Traffic on the Greenbelt more than doubled in some spots during Idaho’s stay-home order

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JULY 07, 2020 04:00 AM

Traffic on the Greenbelt surged across the Treasure Valley during Idaho’s coronavirus-related stay-home order earlier this year, more than doubling in some spots, according to traffic count data.

Data collected by the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or COMPASS, showed the trail through the Treasure Valley was more popular than ever when compared with traffic numbers since 2015, when the association first installed several permanent traffic counters along the path.

“Those counters are actually installed in the ground and they’re measuring data 24/7/365,” Braden Cervetti, assistant planner for COMPASS, said in a video interview.

There are 13 devices permanently located along paths in Boise, Eagle, Nampa, Caldwell and Kuna. (The official Boise Greenbelt covers 25 miles within Boise city limits, but the path has been extended through the metro area.) The traffic counters are spread out from the Eckert Road bridge in Boise to the east and ending at Caldwell’s Whittenberger Park to the west. According to Cervetti, the counters can differentiate direction of travel, as well as tell the difference between cyclists and pedestrians.

And while Cervetti said Greenbelt usage has been gradually trending upward in the five years since the counters were installed, COMPASS noted an unprecedented spike in traffic during the state stay-home order (which began March 25 and ended as Idaho entered Stage 1 in May). Overall, usage between March and May increased by 14.1% over the previous year (from 717,070 users in 2019 to 818,130 in 2020). Each pedestrian or cyclist who passes the counter is considered a user.

WHICH GREENBELT SPOTS SAW BIGGEST SPIKE IN USAGE DURING STAY-HOME ORDER?

Several spots on the pathway saw significant growth in user numbers this spring. In April, which had the biggest overall uptick with 19.5% user growth, two Nampa counters recorded the biggest jump in usage. Traffic on the Wilson and Stoddard pathways southwest of Nampa more than doubled from last April (160% increase and 155.9% increase, respectively), followed by the Eagle portion of the Greenbelt and the Eckert Road bridge (142.1% increase and 127.7% increase, respectively).

But two traffic counters recorded notably lower usage: at Friendship Bridge in Boise and Indian Creek Bridge in Caldwell.
COMPASS officials said they noticed some trends in the traffic flows. Cervetti said the Friendship Bridge, which connects Julia Davis Park to Boise State University, began to suffer when the university moved all its courses online. The Indian Creek area, which is home to restaurants, shopping and entertainment, saw a decline when many businesses closed.

“We could sort of infer that, ‘Wow, that (Friendship Bridge) portion of the trail is being specifically used for commuting or for students who are getting to class,’ ” Cervetti said. “Where other portions of the Greenbelt, we’re seeing decent volume increases, particularly between the hours of 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. where traditionally folks who would be at work … maybe they’re taking some time to, instead of walk to the water cooler, they’re taking a walk or a bike ride on the Greenbelt.”

Cervetti said traffic is starting to return to what could be considered a normal year-over-year volume increase, but even an unusually rainy June didn’t affect numbers as much as officials expected.

“One thing active transportation planners recognize across the board is that exterior forces really do influence whether or not people are going to get outside, so if it’s raining, usually folks aren’t going to be going for a leisurely stroll,” he said. “But even though there was so much rain last month, there was still a decent increase in trail usage.”

**WHAT WILL FUTURE LOOK LIKE FOR GREENBELT AS COVID-19 OUTBREAKS CONTINUE?**

In recent weeks, the number of new diagnosed cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, has again started to grow in Idaho, and in Ada and Canyon counties specifically, sparking concern over whether some regions could be walked back to earlier phases of reopening.

COMPASS spokeswoman Amy Luft said it’s too soon to tell if nationwide stay-home and work-from-home trends will continue, but they’ll likely continue to impact Greenbelt trends as long as they’re in place.

“I think the jury’s still out (as to) whether we’re in a place where we might see some changes, either numbers or time of day, and kind of recreational usage versus commuter usage on the Greenbelt,” Luft said.

Increased traffic on the Greenbelt can be a detractor for some, Cervetti added, particularly as people look to distance themselves from one another during the pandemic.

“There are so many different types of users on the Greenbelt,” Cervetti said. “Folks are exercising, folks are socializing, folks are commuting.

“And one individual that I was talking to (at a committee meeting) really sees the Greenbelt as a resource for commuting,” he continued. “But when there are so many users fighting for one resource, they almost begin to compete with one another. So in April with vehicular traffic
volume being so low on shared roadways and the Greenbelt traffic being so high, (some individuals told me), ‘I’m not going onto the Greenbelt,’ onto a piece of infrastructure that’s, by and large, very safe because they felt more safe being on a shared roadway.”