

Reader's View: Legislature holds key to transit solution

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In 1994, the state Legislature authorized the formation of public transportation authorities in the state. In 1998, the voters of Ada and Canyon counties approved a regional authority with over a 70 percent yes vote in each county. However, the state legislation does not provide for a local funding source to operate and maintain a public transportation system. Although Valley Regional Transit has developed a transportation plan for the future, it cannot be implemented with only the current source of funds — local property tax, farebox revenue and limited federal funds.

Since November 2005, a regional coalition of business and community leaders has been meeting to review the need for public transportation in Ada and Canyon counties and develop a local funding source. The two-county area now has a population of over 560,000, with an estimated 600,000 in the five-county metro area. Clearly, the time has come for our area to plan for our public transportation future. Three reasons come to mind:

1. Our air quality levels are approaching airshed capacity for several pollutants.
2. Funding is being obtained to widen the interstate but traffic congestion is projected to increase on our roads and highways.
3. Economic development inquiries ask us for information on the local public transportation system.

In order to fund the plan, we must first receive legislative authorization for voter-approved, local-option funding. There is no other way to fund a local system. Federal funds are decreasing. The Idaho Constitution prevents the use of gas tax for public transportation. Some local property tax is being used, but we all know this source cannot be increased. The business coalition reviewed many options that could provide the local funding for the transportation plan. Some states allow a personal property tax on automobiles to fund public transportation. The coalition believed this would not be a popular option in Idaho. While no one likes to pay taxes, statewide surveys over the years have shown that the sales tax is viewed as the least onerous tax. Research reviewed by the coalition shows that a local-option sales tax is the preferred method around the country to fund public transportation systems.

We know that local-option taxation has been very controversial in the Idaho Legislature. Only a few examples exist in Idaho law. Local-option sales tax is allowed in resort cities and is being utilized in Sun Valley, Ketchum and McCall. A local-option vehicle registration fee is being used by the Ada County Highway District. The 2007 Legislature will be asked to allow a voter-approved, local-option sales tax of no more than half a penny for a public transportation authority, in this case Valley Regional Transit in Ada and Canyon counties. The election could only be held in November of even-numbered years when our area has its highest voter turnout.

We want over 200,000 people to vote on this major issue for our region's future. We need help from the Idaho Legislature so we can help ourselves.

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