

# Boise leaders raise streetcar concerns

Possible federal funding may alleviate the worries some Downtown powerhouses voiced this spring.

Idaho Statesman, June 14, 2009  
BY: CYNTHIA SEWELL

Some of Downtown Boise's biggest property owners and company CEOs laid out a series of high expectations they want met before the city moves ahead with one of Mayor Dave Bieter's top priorities - a 15-block streetcar loop through the center of town.

They want the city to better understand how many people may ride the streetcar, to develop a plan on how to pay the operating costs and to make sure to take the time to do the whole thing right.

Seven members of the city's 36-member streetcar task force sent a letter April 23 with the litany of concerns to Gary Michael, chairman of Bieter's streetcar task force, and Capital City Development Corporation Director Phil Kushlan.

Many members of the task force "have become frustrated with the many questions and concerns that have been left unaddressed," said the letter, signed by Idaho Power CEO Lamont Keen, St. Luke's CEO Ed Dahlberg and others.

Bieter says the letter is "old news" because the city now plans to pursue up to \$25 million in federal stimulus money, and that could help resolve one of the biggest concerns the business leaders have: How will the city pay for the \$40 million to \$65 million project?

At least one of the letter's signers, George Iliff, Colliers International managing partner, agreed that the federal money went a long way in answering his concerns.

But the question of funding may matter the most to the major property owners in town - like Rafanelli and Nahas, which owns the former Boise Cascade building and several surrounding blocks, and whose project manager Scott Schoenherr signed onto the letter.

The most likely source of the money discussed so far has been a "local improvement district," which would tax the landowners within it. And it can be created without a vote of those landowners - by Bieter and just three members of the City Council.

Plus, the letter states, the city has yet to make a plan for the operating costs of the streetcar: "This is an unacceptable response given the magnitude of the decision."

Bieter said he was confident he had the support of the business leaders because of the federal money.

"We went from zero (federal funding) to half - that's a fundamental change," Bieter said.

But that money is a long way off - even if all goes to plan.

Just Friday, Idaho's congressional delegation joined eight other federal lawmakers in asking the U.S. Department of Transportation to dedicate \$300 million of its stimulus money toward streetcar projects around the country.

Boise's share would come from that money, but to get the full amount, federal officials would have to set aside a full 20 percent of the \$1.5 billion the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dedicated to surface transportation.

Still, the possibility does temper some of the concerns.

"CCDC and the city of Boise have been receptive to the concerns we addressed in our April letter," Colliers CEO Iliff told the Statesman. "The issues in the letter still need further resolution and are in the process of being addressed by the city and its consultants."

Keen, Schoenherr and John Lamb, senior vice president for U.S. Bank Plaza owner Unico, said they are waiting to receive more information before taking a position on whether the streetcar project is headed in the right direction. The other business leaders could not be reached.

In the letter, they said they also were concerned that the city had never conducted a ridership survey to see how many people would use the streetcar, and that the project seemed to be proceeding too hastily.

Bieter said reports and evaluations under way now will address these concerns.

Gary Michael and Kushlan started tackling the problems at a May 15 meeting of the task force, which is composed of business and civic leaders and has been meeting monthly since November. The meetings have not been opened to the public.

Iliff said he's confident the questions will be answered.

"In the coming months the task force will be able to reach informed conclusions and make recommendations about the viability of the project and how it will affect the Downtown stakeholders and the community as a whole," he said.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

### FEDERAL STREETCAR UPDATE

Last week, Congressman Walt Minnick, D-Idaho, became a co-sponsor of the Federal Streetcar Revitalization Act of 2009, a bill introduced by Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Ore., to bring the streetcar back. This and another bill set up the framework for the government to award grants for streetcar projects, but do not provide funding for program.

Idaho's delegation is working with Blumenauer to try and secure funding for the program.

On Friday, Minnick, Rep. Mike Simpson and Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch sent a letter to U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood asking him to dedicate \$300 million of federal stimulus money for streetcar projects like the one Boise Mayor Dave Bieter proposes.

"That's a pretty powerful team. Hopefully we can help the mayor," Minnick spokesman John Foster said. "It is kind of a cool project. This is the kind of thing that definitely has positive impacts throughout the valley on public transportation."

More about Boise's streetcar plans

If things stay on track, city leaders say construction could start in about 18 months, with streetcars traversing Downtown in late 2011.

The first phase would run a 2.6-mile loop along Main and Idaho streets between 1st and 16th streets.

Future phases would connect to Boise State and 30th Street.

The streetcar could cost between \$40 million and \$65 million, according to initial reports from a 36-member task force composed of civic and business leaders. This fall the task force will present complete financial, economic and engineering analysis to the Boise City Council.

**A three-page letter outlining concerns with a plan to build a Downtown streetcar was signed by seven local business leaders:**

® George Iliff, Colliers International managing partner;

® Ed Dahlberg, St. Luke's CEO and president;

® Lamont Keen, Idaho Power CEO and president;

® Jim Kissler, Norco CEO;

® John Lamb, senior vice president for U.S. Bank Plaza owner Unico;

® Doug and Skip Oppenheimer from Oppenheimer Companies;

® and Scott Schoenherr project manager for Boise Plaza owner Rafanelli and Nahas