BOISE — The agency responsible for long-range transportation planning for the Treasure Valley is asking the Legislature to repeal a 2009 law that says high-occupancy vehicle lanes, a tool to deal with traffic congestion, are only allowed in Idaho counties with 25,000 or fewer residents.

The current law says only those low-population counties that also contain a resort city can designate such lanes.

“The goals are a reduction in travel time and a reduction in congestion,” said Ken Burgess, lobbyist for the Community Planning Association of Southwestern Idaho, or COMPASS.
The lanes are also commonly called carpool lanes, Burgess said. They’re reserved for motorcycles and vehicles with two more people, including the driver, during designated times, according to state code.

“There are areas of our state in which traffic congestion is increasing, and it’s expected to worsen over the next few years,” Burgess said. “Those areas are not in counties of 25,000 population and less.”

He noted the “silliness” of only allowing a traffic-congestion tool to be used in sparsely populated areas.

Matt Stoll, executive director of COMPASS, told the Senate Transportation Committee on Thursday that the agency is working on an update of its 20-year long-term transportation plan for Ada and Canyon counties. The two counties have a combined population of about 723,000; by 2040, projections show it rising to 1,075,000.

Sen. Van Burtenshaw, R-Terreton, asked why HOV lanes weren’t included in the current project that’s been adding lanes to the I-84 corridor in Ada and Canyon counties.

“It was specifically excluded because it’s illegal at this time,” Stoll said.

He added, “If state law prohibits it, they’re not going to do it.”

Lane Triplett, government relations officer for the Idaho Coalition for Motorcycle Safety, said his coalition supports HOV lanes as “a safety thing for us.”

“They reduce the chance of rear-end collisions and heavy traffic, and keep traffic moving,” Triplett said.

Austin Walkins of the Idaho Conservation League also spoke in support of COMPASS’ bill, SB 1312. He said air pollution is increasing faster than growth in the Treasure Valley, largely because of drivers stalled in heavy traffic, and the region is “on the cusp” of violating national standards for ozone pollution.

“This region is growing,” Walkins said. “We need to figure out a way to more effectively and more efficiently move people, in order to prevent this region from violating those national ambient air quality standards for ozone.”

Sen. Patti Anne Lodge, R-Huston, who is co-sponsoring the bill with Rep. Rob Mason, D-Boise, said, “I became interested in this because I’ve been in 8-mile or more tie-ups on Interstate 84 getting here in the morning. And if you want to go home anywhere between 3 and 7 o’clock, it takes many hours and lots of stops.”
Lodge noted, “We’re going to be having a lot more trucks coming in because of the big Amazon facility that’s going in to Nampa. ... That gives us more reasons to consider the options that we have in traffic.”

She said her daughter lives in Virginia Beach, where there’s lots of traffic, but “they have the HOV lanes and the reverse-traffic lanes in order to move traffic there. I have not been in a traffic jam in the hours I’ve been there, but I’ve sure been in a lot of traffic jams on I-84.”

The committee voted to send SB 1312 to the full Senate, where it’ll go to the amending order for a “friendly” amendment, a clarification requested by the Ada County Highway District. Two committee members, Sens. Jim Rice, R-Caldwell, and Lori Den Hartog, R-Meridian, voted “no.”

Rice said he opposed the way the bill simply removed the wording restricting the population, and would prefer that COMPASS would have to do its studies and then come back to the Legislature for approval before actually designating any HOV lanes. Under state law, those are designated by the Idaho Transportation Department.

COMPASS officials said they can’t even study use of the lanes — the first step — as state law makes them illegal.

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