

Commuter rail tops wish list for Treasure Valley leaders

By: [Teya Vitu](#) March 17, 2017 0



Traffic in Boise. Boise Mayor David Bieter has said he would like to see a light rail system to ease some of the traffic congestion in the Treasure Valley. Photo by Patrick Sweeney.

If money and political will were no object and there were no limits to building a public transit system for a population heading to 1 million people, what would the system look like?

Right off the top, the mayors of Boise and Meridian veer toward commuter rail between Boise and Caldwell on the existing Union Pacific corridor.

"I'm a rail guy," Boise Mayor David Bieter said. "I've seen the effectiveness of rail-based systems across the country. The one most relevant to us is Salt Lake. The executive of the transit authority once said, 'When we had a bus systems, we were a social service operation. When rail became the backbone, we became a transit organization where people who had choices would use it.' That's the most telling thing. Right now we are a social service system."



Boise Mayor David H. Bieter

Meridian Mayor Tammy de Weerd takes commuter rail and the UP corridor to another level. Meridian City Hall sits alongside the railroad tracks with its 100 feet of right-of-way to each side.

"It's a large right-of-way corridor," de Weerd said. Ideally, she would like to see the right-of-way filled with High Occupancy Vehicle lanes for buses and multi-use pathways for bicycles and pedestrians.

Bieter would add a second rail and his ideal commuter rail would run from Caldwell to Micron every five minutes or "10 would work," he added.

"You would run light rail and streetcar spurs off it to the airport, downtown, the mall," Bieter said. "Then you would do State Street, still do rail on State Street. Take the Interurban and streetcar and do it again. I'd go light rail, dedicated. I'd go to Middleton."

The Boise & Interurban Railroad ran a loop from 1906 to 1928 from Boise to Middleton to Caldwell and then back via Nampa, along the future freeway route and then on Fairview Avenue.

Even Fred Bruning, CEO of CenterCal Properties, which built and operates The Village at Meridian, boards the mayors' vision of a commuter train.

"The one thing I wish we had here was mass transit, a light rail line," Bruning said.

Commuter rail through the Treasure Valley would rely on cooperation with the United Pacific Railroad, which owns the freight track spur that runs through Nampa, Meridian and Boise.

"Our commitment to the communities we serve includes our willingness to consider potential opportunities in regard to topics like commuter rail service options where they may exist along our network," Union Pacific spokesman Justin Jacobs said. "Currently, there is not a plan to develop and/or offer this service between Boise and Nampa."

In the spirit of no-holds-barred transportation fantasy, Bieter looks at the mountains.

"I want a gondola to Bogus," Bieter said. "It would be all-season. It's safer and quicker (than the road)." Kelly Badesheim runs Valley Regional Transit, the Treasure Valley's bus system. Her ideal system plays off the two mayors' thoughts.

"It would include high capacity service, rail or rubber, for the major corridor, something parallel to I-84," Badesheim said. "This could be all the way from Ontario to Mountain Home."



A Valley Regional Transit bus in downtown Boise. Kelly Badesheim, the director of Valley Regional Transit, said expanding bus service to run between Boise and Mountain Home would help commuters.

Photo by Erika Sather-Smith.

Badesheim envisions an east-west route along I-84 and a north-south route on State Street. These would be paired with premium bus systems every few miles running at least every 15 minutes.

There would be a better park-and-ride system. Technology would be tapped for mobility on demand and calling up to hail public transit.

"The idea is a fully integrated system with a variety of options that are tied together that is seamless to the public," Badesheim said.

Like with everyone else, rail transit also surfaces within an ideal transit system for Walt Satterfield, former principal planner at the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, which is the metropolitan planning agency for transportation matters in the Treasure Valley.

"The thing that is always talked about is the rail corridor," Satterfield said. "Rail gives you that national recognition. Trains are fantastic to draw development."

Many cities have built streetcars and light rail systems as much for economic development as to transport people. Development swarms along passenger rail routes, said James Corless, director of Transportation for America, a Washington, D.C., alliance of elected, business and civic leaders focusing on locally-driven transportation solutions.

"There's something about rail that has incentivized developers," Corless said. "It's fixed for at least 30 years."

Commuter rail is only as good as you can get from the train station to your final destination.

"You need a feeder service connecting to the fixed route (light rail)," Satterfield noted.

That entails transforming Boise's bus system into something more ideal than service every 60 minutes with buses stopping by 7 p.m. The ideal goal would be buses that carry a large share of people who ride as a choice rather than a necessity, Satterfield said.

He prescribes traffic signal prioritization and dedicated lanes for buses and transit-oriented development with park-and-ride lots.

"I want to see an increase in service frequency," Satterfield said. "Just as a start, 15 to 30 minutes on key routes would be important."

He's talking about typical routes not the busiest routes. Rapid transit buses should run more frequently. "15 minutes would be fantastic," Satterfield said. "The ideal we should aim for is 10 minutes. Then you are not relying on a bus schedule. You don't have to worry about when, just where you catch the bus."

Idaho Business Review staff writer Teya Vitu has ridden on at least 14 streetcar systems and at least 16 subway systems across the U.S., Canada and Europe.

