

TOP STORY

GARVEE bill still has hurdles before funds reach I-84 in Canyon County

By LIS STEWART • lstewart@idahopress.com Mar 29, 2017



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Traffic travels on Interstate 84 near the Franklin exit in Nampa on Wednesday afternoon. A bill passed by the Idaho Legislature could mean that a segment of I-84 stretching from Franklin Boulevard to the Karcher Road underpass in Nampa, about 2 miles of road altogether, gets widened from two to three lanes in both directions.

NAMPA — The Idaho Legislature's decision this week to approve of a major transportation funding bill that could widen a stretch of Interstate 84 in Canyon County has been met with cheers and relief by local leaders.

But at the same time, leaders caution that funding for the project has a few hurdles yet to clear.

"We're excited. It revives the GARVEE (bond program) and now the devil is always going to be in the details, and I'm looking forward to reading the bill after the governor signs it," Nampa Mayor Bob Henry said. "It appears this is the best path forward for getting the freeways widened in Canyon County."

The bill could mean that a segment of I-84 stretching from Franklin Boulevard to the Karcher Road underpass in Nampa, about 2 miles of road altogether, gets widened from two to three lanes in both directions. Proponents say this would help move traffic through a busy corridor more safely and efficiently, and bring about a boost to the local economy.

"We are very thankful the Legislature decided to fund that, because it is so important to our growth, and we have significant growth coming to our area and transportation is critical to commerce, to business," said Debbie Kling, president and CEO of the Nampa Chamber of Commerce.

On the average weekday, 80,000 to 85,000 vehicles travel that stretch of road, according to studies by the Idaho Transportation Department. Traffic volume is expected to increase to 110,000 by 2040. If the road is not widened, travel time between Caldwell and Boise is expected to increase from 25 minutes to 1 hour 10 minutes by 2040.

Widening the entire stretch of I-84 from Nampa to Caldwell remains the top, unfunded priority for the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho.

Senate Bill 1206 authorizes ITD to bond up to \$300 million through the GARVEE program, which allows states to spend against future highway money from the federal government. The money is to be used for new road construction projects. Several projects will likely benefit from the GARVEE money.

While discussions around the bill were mostly about funding improvements to Canyon County's interstate, there are still steps that need to be taken before construction crews and heavy equipment begin any work on the interstate. The bill does not direct ITD to spend the money on a specific project, but instead provides a list of transportation corridors around the state in need of improvement and repair. Ultimately, the Idaho Transportation Board will decide what projects will be paid for with the GARVEE money.

The widening project is separate from a resurfacing program scheduled for the interstate from Franklin Boulevard in Nampa to Franklin Road in Caldwell. That project was moved up to this summer due to the widespread damage suffered during the winter season. The resurfacing project was approved by the Idaho Transportation Board in February through another fund.

It is the \$90 million Franklin Boulevard to Karcher Road widening project that still needs money.

FRANKLIN BOULEVARD TO KARCHER

COMPASS Executive Director Matt Stoll said the GARVEE bill this year was a "great first step" in addressing all the unfunded transportation needs in the Treasure Valley. He said there are 32 other priority corridors that need attention before the valley's population doubles, as projected, by 2040.

"We'll continue to be working with the Legislature and also our congressional leaders to leverage additional funds into Ada and Canyon counties to meet the needs of infrastructure improvements, to meet the needs of a growing population," Stoll said.

While legislators from Canyon County acknowledged I-84 needs to be widened all the way to Caldwell, it is likely the GARVEE money will only be used for the Franklin Boulevard to Karcher project.

The reason behind this is simple: The Franklin Boulevard to Karcher project has already had its environmental impact assessment completed, a necessity before starting any road project. Environmental assessments take a lot of time, and in the meantime there are other expansion projects across the state that need attention.

Legislators expect the GARVEE money could be used to fund the environmental assessment for a road widening project from Karcher to Franklin Road in Caldwell.

In the meantime, COMPASS and ITD are waiting for a decision on an application for a \$72 million federal grant for the Franklin Boulevard to Karcher project. Stoll said it would be ideal to get the grant even now that GARVEE has passed, because then the GARVEE money could be used for other projects. The state tried and failed to get federal grants for this project last year.

Grant recipients could be announced this spring, Stoll said.

SO WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

The bill now awaits the action of Gov. Butch Otter, who has five days — not counting Sundays — to veto legislation. Even if he does not sign it, an unvetoed bill becomes law after the five-day period.

The governor has not taken position on the bill, said Jon Hanian, a spokesman for the governor's office.

"As far as what he's going to do, stay tuned," Hanian said.

When asked about Otter's position on specific portions of the bill, Hanian referred to stances Otter has taken in previous years on the use of general funds for transportation. Otter has disapproved of bills that have diverted general fund resources for transportation projects.

SB 1206 includes an allocation of 1 percent of sales tax revenue for a new fund dedicated to transportation expansion and congestion mitigation. That is basically taking general fund dollars and using them for transportation.

A press conference with the governor and legislative leaders about the legislative session, which ended Wednesday, was scheduled for 2 p.m. Thursday at the Capitol. On Thursday, it was rescheduled for 2 p.m. Monday.

If the bill becomes law, it is then up to the seven-member Idaho Transportation Board to determine which projects will be funded by GARVEE bonds.

ITD is still figuring out how and when the bill will be applied, said Vince Trimboli, ITD's communication manager.

"We're going to assess the bill right now and talk about it with our transportation board," Trimboli said.

The last time GARVEE was approved to be used was when it was created in 2005. The \$857.6 million of GARVEE bonds expanded 119 highway miles across the state, including adding a fourth lane on I-84 from Meridian to the Garrity Boulevard exit in Nampa and a third lane from Garrity to Franklin Boulevard. Work on that project, which included bridges and interchanges, started in 2006 and was complete in 2014.

THE LEGISLATIVE EFFORT

Passing the bill was the culmination of several years worth of work by local legislators. Even before the session began, Canyon County legislators identified transportation as a top priority, especially after a tough winter that created potholes and other damage to roadways all across the state.

"We navigated some of the toughest political waters that I've ever navigated in my five years at the state capitol to get this done," said Rep. Brandon Hixon, R-Caldwell.

It was the persistence of local legislators, as well as the support from legislators from other parts of the state, that got the bill passed, members of the Canyon County delegation said.

House Assistant Majority Leader Brent Crane, R-Nampa, credited the work of fellow Nampa representative Robert Anderst, a member of the House Transportation Committee, in keeping the effort together.

"That was one of the real strengths of the coalition this year, in trying to get the bill passed," Anderst said.

Still, local lawmakers say more work remains.

Caldwell Sen. Jim Rice said even though the legislation passed this week will not likely pay to widen the interstate all the way through his home district, the progress made still is a victory for his constituents who commute across the Treasure Valley daily.

There are also broader, philosophical questions to resolve about how best to adequately fund transportation in Idaho. Legislators said those issues will be addressed in upcoming sessions and include discussions on raising the gas tax and registration fees or diverting more general fund dollars for roads and bridges.

A comprehensive plan is needed to address the needs of state roads, commented Sen. Abby Lee, R-Fruitland.

"This is not over for our state, and this is something we will continue to work for," Lee said.

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Nampa Mayor Bob Henry



Matt Stoll

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