

## Reader's View: Increasing public transportation will improve livability

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Idaho stands at a sales tax crossroads. This summer, legislators could force an unfortunate path with an overzealous push to create a special-interest tax break under the guise of homeowner property tax relief.

Idaho governments have debated local-option taxing. The Legislature, with few exceptions, has refused to allow it, though such taxes require far more than majority local voter approval and address needs that can't be met by fees and other revenue.

One new cooperative proposal from cities around the state is to allow, for example, half a cent of local sales tax to fund right-of-way acquisition, construction and planning for rail or other point-to-point fixed mass transit between cities like Caldwell and Boise where growth is already pushing new freeways to capacity.

At the same time, in November, voters will get the opportunity to raise the sales tax a penny, earmarked to end an era where schools struggled under legislative budgets that have repeatedly come out flat or declined — particularly once student population growth, increasing insurance, heating, wages and transportation costs are taken into account.

Sadly the majority of Idaho's Legislature hasn't been in hot pursuit of educational excellence. So voters may well use their pocketbooks to set priorities on this issue, finally addressing the economic necessity of funding school building repairs, replacing textbooks and equipment and enhancing student programs.

Looming still is the idea of using a 1.5 cent statewide sales tax increase to remove over \$250 million in ongoing school "maintenance and operations" funding from the property tax. Unfortunately this proposal by Republican lawmakers has hidden within it roughly \$125 million in tax relief for corporations, investors, vacation condominium owners and others besides Idaho homeowners.

Unlike homeowner taxes, which are based on assessed value, Idaho commercial property tax is based on business profitability. So while homeowners have seen massive increases in taxes, that's not necessarily true of commercial property. Thus a compromise proposal by Democrats avoids a sales tax increase and creates \$104 million in M&O property tax reductions for homeowners only — preventing families from having to pay for special tax breaks for other classes of taxpayers.

Idaho's 5 cent sales tax is low compared to the majority of other states, though we do tax groceries, which impacts families disproportionately. Still, many cities have a higher base rate plus whopping 4 or 5 cents in additional local tax.

Clearly there's such thing as too much sales tax. Income tax takes a more fair percentage of each family's income. Thus, local-option taxes must be approved by local voters. Also, because sales tax is volatile, it's good for construction and repair but unwise for ongoing budgets to rely on alone.

So what's worth spending sales tax on?

Idaho's growing cities can't afford to postpone building real public transportation. Idaho's urban areas are our economic engine, our balance to important rural agricultural diversity. We must make Idaho's cities livable and accessible for growing senior populations and commuters hoping to save money and time by using fuel-efficient, state-of-the-art systems.

Idaho has smarter ways of lowering property tax without a new sales tax. But without public transportation and quality schools we'll cripple our economic growth, mire neighborhoods in traffic and destroy the clean air, prosperity and relaxed pace of life that will keep Idaho's next generation of families and businesses thriving here in our state.

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