Support for local option tax grows in Valley

Civic, business leaders who want money for public transit face big obstacles in Legislature

By Gregory Hahn
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A growing coalition of business leaders and elected officials from throughout the Treasure Valley wants the power to pass a local sales tax to boost mass transit. But some of the local lawmakers on the conservative House Revenue and Taxation Committee may stand in the way.

"If we can get it out of Rev and Tax, we can get it through both bodies," said Boise Democratic Rep. Nicole LeFavour, a committee member and one of the proposal's biggest supporters.

Although she and the committee's other five Democrats are on board, it could be hard for the local coalition to find the five Republicans needed to get the bill over its first hurdle.

The Idaho Constitution requires all tax bills to start in the House. The 18-person tax committee holds the first hearing. This committee has thwarted local option taxes in all but a handful of cases over the years. This time around, business leaders and elected officials still haven't convinced the Treasure Valley Republicans on the tax panel.

For many years, public transportation was seen as a Boise issue. It still has the most support from the slate of Democrats who won four of the five legislative districts within Boise city limits.

But now Nampa Mayor Tom Dale and Caldwell Mayor Garret Nancolas support the local option tax. So do the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce and the chambers in Nampa, Meridian and Middleton. Meridian, Eagle and Star have joined the coalition, along with still-rural Middleton, Melba, Parma, Greenleaf and Notus.

Half-cent tax
The coalition hopes to pass a half-cent local option sales tax in Ada and Canyon counties for 20 years.

The tax could bring in almost $1 billion during that period, which the Valley Regional Transit Authority would use to boost bus service in every city and town, preserve a corridor for a light-rail system connecting the Valley from east to west, and eventually construct a street car system in Downtown Boise.

Most proposals to increase taxes require a two-thirds majority, but this plan's sponsors hope the law will be changed to allow a simple majority if the votes are cast in a general election in November of an even-numbered year.

Committee Stance
Five of the 18 committee members are from Ada and Canyon counties. Among them are Nampa Republican Reps. Bob Schaefer and Gary Collins. Neither has glowing things to say about the tax.
Schaefer said Nampa is "on a spending spree" as it grows. "The taxpayers can only offer so much," he said.

"There are myriad things city officials are trying to raise taxes for," Collins said. "And I think they're going to lose them all."

Nor are everyday citizens asking for the tax, they say.

"Not from the constituents," Collins said. "Not at all."

Besides, other influential business groups like the National Federation of Independent Business oppose giving local governments the authority to pass local sales-tax increases.

One of the Ada County lawmakers on the tax panel is wary.

"I think there is a perception among everybody that if we put all these buses on the road, then the other guy is going to ride the bus," said House Majority Leader Mike Moyle of Star.

There is a time when a region needs to invest in transit, Moyle said: "That time is when people will ride."

LeFavour disagrees. Even if they don't want to ride the buses themselves, some people would vote for the tax to clear the roads, LeFavour said. If the Valley waits for Moyle's "right time," it could be too late, she said.

"Until a system has the kind of schedules to get people where they want to go when they want to get there, no one will use it," she said.

Freshman Democrat Bill Killen, the fifth local member of the tax committee, said the reckoning will come, but it may be long after he and the rest of the committee are gone.

"If we don't do anything, they'll be asking, 'Why didn't they start the process 20 years ago?'" he said.