and residential design, construction and real estate. The January issue focuses on workspace design and construction. This story also appears in the print edition of Square Feet, included with the January 20 edition of the Idaho Business Review.

So far, the challenge committee is gravitating toward three initial solutions:

- park and ride lots with shuttles to the downtown core
- car sharing
- preferential parking for car pools

One alternative commuter option already in place since January 2016 is ACHD Commuteride's MyCommuterCrew online ride share website. The more than 1,500 commuters who have signed up can enter their departure and arrival points and times and the site churns out all the carpool, cycling, walking and transit partners, vanpool routes and transit routes available for a specific member entry, said Maureen Gresham, Commuteride's manager.

MyCommuterCrew through October logged more than 77,000 smart trips, defined as members using alternative forms of transportation. These added up to 597,000 smart miles, Gresham said.

November alone had 38,000 smart miles by participants. Gresham's goal is to increase MyCommuterCrew's user base to 10,000 people in coming years.

Clark and the challenge committee, meanwhile, are determining if there is enough public interest in a park and ride program with shuttle service, estimated to cost \$1.4 million to \$1.6 million for the first year to acquire and operate vans and lot improvements.

The idea is to have parking at the fringes of downtown. The College of Western Idaho property or neighboring property at Main Street and Whitewater Park Boulevard is one site under consideration as is Elder Street near Boise Airport off Vista Avenue, Clark said.

"Let's think outside the box. Let's find five churches that aren't use their parking lots during the day. There's all the underutilized space."

Badesheim is also thinking outside the box on how to get people from the park and ride lots to the Main Street Station bus station.

"We are exploring mobility on demand to support park and ride," Badesheim said. "There are certain times of day where a shuttle bus is not efficient (mid mornings, mid afternoons). We could recruit taxi cabs. We could use technology and applications to coordinate service."

Shuttles, however, would likely be the anchor, possibly operated by Boise State, which already has shuttle service from the university to downtown. Clark said more shuttles would be added and operate more frequently.

Clark is targeting a summer start date. He estimates a potential monthly fee of \$30 or \$40 for park and ride and a shuttle ride. This could entail a wait if a shuttle isn't immediately at the lot or downtown stops.



Max Clark

"For a bank teller, sous chef or retail worker, is 20 minutes and \$40 a month a decent trade-off for \$150 a month?" Clark ponders.

About 40 part-time Boise Centre employees have scrambled for parking since the Parcel B dirt parking lot two blocks from the convention center shut down at the end of September.

"They are parking in lots as far as six-seven blocks away or street park (beyond the parking meters)," said Pat Rice, executive director of the Boise Centre and Greater Boise Auditorium District. "Some are taking the bus. Some are carpooling. A lot are riding bikes."

Rediscovered Books co-owner Bruce Delaney touches on Badesheim's mention of 24-hour service and the many who don't work 8-to-5.



A parking garage in downtown Boise. The Capital City Development Corp., which owns the city's parking garages, is looking for creative ways to reduce the city's parking needs and avoid building more parking garages. File photo.

"It will have to run 6 a.m. to 2 a.m. or 3 a.m.," Delaney said. "As long as a shuttle runs every 10-15 minutes, that should work. In general, my employees would be for it."

Boise Centre and Rediscovered Books partially subsidize parking for some employees.

"We subsidize our employee parking significantly," Delaney said. "Some choose to ride a bike and keep the money. It is a cost of doing business. We want the best employees."

Boise Centre subsidizes 65 percent of the cost for 42 spaces in the Hotel 43 garage for its 38 full-time employees, Rice said.

CenturyLink does not pay for employee parking in downtown Boise, said Jim Schmit, vice president of operations for Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

"We did an internal survey on parking several months ago to see where employees were parking and what they were paying, and a lot were parking in surface lots, and some of those have been grabbed up (by development)," Schmit said. "Some of them park farther away on the street. Our employees are pretty creative in finding places to park and minimizing their cost."

In January or February, Clark expected to have three leased vehicles available in CCDC garages for car sharing.

"Say you ride your bike to work and you have to go to Meridian," Clark said. "We're trying to eliminate the hurdles people have about trying something different."

Clark also wants to work a carpool incentive into the waiting lists for monthly passes at CCDC garages. In spring, he wants to institute a carpool preference for carpools that have registered and been verified by ACHD Commuteride.

"You go to the top of the waitlist," Clark said.

Why not just build more parking garages? Gardner Company is building a 644-space garage as part of its Pioneer Crossing development between Myrtle and Front streets but that garage is only possible with a \$5.4 million subsidy from CCDC, which is buying 250 spaces for public use.

Parking garages typically cost \$20,000 to \$40,000 per space to build. Plus, garages just enable more cars to come to a downtown that has limited road access.

Rafanelli & Nahas, the Boise-based real estate development firm that owns Boise Plaza (former Boise Cascade building) and Key Bank building, built an eight-level, 951-space garage in 2009 for Boise Plaza and future development on neighboring lots.

"It doesn't make sense to not build a garage," said Scott Schoenherr, a Rafanelli & Nahas partner. "For us it's important. It's how we get our buildings rented. For our tenants, it's important because they know they will have parking."

Rafanelli & Nahas overbuilt its garage in anticipation of building on the neighboring lots it owns, such as the property on which the Hyatt Place hotel is currently under construction. Schoenherr said "a couple hundred" people who don't work at Boise Plaza rent spaces in the garage.

"Our philosophy is the same for all our buildings," he said. "We want to control our own parking. We think it's critical to do that."

ABOUT TEYA VITU



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