

# IMPulse

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**Business Insider**

The Idaho Statesman  
Boise, Idaho

**Wednesday Aug. 16, 2017**

**by Audrey Dutton &**

**Dana Oland**

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## Meridian's growth changes traffic, housing, shopping

Bruce Chatterton moved to Meridian from Boise more than four years ago. The “room to grow” that is Meridian’s essence made him want to live and work there.

Now the city’s community development director, Chatterton says it’s also been “fun seeing a small, somewhat quiet downtown become a place people want to hang out.”

Meridian still has plenty of room to spread out, and that’s good, because its population is booming. It was the 13th-fastest-growing city in the U.S. last year.

And it’s not just about Meridian. The growth is changing the whole Treasure Valley, affecting traffic, housing, health care, education and retail.

The 2016 U.S. Census estimates put Meridian’s population at nearly 96,000. The Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (Compass) estimates today’s population at just more than 98,000. That’s a tenfold jump since 1990.

The growth seems unlikely to look to slow anytime soon, says Compass planner and demographics specialist Carl Miller, who lives in Meridian.

“Right now Meridian is growing by about 3,700 people per year,” Miller says. Compass projects population to top 163,000 by 2040. (The agency says Boise could reach 310,000 in the same year from its current population of about 228,000.)

### ***More jobs, more people —more housing***

With more than 48,000 jobs on the way by 2020 — and an estimated 75,000 by 2040 — it’s expected that Meridian will become home to more than 21,000 new households.

Developers are responding by creating ways to keep people working and entertained closer to home. For example, two companies, Ameriben and Paylocity, will occupy Brighton Corp.’s development TM Crossing at the Ten Mile I-84 interchange.

Housing is on a tear, and not just single-family homes in large developments. Builders are taking out hundreds of permits for multifamily housing units, giving families an option for denser, more urban-style housing beyond Boise.

About 2,400 new housing units were built in the West Ada School District in 2016-17, according to the Ada County Assessor’s 2017 market report.

Last week, plans were unveiled for two apartment complexes in Meridian on East Overland Road between Linder and Ten Mile roads. They could become the largest in the Treasure Valley.

Apartment and condo development is new to West Ada County, but it appears to be a permanent part of the housing landscape.

There are apartment projects planned for Records Avenue across from Julius M. Kleiner Park. And as The Village at Meridian eyes its 225,000-square-foot expansion, housing could become a component, says Village General Manager Hugh Crawford.

“Right now The Village is retail, entertainment and office space,” Crawford says. “This next phase could potentially add residential or hospitality to the mix. It will reflect what the market needs.”

CenterCal, the corporation that owns The Village, also is preparing to sell a large piece of land on the east side of The Village for residential development.

“That will become the fifth multifamily project along Records Road of about 1,000 apartments,” he says.

## ***Changing retail experience***

The Village at Meridian opened in 2012 at the corner of East Fairview Avenue and Eagle Road. With its winding streets, a fountain plaza and parklike settings, it has become a game changer in the Treasure Valley retail scene.

The development already holds nearly 80 local, regional and national stores and restaurants, a movie complex and a grocery store. It pulled boutique retailers Anthropologie, Loft, Lululemon and Urban Outfitters out of bustling Downtown Boise, and large box stores such as Toys “R” Us from the Boise Towne Square area. One quintessentially Boise business, the Boise Co-op, and a few national retail chains, such as H&M, have opened second locations at The Village.

Boise eateries The Matador, a locally owned franchise, and Bodovino, a Boise-owned wine bar, also opened second locations in The Village that expanded their original concepts.

The Village produces a summer concert series, Rock the Village, that brings between 6,000 and 9,000 people per show depending on the band. In the winter months, people go for holiday events and to skate at the ice rink in Fountain Square.

Competition from The Village also has challenged Meridian’s retailers in downtown.

“I think The Village was a call to arms for our downtown vendors,” Chatterton says. “They realized they needed to distinguish themselves.”

Meridian also soon will be home to Albert-sons’ crowning glory: a store at Eagle Road and Fairview Avenue that CEO Bob Miller promises will be “the best grocery store in Idaho.”

## ***Schools bursting at the seams***

Meridian is part of the largest school district in the state: West Ada School District, which has nearly 40,000 students — more than the population of Lewiston.

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The district is growing at a rate of 1,000 students a year, and more schools will be needed in the next few years.

Spokesman Eric Ex-line says the district routinely looks at urban planning data and projects what it needs based on residential construction.

“By 2028, we would need five elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools,” Exline says.

An elementary school costs \$15 million, a middle school \$30 million, a high school \$60 million. Because it costs so much to build, the district is hunting for property to buy now, so that when it comes time to build, it doesn't have to pay a premium for the land.

The district has three properties in its pocket for high schools and several for middle and elementary schools.

Recruiting teachers is not a problem, because the growth also is drawing educators who want to live in the area.

When schools get crowded, the challenge is trying to “scavenge every place you can have a classroom,” he says. That's when the district asks voters to put up money for new schools.

The latest bond effort in 2015 failed on the first try. Voters later approved a modified version.

“West Ada has experienced the management of growth for a very long time now,” Exline says. “But the concern is that, at some point, the community will simply say, ‘We're just tired of passing bonds.’ And when that happens, that will be a rock and a hard place.”

## ***Keeping health care close to home***

The two major hospital systems in the Treasure Valley keep hustling to deal with Meridian's growth.

They try to predict which neighborhoods will grow, where new developments will spring up and who will live there in 20 years. The trick is to anticipate what future patients will need, be it orthopedic surgery suites to replace older hips or pediatricians to keep children healthy.

St. Luke's Health System built its Meridian Medical Center on Eagle Road near I-84 in 2001 and soon found itself in a pickle. Not only was the immediate community exploding, but one in every four or five patients was coming from Nampa, Caldwell and other nearby towns.

The hospital grew from 100 health care workers then to 1,200 today. Up to 150 patients come to its emergency department each day. To keep pace, St. Luke's has invested \$58 million into its Meridian campus in the past few years, says Dennis Mesaros, administrator of St. Luke's in Meridian.

The influx was so heavy that St. Luke's decided to build a nearly \$100 million hospital in Nampa.

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The health system also is part of the Treasure Valley Family YMCA's The Hill project, slated to open early next year at Eagle and Amity roads. The new YMCA campus — a partnership of the West Ada School District, the city of Meridian and St. Luke's — will include a school-nurse program and a wellness center to help people eat, exercise and live more healthfully. Nearby, St. Luke's will open a clinic to provide primary care and other services such as physical therapy and behavioral care.

Meanwhile, Saint Alphonsus Health System is pouring resources into small clinics around Meridian.

"That has been our focus, really: How do we meet the needs of that population without having to put up huge buildings?" says Saint Al's Nampa CEO Karl Keeler.

That is why the system opened the Meridian Health Plaza on Cherry Lane and Ten Mile Road, the Eagle Health Plaza on State Street and Eagle Road, clinics in Kuna and Star, and now a clinic at Eagle Road and I-84. Those clinics offer urgent care, family-practice doctors and other services.

But outpatient and short-stay facilities are limited. Hospitals are necessary for any community. So Saint Al's opened its new hospital in June 2017 in eastern Nampa. Saint Al's factored in how the area's growing traffic issues would impact people's ability to access the new medical center. At I-84 and Garrity Boulevard, it is easily accessed from Meridian and Nampa, Keeler says.

"Traffic and roads [are] a struggle especially in Meridian. The infrastructure hasn't kept up with growth," he says. "That Chinden [Boulevard] is a two-lane road is absolutely crazy."

## ***The everyday jam***

Crazy traffic is one of Meridian's big problems, especially at rush hour, and not just on Chinden. There's traffic from commuters from Canyon County, Eagle and other neighboring areas. There's traffic from people coming into Meridian for work at Blue Cross of Idaho, St. Luke's and other employers.

The reason for its congestion also is what makes Meridian appealing to new residents: It's the geographic center of the Treasure Valley. Says Chatterton, "I know families where one breadwinner works in Nampa and one works in Boise."

Ada County Highway District officials say their agency invests millions each year in bike and pedestrian improvements, as well as transportation projects to move vehicles more efficiently. Successes include the Locust Grove overpass and Pine Avenue in downtown Meridian.

Christy Little, planning review supervisor for ACHD, says the district works to get buy-in from developers as they build new housing. "The developer pays for design and construction of an intersection up front," she says. A lot of the North Meridian area — especially intersections along McMillan Road — benefited from those agreements.

But the traffic backups are here to stay. And compared with other metro areas in the U.S., traffic jams in the Treasure Valley are a breeze. But city and regional planners say they're doing what they can to make travel easier.

"We'll never grow ourselves out of congestion," Mayor Tammy de Weerd said in a Business Insider interview in May. "But if you can bring services closer to where people are living, if you can make sure that you have workforce choices for people as well, they can work closer to where they live. We want our residents to spend more time with their families, not sitting in traffic."

## **108,954**

The 24-hour count of north-south traffic on Eagle Road at Fairview Avenue, according to the Ada County Highway District. The last count was in 2015.

## ***"Right now Meridian is growing by about 3,700 people per year."***

— Compass planner and demographics specialist Carl Miller

## **10.1%**

Job increase in Meridian last year, according to Mayor Tammy de Weerd

## **93%**

People who think Meridian exceeds expectations for families, according the city's 2017 Citizen Survey.

## ***"By 2028, we would need five elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools."***

— West Ada School District spokesman Eric Exline

## **\$430 MILLION**

Dollars spent on new construction in Meridian last year, according to Mayor Tammy de Weerd

## **\$242,000/ \$275,000**

Median sale price of homes in Boise/Meridian, year to date, according to Boise Regional Realtors

## ***"That has been our focus, really: How do we meet the needs of that population without having to put up huge buildings?"***

— Saint Al's Nampa CEO Karl Keeler

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— Mayor Tammy de Weerd

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