What is COMPASS?

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MERIDIAN — The Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or COMPASS, does not own public buses or build roads. It is not responsible for constructing a bridge in Nampa or filling potholes on Boise roads or widening Interstate 84 to ease congestion.

What does COMPASS do, then, and why is it important to the Treasure Valley’s transportation network?

COMPASS is responsible for ensuring those aforementioned transportation improvements are strategically planned and funded.

On one level of a two-story office building in downtown Meridian, a staff of about two dozen planners and other experts work to ensure transportation funding — primarily from federal grants — is spent on projects in Ada and Canyon counties that will benefit the entire region.

“We do the long-range transportation plan for the two counties, basically looking out over the next 20, 25 years,” said Matt Stoll, executive director of COMPASS. “What are the needs of the transportation system, as the two counties continue to grow, to ensure that there’s not a negative impact on the economy or promotion of the economy?”

COMPASS is a metropolitan planning organization, or MPO. All U.S. urbanized areas with populations exceeding 50,000 must have an MPO if local or state agencies spend federal money on transportation improvements. Other Idaho MPOs include the Bonneville Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Bannock Transportation Planning Organization in eastern Idaho as well as the Lewis Clark Valley MPO in northern Idaho. There are about 400 MPOs across the country, Stoll said.

“The federal government wants (MPOs) to ensure that there’s proper coordination between the local units of government and the state transportation department on the transportation system improvements that are going on,” Stoll said. “It’s particularly challenging for a region that’s growing, and we have limited funds available to us.”

COMPASS’ $3.8 million annual budget primarily comes from federal grants (63%), but about a quarter of funding comes from member agencies, which pay annual dues. COMPASS does not fund transportation projects directly but employs experts who help COMPASS member agencies plan for projects and secure funding assistance from the federal government.

COMPASS member agencies include the majority of cities in Ada and Canyon counties as well as Ada County Highway District, Canyon Highway District, Golden Gate Highway District and a variety of special members such as Boise State University, Idaho Transportation Department and Valley Regional Transit.

Representatives from member agencies sit on the COMPASS board of directors, which guides the direction of COMPASS’ operations.

Day-to-day operations include seeking out federal grants on behalf of its members — such as a $90.24 million grant for I-84 improvements, the largest competitive grant the state of Idaho has won for transportation — and developing a long-range transportation plan for the region, better known as Communities in Motion.

COMPASS also conducts and coordinates other planning services for its members. A few of those services include air and water quality; economic development; land use, mapping and geographic information systems (GIS); and emergency management.

The top three unfunded state transportation projects identified in the plan are:
• Widening I-84 from exit 27 to 29 in Caldwell.
• Widening U.S. Highway 20/26 from Middleton to Linder roads.
• Widening Idaho Highway 44 from Canyon Lane to Star Road.

The local transportation network wish list includes:
• Improvements to Franklin Road between Star and Black Cat roads.
• Improvements to Amity Road from Southside Boulevard to Meridian Road.
• Improvements to Franklin Boulevard north of Birch Lane to Highway 20/26.
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The most recent long-range plan, Communities in Motion 2040 2.0, published in 2018, is based on a forecast population of 1.022 million in Ada and Canyon counties by 2040 — that’s a 334,000, or about 49%, increase between 2018 and 2040. Planning for that growth, Communities in Motion focuses federal money on maintaining the valley’s current transportation system, and it identifies 31 unfunded improvement projects that should be pursued when funding becomes available.

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Also identified are public transportation improvements, such as increasing bus capacity along State Street — first on the priority list — and building a commuter rail system — fifth on the priority list.

All of those projects, at this time, are dependent upon competitive federal grants, Stoll said, because local and state agencies will fall short by about $5.4 billion, or $235 million per year, of funding the 31 projects.

“If we’re serious as a region about having the infrastructure — roads and public transportation — in place for the population to move, but also to support the business community and the economy, we need to make investments in our transportation network,” Stoll said.

COMPASS has taken a stance on several policies that would increase transportation funding. In addition to supporting changes to Idaho’s current transportation revenue mechanisms — for example, increasing the state motor fuels excise tax rate or indexing the fuels tax to the rate of inflation — COMPASS hopes legislators will create new funding mechanisms, such as allowing local governments to implement a local option sales tax or allowing the state to create a dedicated funding source for transportation, which currently does not exist.

Planning strategically for growth, COMPASS’ mission, will depend on whether lawmakers have the “intestinal fortitude to make some of the hard choices,” Stoll said. “Either providing the tools so that we can ask the citizens what they’re willing to pay for, or making these decisions at the State House and at the U.S. Capitol to fund the transportation network.”