New Ada County freeway was supposed to handle growth. Growth is here. The freeway isn’t

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AUGUST 13, 2020 04:00 AM

Standing on a ridge above Star, Mike Moyle looks out over a patchwork of farms and subdivisions, most of which have gone up in the last five years.

Cutting between them, in the distance, is a 2.5-mile stretch of road, the only completed part of a project that he has long advocated: lengthening and converting Idaho Highway 16, once a sleepy country highway, into a four-lane, limited-access freeway extending 20 miles from Emmett south to Interstate 84 between McDermott and Star roads.

“That whole area is going to get built up, so if you don’t build it now, you’re never going to build it,” said Moyle, the longtime Republican state representative and majority leader of the Idaho House — and a farmer with land along Highway 16.

State highway officials and local legislators have envisioned, and planned for, the expressway since the early 2000s. They anticipated that this agricultural area of North Ada County would urbanize. Now, the growth has arrived, but except for the 2.5 miles opened in 2014, the highway expansion has not.

What’s more: The very growth that the highway was meant to help accommodate could impede its construction. As cities like Star, Meridian and Eagle approve new development along the corridor, and as property values rise, the state has found itself in a race to secure the right-of-way for the road before developers get there first.

Some local officials once skeptical of the project are now feeling pressure to complete it — but the state doesn’t have the money for it. And the Ada County Highway District may not get around to making the road improvements to serve the new highway for years, because of its own funding constraints.

Rumors have swirled for years that Moyle wants the project because he stands to benefit from selling land his family owns to developers. Moyle says that isn’t so.

This is the how expectations of growth and dreams of prosperity led to a highway expansion — and how critics, competing priorities and limited resources led to its quandary.

A FUNDING PRIORITY FOR BUSINESS LEADERS

Since Boise began growing rapidly in the 1960s, most of the Treasure Valley’s need for high-volume traffic routes has been from east to west. I-84, built in the ‘60s and widened in the 2000s, and the I-84 Connector have carried most of the burden.

In the 1990s, to provide some better north-south access, the state expanded Eagle Road. Development quickly followed, crowding the road. Meanwhile, new subdivisions edged westward, and the need for another north-south connection there began to grow.
But money was scarce, and other highway improvements were even more pressing. Local officials east of the proposed Highway 16 route protested it, because they wanted other roads widened first, such as State Highway 44 and Chinden Boulevard. The traffic on Chinden near Eagle Road had reached 22,000 cars a day by 2011. Traffic like that wasn’t expected on the Highway 16 corridor for several years.

“Highway 16 was one of those projects that needed to get done eventually, but I never understood how it got the priority it did,” said Tammy de Weerd, Meridian’s mayor from 2004 to 2019, in a phone interview. She first wanted to see an I-84 at Linder Road, improvements on Eagle Road and above all, widening of Chinden Boulevard.

“We needed Chinden functioning far more than having a first phase of Highway 16 that dead-ended at Chinden and dumped even more cars on an already over-capacity roadway,” she said.

And yet, it was Highway 16 that a group of business leaders in Emmett, Eagle and Star, along with real estate development interests and some civic leaders, backed. In 2011, with growth still stalled after the Great Recession, they formed a group called the Central Valley Expressway Coalition. It dubbed Highway 16 “a bridge to recovery.”

“It was a huge attraction to businesses that were looking at the area,” said Mary May, who then served as chair of the coalition, and was the head of the Eagle Chamber of Commerce and community relations manager for the developer M3 Cos.

At the time, M3 was working with the Dallas Police and Fire Pension System to build Spring Valley, a 7,000-house master-planned community on 6,000 acres that it had gotten Eagle to annex in 2007. Having a new, adjacent highway would have benefited their subdivision.

The coalition set out persuade the Legislature to fund the highway. Members supported a bill proposed in 2013 by lobbyist Jeremy Pisca — who represented M3, the Idaho Association of Realtors, and the Idaho Building Contractors Association — that would use 30 years’ worth of anticipated future sales tax money to pay for the road.

The bill failed, but the Idaho Transportation Department won authorization to spend $140 million to build the first phase of Highway 16 — enough to finish the 2.5-mile stretch between State and Chinden, which included a new bridge over the Boise River. The project ended up costing $111 million.

In August 2014, the Central Valley Expressway Coalition hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new road segment and bridge. On a podium, Moyle and May, along with the mayors of Eagle and Star, joined Gov. Butch Otter to celebrate the opening. De Weerd and Boise Mayor David Bieter didn’t go.

**MOYLE FAMILY MAY STAND TO GAIN**

The highway would benefit landowners in North Ada by opening up development possibilities there. Some people began to notice one major landowner who stood to gain: Moyle.

Moyle says he’s not benefiting from Highway 16, despite rumors he says Democrats have spread for years.
Moyle, his company Republic Storage of Star, and his parents collectively own 183 acres at the northwest corner of Highway 16 and State Street, the 2.5-mile segment’s northern terminus. Of those, Moyle owns 15 acres and Republic Storage owns 30., which Moyle said he does not plan to develop further.

His parents, Joseph and Lynn Moyle, own the remaining 138 acres, including a gravel pit, a small man-made lake and some farmland.

In 2019, the Star City Council annexed 38 of the elder Moyle’s acres and rezoned them as mixed use, opening them to development. Moyle said his parents may develop the land eventually, but he is not involved in those decisions.

“My name is not on that deed. That’s not my ground,” Moyle said. Some parcels are owned by his father, Joseph Moyle, and others are owned by a living trust in the names of Joseph and Lynn Moyle.

“I don’t even know if I’m a beneficiary of the trust,” Moyle said. He said his parents will not have access onto Highway 16, and any access to their land via State Street will be a from a right-in, right-out turn, which Moyle says “devalues” the land.

“It was not to my father’s advantage to have Highway 16 happen,” Moyle said. “But it was to my constituents in Star, and it was to my constituents in Eagle, and it was to my constituents in Meridian, and it was to my friends in Emmett.”

NO FUNDS TO FINISH THE ROAD

As houses go up, commercial development is also adding pressure for the highway expansion. Amazon is building a new distribution center near I-84 and the planned Highway 16. The center is expected to generate 7,000 vehicle trips a day.

In 2018, the Idaho Transportation Board approved $90 million to be spent on right-of-way for the 7.5 mile stretch from Chinden south to I-84. The right-of-way money was freed up after the federal government awarded Idaho a grant to expand I-84, which allowed ITD to shift other I-84 money to Highway 16.

In May, the board approved an additional $20 million for right-of-way. Still, that $110 million allocated so far may not be enough to acquire all the land needed for the corridor, which ITD spokesman Jake Melder said is expected to cost $125 million.

Growth has already affected the planned route, which parallels McDermott Road near the border of Ada and Canyon counties. The route had to be altered after Meridian approved the West Ada School District’s plan to build a new Owyhee High School within the corridor.

The land could become too expensive to acquire if houses get too close as well. The farm north of Moyle’s house, for example, has increased in value to $7,761 an acre from from $4,108 in 2010, according to the Ada County property assessor.
Development is encroaching. In the last five years, Star has added nearly 1,400 houses. Even more growth is on the horizon: Some of the Treasure Valley’s biggest developers, as well as several investors from out of state, have snatched up hundreds of acres of farmland along the corridor.

Even with the $90 million that the Idaho Transportation Board authorized in 2018 buy right of way, it could take another two decades for the Highway 16 extension to be completed. When it is done, the state will have spent an estimated $450 million on the road from I-84 to State Street since 2014.

But ITD can’t rely on another grant to construct the rest of the road, says Matt Stoll, executive director of COMPASS, the Treasure Valley’s regional planning agency.

And there is still no money for the 13 miles of Highway 16 from State Street north to Emmett. That is more fantasy than plan at this point. Gov. Dirk Kempthorne proposed it in 2005 in a big highway-development plan he dubbed Connecting Idaho. But the Legislature hasn’t funded it, and 15 years later, no money is being spent even for right-of-way acquisition.

When the state does have the money to build more roads, Highway 16 won’t be first. ITD follows the recommendations of COMPASS, which has prioritized other widening projects ahead of it, including I-84 west of Franklin Boulevard, Highway 44 west of Highway 16, Chinden between Middleton and Star roads, and Highway 55 from Pride Lane to Middleton Road.

Says COMPASS’s Stoll: “Our investments in infrastructure in this Valley and in this state are very reactive. We put in the infrastructure after the growth occurs. We’ve been talking about Highway 16 for years. The reality is we should have built that as a region sooner. But the problem is that we’re still building infrastructure that should have been built back in the ‘90s.”

GREENFIELD HIGHWAY DEVELOPMENT

When Ada County Highway District Commissioner Kent Goldthorpe looks at ITD’s plans, he starts to get worried.

Even though ACHD isn’t paying for Highway 16, it will have to pay to widen and maintain the local roads feeding it, such as Ustick and Franklin roads. And while Highway 16 would mostly benefit commuters from Star, Eagle and Emmett, all Ada County taxpayers will have to shoulder those costs.

This year, when the ACHD revised its capital improvement plan, the district proposed widening Ustick to five lanes between Star and Linder Roads. Just four years ago, ACHD had planned for that road segment to remain two lanes. But growth along the Highway 16 corridor, plus the arrival of the new Owyhee High School, has added a pressure for more vehicle capacity.

“For now that they think Highway 16 is coming, some people think ACHD is obligated to put in all the infrastructure next to Ustick,” said Goldthorpe, who represents the areas of Boise, Meridian and Kuna east of Cole Road and south of I-84. “They want us to immediately screw all the other cities where we’ve planned to spend on infrastructure and dump it all into something that benefits only Canyon and Gem County.”

The ACHD Commission — where Mary May, the former Central Valley Expressway Coalition leader, is now president — is set to adopt the plan on Aug. 19. But Goldthorpe may seek to change it. He doesn’t
want to see ACHD make improvements near undeveloped land until it can address the existing needs in Meridian and Boise.

“We have at least $250 to $500 million worth of projects in our CIP east of Ten Mile that are absolutely essential that they get done as soon as we have the money for it,” he said.

Moyle, for his part, is excited about ACHD’s road-widening plans.

“They’ve gone a great job of getting Ustick to expanding close to where 16 will go through,” he said.

**GROWTH IN STAR, EAGLE**

On a recent Thursday morning, Moyle drove in his red pickup truck through the two-lane roads of Star. He pointed at farm after farm and named the developer who had bought each one.

North of his land, Toll Brothers just got a 469-house subdivision approved. Just to the west, American Homes 4 Rent is building single-family rentals. To the southeast, M3 Cos. is building 268 houses.

Moyle pointed out a few farms whose land he leases. Their owners have told him he’ll have to leave. They want to sell. Moyle expects that within four years, there won’t be any land left for him to farm, except perhaps his own.

Star Mayor Trevor Chadwick expects commercial development to follow.

“When Highway 16 connects from Chinden to the interstate, that’s going to change the whole dynamics of this corridor, because it’s going to make it a major north-south route,” Chadwick said.

Where miles of farmland once separated the Treasure Valley’s towns, growth in Northwest Meridian is pushing the city’s boundaries out to Star’s. Star’s population has doubled to 11,860 in the last decade and will likely double again by 2040.

Chadwick expects State Street and Floating Feather Road, which will connect to Highway 16 with interchanges, to become major commercial corridors. Already Albertsons and a Ridley’s are building grocery stores along State Street near the highway.

“Highway 16 just enhances growth,” he said.

Meanwhile, up in Emmett, John Evans, a real estate agent, said the highway has “opened up” Gem County. More subdivisions are going up in Emmett than he has ever seen.

“They know that traffic is going to be coming out a lot faster now this way,” he said. “A lot of our buyers are coming in from Eagle, Star, Caldwell and Boise, because it’s sprawling over there.”

As more people move in from out of state, that demand is only going to increase the urgency for the rest of Highway 16 to be built, said Bill Rauer, executive director of the Building Contractors Association of Southwestern Idaho.

“People aren’t waiting for those roads,” Rauer said. “People are coming whether we do this or not.”