Little action is expected from the present legislative session, but Idaho's decisions now could shape the future of the state.

Xavier Ward

In his State of the State Address, Gov. Brad Little promised roughly $100 million to go to Idaho's roads, fixing the infrastructure the state has in place. However, the state, and by extension the Boise area, has a major shortage when it comes to transportation spending.

“We have extreme needs—we have $235 million per year shortfall in the necessary infrastructure... Roadways, public transportation and bike-ped facilities that need to be built before the time we have roughly 1.02 million people in Ada and Canyon counties by the year 2040,” said Matt Stoll, director of...
the Meridian-based transportation planning organization COMPASS.

Little's suggestion that the state allocate $100 million toward roads is, for many, a step in the direction of addressing Idaho's needs, and it's not new money, either. None of the money spent would come out of the general fund; rather, it's all federal or previously dedicated funds, according to the Idaho Press.

“In a growing state, we must move people and products as safely and efficiently as possible,” Little said in his address.

In Stoll's mind, the money Idaho dedicates to transportation now will drastically affect the future of the Treasure Valley. Without proper infrastructure, Idaho could lose out on major economic opportunities, he said.

“We need to do improvements to the roadway system, but we need to be moving toward a more viable public transportation system so the folks who aren’t able to drive or don’t have access to a car have other modes of transportation,” Stoll said.

Idaho's public transportation is stuck in a negative feedback loop. Idaho is one of two states that doesn't have a dedicated funding source for transit. Instead, the local transit authority, Valley Regional Transit, has to request funds from cities across the city, which can pay as much—or as little—as local leaders decide. The other state that doesn’t have a dedicated funding source is Mississippi.

“What we've seen with other regions that haven’t addressed the issues earlier, what ends up happening is increased congestion. The population gets extremely frustrated, there could be in some situations lost opportunities of employers coming into the area,” he said.

Whether the state decides to dedicate a funding source is entirely up to the legislature. Presently the state allows for resort areas to use a local option sales tax, a voter-selected tax that goes toward a specific purpose. However, if a county's population exceeds 30,000, it cannot use the local option tax. Legislators have proposed similar bills in the past, but it has never been approved.

“I'm starting to hear some rumblings from a legislative standpoint about this growth paying for itself. ... There may be some transportation revenue increases that may be discussed, whether things actually get passed or not, I'm not sure,” he said.

In the past, legislators considering expanding local option taxes have gotten hung up on raising taxes. Gary Collins, the chair of the House Revenue and Taxation Committee, previously said he's not opposed to a local option tax for Idaho, but he hasn't yet seen a bill that's a good fit. He said he'd like to see a two-thirds supermajority requirement for the tax to pass.

“We don't think it's too high of a hurdle to meet if you're going to be raising everyone's taxes,” he told the Idaho Press.
One of the issues facing people trying to convince lawmakers of the need for updated statewide infrastructure is the numbers used are out of date, Stoll said. COMPASS uses region-specific data from its 2018 long-range plan, which showed the Treasure Valley shortfall; however, the statewide numbers were last updated in 2011. That will change this year, as the Idaho Policy Institute at Boise State University is putting together a new report that factors in some new items and takes an analytical look at the state's biggest transportation needs. The institute also publishes the yearly Treasure Valley Survey.

“The last report, the one that was released in 2011, was very comprehensive in terms of roads and bridges, the physical infrastructure itself,” said Vanessa Fry, research director at the IPI. “We're broadening it just a little bit to include bike and pedestrian infrastructure.”

The upcoming report will look at the needs of the entire state, not just the Treasure Valley. Fry said there will be regional information, too, but focusing on specific cities is not part of this study.

“We're trying to look at both [state and local needs], but know that it's going to be hard to drill down into the specific needs of a locality,” she said.

In terms of transit, the report will likely not focus heavily on public transportation. While Fry said there does appear to be a consumer desire for updated public transit, it's hard to adequately state the need.

“There is some indication the people in the valley see a need for more comprehensive public transportation in the valley. ... The need may be undervalued if we're just looking at money coming in,” she said.

Idaho's current decisions on infrastructure and transit could drastically affect its future

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