BOISE — Getting around the Treasure Valley isn't as easy as it used to be.

Congestion on the roads of all sizes has spiked, commutes are getting longer, and parking spots in downtown Boise are becoming scarcer by the month. With a regional population north of 1 million expected by 2050, the clock is running out before the region's growth outpaces the government's ability to adequately prepare for all of the new people on the roads.

Local officials and residents alike are looking for a broad range of solutions to ease the growing pain of getting from place to place.

Large cities such as Denver, Austin, Texas, and Phoenix are often choked with traffic as car commuters try to get in and out of the city center to their homes in the sprawling suburbs. As Boise, Nampa, Caldwell and the surrounding cities attract more residents and neighborhoods continue to spring up on what was once farmland, transportation planners are sounding the alarm that if the region's public transportation system does not evolve so people can get from place to place without driving in their car alone, the Treasure Valley could follow in those congested cities' wakes.

“A lot of the challenges that larger urbanized areas have had with inadequate transportation networks or lack of preparation for the growth they have experienced, we haven't hit that threshold yet,” said Matthew Stoll, Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho executive director. “There's still time for us to get more prepared and better prepared than those other metropolitan areas, but that window is narrowing.”

In the last decade, the population of Ada and Canyon counties grew by 131,000 people, or the same size as the current populations of the cities of Nampa and Eagle combined. This is roughly equivalent of 1.5 people being added to the area's population per hour, or 36 per day, according to COMPASS. The agency's 2019 population estimate for both counties is 712,000 people.

This problem is especially acute in downtown Boise, where more than 40,000 workers flood into the city every weekday and there are only around 18,000 parking spaces. There isn't enough road capacity or parking spaces for all of the downtown workers to drive into the urban core in a car alone, but Boise's Deputy Director of Comprehensive Planning Daren Fluke said this demand on the transportation system will eventually spread farther to other areas.
“With increasing population, there's increasing pressure on the roadways, and what we know for sure is we can't build our way out of automobile congestion,” he said. “We simply can't build roads big enough to accommodate every person to drive their own car to work themselves every day.”

By 2040, there will be an estimated 190,200 trips per weekday on westbound I-84 and another 44,500 trips on State Street. Another 200,000 new vehicle trips per day will be added to the city of Boise by the same year.

Transportation projects of all kinds are squeezed by a lack of funding in Idaho, but finding ways to pay for public transit infrastructure to give commuters another option instead of driving is even more complicated. Idaho and Mississippi are the only states in the country without a dedicated state funding source for public transit, but Idaho is even further constrained because there is no local option taxing authority for city and county residents to approve sales tax bumps for projects like transportation.

Valley Regional Transit runs buses and other specialty transportation services between Ada and Canyon counties, as well as local routes around the major cities of Boise, Meridian, Nampa and Caldwell. But without a local option tax or revenue coming in from the state, the system is heavily reliant on property taxes from the cities it serves. Boise currently shoulders 87% of the agency’s budget, with Nampa paying roughly 4% coming in second.

The question of how to pay for upgrades to the regional transportation network, both for public transportation or road projects to expand capacity for more cars, is at the top of Treasure Valley transportation officials’ minds. Stoll said not solving the problem could have ramifications for economic development for Idaho down the line.

“As we continue to move up the list of top 100 metro areas, we are venturing into territory where if you want to compete economically, you need to have a viable transportation system the workforce can utilize that is an attractant of business considering the Boise/Nampa area as opposed to someplace like Salt Lake City,” he said.

With more people packing themselves into the Treasure Valley, Fluke said a change in how we think about getting around is necessary.

“In America, but in the West in particular, it's a really auto-based culture and we've never had good public transportation,” Fluke said. “Large segments of the population know no other way of life other than everybody goes everywhere they need to go by single occupancy automobile. My hope for the city of Boise is we start to see a change in the culture where people embrace the fact that we can't build our way out of congestion and we start to look for alternatives to the automobile.”
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-Daren Fluke, city of Boise