More cars, more problems: Leaders look for solutions to the transportation crunch

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Lights, traffic and another long commute.

As the Treasure Valley continues growing and the housing crunch continues to push people farther away from their jobs, forcing longer and longer commutes, municipal governments and private citizens need long-term transportation solutions. But all the potential solutions require two things in short supply — time and money.

Even solutions such as bicycle and pedestrian trails next to railroad tracks, which have been successful in Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint, are struggling to gain traction.

In 2015, Meridian began looking at a rail with trail project that would connect Nampa, Meridian and Boise via the Union Pacific railroad. The trail would have been paved and located inside the railroad corridor in order to avoid land use issues, but Union Pacific declined the trail due to safety concerns.

Kristen South, Union Pacific's senior director of corporate communications and media relations, said the railroad company has concerns about the safety of cyclist and pedestrians in the railroad's right of way.

"Normally we want to protect our right of way, and safety is what we're going to be concerned about," South said.

South said Union Pacific has not heard from anyone in the Treasure Valley since they made their decision.

"It has been a number of years since we have been approached about this project, and at that time we never had a formal proposal," South said about the rails with trail project.

The struggle to work out more creative solutions is part of the greater issue the Treasure Valley faces, which is how to do the big ticket items that will ease congestion and offer more public transportation options for everyone.

Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS) has been looking at other, more classic plans for both mass and single-person transportation options in the Treasure Valley for a long time. From a rapid bus transit system to light or commuter rail, potential fixes to the snowballing transportation issues are being discussed. But their viability is the real problem.

Another possible, partial solution, high-occupancy vehicle lanes, which are used in many urban areas in the West isn't even being considered for the Treasure Valley because state law forbids them.

As the Idaho Press reported Feb. 27, a 2009 state law says that high-occupancy vehicle lanes are only allowed in 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 big ticket items are difficult to get moving due to cost and time, and even creative solutions are running into roadblocks.

"We don't have a dedicated funding mechanism for public transportation," said Matt Stoll, COMPASS's executive director.
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Idaho is one of two states in the nation without a dedicated funding stream for public transportation, with Mississippi being the other. And because of how much control the Idaho Legislature exerts over taxing authority in the Treasure Valley, there is little to no opportunity for the local governments who make up much of COMPASS’s membership to gather the funds necessary for new transportation projects.

That lack of funding ability means the biggest obstacle to any rail or trail project is a $250 million per year funding deficit for transportation projects. That $250 million-a-year deficit doesn’t include five currently unfunded projects that include more bus lines, bus rapid transit, a quadrupling of bus routes and a commuter rail. The combined cost of those projects would run the valley just over $1.7 billion.

All totaled COMPASS’ member communities are staring down the barrel of a big problem — money and a lack of it.

One of the most common solutions proposed to cut traffic is a light or commuter rail similar to Denver’s rail system or Amtrak in the northeast. But either of those projects will cost hundreds of millions of dollars, a COMPASS report from 2018 states.

“Ideally, down the road, would it be nice to have some sort of light rail or bus rapid transit system or a commuter rail system? Absolutely,” Stoll said. “But as I like to say, you’ve got to learn to crawl before you try to run the marathon.”

According to Liisa Itkonen, the principal planner for COMPASS, it takes 14 years to get a large-scale public transportation system fully operational, so unless funding is identified soon, those public transportation options are going to be left in the dust.

Northbound traffic remains backed up along Eagle Road south of Fairview Avenue in Meridian, even as lights are green, Tuesday, June 25, 2019.

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