

I-84 widening to start next fall

Meridian-Nampa stretch will get 3rd lane each way

By Sandra Forester

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On the heels of opening the new Karcher interchange, Idaho Transportation Department officials were back in Nampa on Wednesday, with the word on plans to widen Interstate 84 between Meridian and Nampa.

Residents and officials said they believe the expansion is one of the most crucial projects in Idaho and can't happen soon enough.

"Hurry up and do it," said Jodey Luke of Nampa, who drives to Boise five days a week for work. "It should have been done in 1980."

Luke and other residents at Wednesday's open house said they welcome the state's plan to add a third lane in each direction, but it won't be enough — especially by the time the widened roadway is completed in 2009.

"Every morning that traffic is backed up, and I think even if they put in three lanes it will be the same," said Jim Clegg, a Nampa resident near Happy Valley Road and Stamm Lane. "We need to be working ahead of things instead of behind," added his wife, Mary Clegg.

A fourth lane is not possible in the near future because it would require reconstruction of several overpasses, and funds are limited, ITD spokeswoman Mollie McCarty said.

The widening, slated to begin in fall 2007 and last two years, is part of \$200 million in Grant Anticipation Revenue Vehicle (GARVEE) bonds from the first year of Connecting Idaho, approved by the Legislature in April. The bonds will be paid back with future federal highway funds.

Funding is a big obstacle, even with GARVEE bonds, McCarty said. The bonds "allow us to get ahead of inflation so we can get some construction done before it's cost-prohibitive to do," she said. "It's not going to resolve the funding shortfall that still needs to be addressed."

A second open house about the project is planned tonight in Meridian.

Transportation planners originally hoped to expand the interstate from Meridian through Idaho 44 west of Caldwell, but funding was available only for the proposed third lane each way between Meridian Road and Nampa's Garrity Boulevard. A study of future needs from Idaho 44 west to Five Mile Road also will be funded, McCarty said.

Officials say the third lane will give thousands of drivers smoother, quicker and safer commute and would be a draw for corporations looking to locate in the Valley. The interstate from Boise to Meridian was widened as part of the Wye interchange project that was completed in summer 2004.

The Idaho Transportation Board will recommend to the governor and Legislature during the next session an increase of \$203 million annually to improve the state highways and bridges.

Otherwise, Idaho Transportation Board Chairman Frank Bruneel said, the state would run into a \$6.1 billion shortfall during the next 30 years.

Matt Stoll, executive director of the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, said he'd like to see improvements on Interstate 84, Idaho 44 and Idaho 20/26 happen quickly and completely, but he realizes that transportation agencies are grappling with funding shortfalls and the need to maintain more pavement. Even with increased funding, transportation will continue to be a challenge because of population growth, he said.

About 530,000 people now live in the Boise-Nampa area. COMPASS population projections for the Valley estimate 820,000 people in 2030, and Stoll said some estimate it could be as high as 1.5 million.

If that happens, he said, "you're talking about a potential for a 2-hour commute even with the (transportation) system growth we have in our plan," he said

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