Finding a transportation solution we can all support

By: Matt Stoll August 21, 2020

At the Aug. 4, 2020, Idaho Business Review Breakfast Series forum, “Idaho on the Move...Transportation Trends,” Boise State University’s Idaho Policy Institute shared the results of an update to a 2011 study, “Modernizing Transportation Funding in Idaho.”

Working with a group of stakeholders, including COMPASS, IPI researched and documented Idaho’s transportation needs and funding projections.

Its conclusion? The State of Idaho is short approximately $242 million per year, just to meet maintenance and preservation needs for Idaho’s roads, bridges and public transportation system.

This figure is actually very similar to COMPASS’ estimated shortfall of $250 million per year for Ada and Canyon Counties. While the figures are similar, and certainly reach the same conclusion of a significant transportation funding shortfall, they reflect different needs and geographies.

COMPASS’ calculated shortfall is only for Ada and Canyon Counties, while IPI’s includes the entire state. At the same time, IPI’s figure only covers maintenance and preservation needs, while COMPASS’ figure includes maintenance/preservation as well as expansion to accommodate growth.

So, while the parameters are somewhat different, the bottom line is the same: We have a big problem that is getting bigger every day.

Costs will only increase as we kick the can down the proverbial road. In addition to inflation driving up costs, so does the nature of the need. It is much less expensive to maintain our transportation system today than to fix it later. If we don’t keep up with maintenance, we will incur much higher repair costs in the future.

The underlying message of the IPI study is that Idaho must raise new revenue to preserve its transportation network. COMPASS agrees.

The question is, “how?”
While it did not make any specific recommendations, IPI summarized some potential methods to increase revenue, including modifying the fuel tax and/or registration fees, implementing vehicle mile travelled fees or local option taxes, and more.

However, in a state with a strong “anti-tax” sentiment, coupled with the current COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on our economy, this is a tough sell. In a recent COMPASS survey, when asked about support for different policies that support transportation improvements, comments again and again expressed the same sentiment: “no more taxes.”

Yet, in the same survey people also told us in no uncertain terms that they were frustrated that our transportation system was not keeping up with needs and “something” needed to be done to remedy that.

So, while there seems to be agreement that our transportation system is deficient and “something” needs to be done to fix it, there is not agreement on what to do or how to pay for it.

In the COMPASS survey, we received many suggestions of how transportation needs could be paid for — from greater use of impact fees, to better managing government budgets, to relying on private industry to provide transportation solutions. However, while these may be pieces of the puzzle, they are not going to solve a $242 or $250 million per year deficit.

How do we get off the proverbial dime and craft a solution before things get worse?

My suggestion is that we talk, and even more important, we listen. Forums such as Idaho Business Review’s Breakfast Series are a good start. We need to have an open, honest discussion about the pros and cons of all options — from doing nothing, to increasing taxes, to everything in between. We also need to do a better job of sharing information about how transportation is funded and how taxes are collected and distributed, so everyone can start on the same page.

We need to have those conversations with decision-makers — especially our legislators — and with people from all walks of life. Transportation and how we pay for it affect us all, from our quality of life to the money in our wallets.

Let’s come together to develop a long-term solution that supports the valley, the state and everyone who lives here.

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