Four agencies, one project: How to build an overpass at Linder Road

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MERIDIAN — In 2018, the city of Meridian’s transportation priorities list, which it sends to the Ada County Highway District annually, showed as its 20th priority an overpass at Linder Road over Interstate 84.

Just a year later, the overpass moved up to fifth on the transportation priorities list.

The Linder Road overpass moved up again this year and is now the second-highest priorities on Meridian's draft list, which is being finalized this spring. The project has been earmarked as a top priority for the Mayor's Office, a recognition bestowed on just three of Meridian’s top 20 projects.

“The Linder Road overpass is something that is definitely needed here in our community,” Meridian Mayor Robert Simison said in January. “Having it would help take car trips off of Ten Mile and Meridian Road.”

Transportation was the most-discussed issue during Meridian's mayoral race last fall. Simison said he would work with county and state transportation agencies to make needed improvements to Meridian's roads. That cooperation will be necessary for an overpass at Linder Road, which could alleviate daily trips on Meridian's increasingly congested interchanges.

Simison said the overpass is an “aspirational” priority, as opposed to a funded priority — such as widening Chinden Boulevard, which is underway. The Linder Road overpass will remain on the city’s wish list to ACHD until it’s completed, he said.

What’s standing in the way?
“What it comes down to (is) having the dollars that are needed to fund these transportation priorities,” Simison said.

**GROWTH**

As the Linder overpass shoots up Meridian’s wish list, the area around Linder Road and Interstate 84, and more broadly south Meridian, is seeing significant growth.

According to the 2018 Development Monitoring Report from the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS), the most recent report, building permits issued in south Meridian numbered 421 for single-family homes, the highest annual rate since the pre-recession boom of 2005, and 336 for multifamily units, the highest annual rate in south Meridian since 2001 — the first year data was tracked for the report.

The area just north and south of I-84 between Ten Mile and Meridian roads saw one of the highest densities of new residential units per square mile — more than 200 units — in the Treasure Valley in 2018, the report says.

Zoom in even closer. Along Linder Road between Franklin and Overland roads, 138 housing units were permitted in 2019, according to more recent COMPASS data, from its building permit tracker.

Farther south along Linder Road, local developer Allen Lee Centers has a few projects that will bring 870 residential units between Linder and Meridian roads, just south of Victory Road. Some homes have already been built, and hundreds more are in the planning stages.

Without the overpass at Linder Road, those residents will have to use one of two interchanges, at Meridian or Ten Mile, to visit, say, the future Costco Wholesale or WinCo Foods planned along Chinden Boulevard, or to church or a restaurant or anywhere else in north Meridian. Or they can try their luck with the Eagle interchange, which wouldn't be wise if they're in a hurry.

A new overpass provides another option, which lessens the burden on interchanges.

"When you don't have the ability to cross a major feature like a bridge, or the river, or I-84, it really consolidates traffic into the options that are there," said Ryan Head, planning supervisor for ACHD. “Opening (Linder) up, it would provide increased access north and
south without having to push over to Meridian or Ten Mile, which are interchanges, so they're already naturally busier."

And they're only getting busier.

In 2018 the Ten Mile interchange saw about 18,500 daily users, and the Meridian interchange saw 16,000, according to the Idaho Transportation Department’s Average Annual Daily Traffic tool.

In 2040, those numbers could jump to 34,400 and 84,900, respectively, according to ITD estimates from a preliminary analysis of Idaho Highway 69/South Meridian Road between Overland Road and the city of Kuna.

That analysis also studied how traffic on the interchanges might be reduced if an overpass were built at Linder Road. The result: Ten Mile interchange could see 4,300 fewer daily trips, or a 12.5% reduction, and Meridian interchange could see 8,200 fewer trips, a reduction of 9.7%.

The Linder overpass, which is being discussed as just an overpass and not an interchange, could have nearly 30,000 daily trips by 2040, the analysis found.

"As a Meridian resident, I think it's a great idea," said Matt Stoll, executive director of COMPASS, the metropolitan planning organization for Ada and Canyon counties. "From a planning standpoint, we need to have more overpasses on the interstate to help alleviate the existing interchanges."

When getting on the interchanges, it doesn't take long to realize "they're starting to get congested," Stoll said.

At Ten Mile in particular that congestion soon may increase, when a new Amazon fulfillment center opens in Nampa, Stoll said. The 650,000-square-foot facility on the corner of Franklin and Star roads, set to open in late 2020, is expected to generate nearly 7,000 vehicle trips per day during the peak season, around the holidays.

"Amazon trucks are either going to go onto the Ten Mile interchange or the Garrity interchange," he said. "Garrity interchange is already a challenging one."
FUNDING

No funding has been allocated nor has any agency committed to funding the Linder overpass, which COMPASS estimates would cost $20 million.

Making the project a reality, rather than an aspiration, will require cooperation from three regional and state transportation agencies along with the city of Meridian.

ITD would build the overpass itself, ACHD would extend and widen Linder Road leading up to the overpass and COMPASS would seek out a federal grant to ease the cost burden. The city's role is to request the project be completed. Cities don't receive any transportation dollars from the state, but a project of this size may require the Meridian to chip in some cash, as well, to get the project started.

In 2007, Meridian contributed $1 million of city funds to build an I-84 overpass at Locust Grove. Simison, who said while campaigning for mayor last fall that he would use city funds for transportation projects, told the Idaho Press a similar commitment could be made to the Linder overpass.

As for the other transportation agencies, they say they're working on it.

For its part, COMPASS is working on packaging multiple I-84 overpass projects together for a competitive federal grant, specifically the BUILD (Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development) Grant. The grant would provide funding for multiple overpass projects at once.

"The challenge is, if you're going to go after federal funds, you have to do the environmental work on it," Stoll said, referring to environmental studies required for federally funded projects. "So it's just a question, from a city of Meridian standpoint, whether they want to wait for that."

ACHD has included the overpass in its five-year work plan between 2021 and 2025, but it hasn't given the overpass a design date. Head, ACHD's planning supervisor, said the overpass is included in the plan "for discussion purposes with the state (ITD)."
"So, if we have it in our plan, it kind of shows our interest," he said. "And then we go meet with the state every year to talk about, 'What is the likelihood of them being able to move it forward on their side?'"

ITD declined an interview request but offered the following statement via email:

“ITD is working with the City of Meridian and ACHD as they develop the project to build a bridge over I-84 to connect Linder Road.”

Transportation projects such as the Linder overpass can make a career for a Meridian mayor. During a farewell event in December, four-term Meridian Mayor Tammy de Weerd and other city officials pointed to the Ten Mile Interchange and Locust Grove overpass as key accomplishments during her 16 years in office. Meridian residents will closely watch the new administration to see whether it can make similar strides on transportation.

Simison told the Idaho Press that Meridian is a safe community, with a "high quality of life." Without having to worry about those issues, "naturally people default to one of the next biggest issues in Meridian, and that is transportation right now," Simison said.

Transportation will be a "high priority," Simison said, and he hopes his administration, along with the city council, transportation agencies and the development community, can work together "to find solutions to get more transportation improvements in Meridian, sooner rather than later."