

ARTICLE PUBLISHED FEB 7, 2005

## On your mark, get set ...

### For some of the many who commute from Emmett, Idaho 16 has become a virtual racetrack

EMMETT — The only number you need to know when evaluating the need for a widening of Idaho 16 from Emmett to State Street is this:

Sixty-eight percent of adults in Gem County commute to a job in another county. For most, that means a trip on Idaho 16.

Gov. Dirk Kempthorne's plan to borrow \$1.6 billion to upgrade Idaho highways would turn 16 into a four-lane, divided highway and extend it 9 miles to Interstate 84. The project would cost \$157 million.

"Right now, it's really kind of dangerous out there," Emmett Mayor Marilyn Lorenzen said. "Not kind of — it is dangerous."

The 14-mile, two-lane road saw a 22 percent increase in traffic from 1999 to 2003, topping out at 8,300 vehicles per day. Crashes there have killed six people since 1999, putting the road right at the national average for fatal incidents. The state's general guideline for the capacity of a two-lane road is 6,000 vehicles per day.

The road has become a bit of a racetrack as drivers tax their speedometers on a long straightaway and jockey for position at passing lanes.

Some folks drive the road at 90 mph. Others stall traffic at 55. The speed limit is 65.

"There are safety issues relating to any two-lane road like that," Gem County commissioner Sharon Church-Pratt said.

"People need to be responsible and drive accordingly and not be impatient, and humans can't seem to do that, whether it's adults or whether it's teenagers."

Many of those commuters pass Gerikens restaurant on Idaho 52. Owner Todd Luedtke just needs to look out his window to see a problem.

"You ought to sit on that corner at 7 o'clock in the morning," he said. "There are hundreds of cars going over."

The Boise Cascade mill closure in 2001, which put 275 people out of work, has helped push Gem County folks to other counties for jobs. The county population is 16,500, and Emmett (5,500) is its only incorporated city.

Even some of the people who work at the top two remaining employers — the school district and the hospital — are commuters. They come from out of town.

"We are getting to be a bedroom community," said Joyce Newton, who moved to Emmett 31/2 years ago and opened Home Town Fabrics in October. "People who still want to raise their families in a nice, quiet atmosphere (move here)." County commissioner Lan Smith commuted to downtown Boise for 22 years. He said by the end of that time, he had moved his start time up a half-hour to compensate for traffic.

"I used to be alone on the highway," he said.

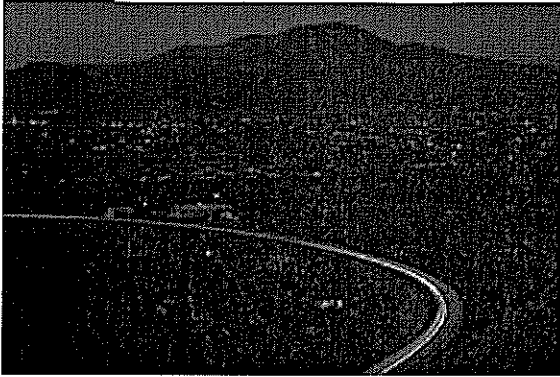
The improvement from State Street to Emmett is in the planning stages. The environmental assessment is nearly complete, and right-of-way purchases could begin this spring, but money has not been allocated for the entire project through the 2009 fiscal year.

Mike Kauffman, owner of the Winery at Eagle Knoll and part-owner of River Birch Golf Course, says the new road will not infringe on those properties. His only concern is that his winery be easily accessible after the state restricts access to the highway.

"Four lanes would be good in here," he said. "... It's not a dangerous highway, it's just the way people drive on it. Every morning, you can see people pushing people. It's something else to watch."

Sixty-eight percent of adults in Gem County commute to a job in another county. For most, that means a trip on Idaho 16. Gov. Dirk Kempthorne's plan to borrow \$1.6 billion to upgrade Idaho highways would turn 16 into a four-lane, divided highway and extend it 9 miles to Interstate 84.

Enlarge 



Photos by Katherine Jones / The Idaho Statesman

Photos by Katherine Jones / The Idaho Statesman

Rush hour on Idaho 16 from Emmett to State Street is like a race track, commuters say, as drivers go as fast as 90 mph and make dangerous passes. The road is heavily used because 68 percent of Gem County residents work in another county.

Joyce Newton moved to Emmett 31/2 years ago and opened Home Town Fabrics. She says the town draws "people who still want to raise their families in a nice, quiet atmosphere."

Enlarge 

