

TOP STORY

Legislature approves GARVEE bonds that could help I-84

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Sen. Patti Anne Lodge, R-Huston, speaks in favor of a transportation bill that would affect Canyon County during the Senate debate Tuesday at the Capitol.

BOISE — A bill that could help pay for the widening and resurfacing of a troublesome stretch of Interstate 84 in Canyon County is on its way to Gov. Butch Otter's desk.

The House approved the bill on a 51-19 vote after little debate Tuesday evening.

"I am not always comfortable with some of the things we need to do to take care of business in Idaho, but this is one thing we need to take care of," said Rep. Joe Palmer, R-Meridian.

Those lawmakers who voted against the spending package made a case against borrowing money to finance the improvements.

"Debt overall is bad for Idaho," said Rep. Priscilla Giddings, R-White Bird.

Earlier in the afternoon, the Senate voted 19-16 to approve the bill after nearly two hours of debate, with all Canyon County senators casting votes in favor the legislation.

The bill authorizes the state to bond up to \$300 million under GARVEE, a program that allows states to pay for road projects by borrowing against future federal highway payments. It also includes compromises made with House leadership, like extending the surplus eliminator sunset date for two more years and establishing a fund that would be for transportation expansion and congestion mitigation.

"Certainly it is not an end-all," said Sen. Bert Brackett, R-Rogerson, when introducing the bill. "Transportation will continue, funding issues will continue to be addressed."

The bill is similar to one shot down by the Senate less than a week ago that was also aimed at funding improvements along I-84 in Canyon County. In the aftermath, legislators said they were contacted by numerous community leaders and constituents in their district, including members of the Nampa and Caldwell chambers of commerce.

The only section of I-84 that would be funded by the approved GARVEE funds is between the Karcher underpass and Franklin Boulevard in Nampa. Fixing that stretch is possible because it's the only segment that already has undergone a formal environmental impact statement. The rest of the interstate to Caldwell is also on the state's list of priorities, but lawmakers will have to figure out another way to pay for the project.

Sen. Chuck Winder, R-Boise, said he would rather not have this debate again.

"But your colleagues from Canyon County are begging for your help," Winder said. "And some of you will say here we are in the last few days of the legislative session, and we're taking up a major issue like this. We've been working on this for the last six weeks."

Sen. Mark Harris, R-Soda Springs, said while considering the bill was difficult, he decided to support it after weighing the good and bad. He drives on a road supported by GARVEE bonds between Boise and Pocatello, and he contends the stretch is much safer now than before.

"I drove out here on I-84 to see what it is like. It wasn't fun," Harris added.

Sen. Patti Anne Lodge, R-Huston, cited public safety as one of her chief reasons to vote for the bill. She also said the repairs would ultimately impact more people than those who just live in Canyon County.

"Do you not care about the safety and lives of the people in your district and in Idaho?" Lodge asked her Senate colleagues.

In addition to the \$300 million in GARVEE bonds, the bill extends the sunset date for the surplus eliminator, due to expire in May, to 2019. Funds at the end of the year from the state budget surplus, if any, would be split in half. One-half would go toward a strategic initiatives fund that would be split 60/40, with 60 percent to ITD and 40 percent to local governments for transportation projects. The other half of the budget surplus would go toward budget stabilization.

The third major component to the bill is establishing a transportation expansion and congestion mitigation fund in the state general fund. This would be funded by 1 percent of state sales taxes collected after the portion for local governments is taken out — around \$15 million annually — and about \$5 million per year from cigarette taxes that currently go to ITD for its strategic initiatives program.

Several senators expressed reservations and concern about the bill because of its reliance on sales and cigarette tax revenue. Others objected to taking on more debt, as a GARVEE bond technically would do.

Sen. Michelle Stennett, D-Ketchum, said while she has sympathy for I-84 and all poorly maintained roads in the state, she is concerned about the bonding.

"We have to talk about the debt, ongoing debt that we're talking about here for all Idahoans," Stennett said.

Stennett said rural areas will not benefit from the transportation expansion and congestion mitigation fund because that money will probably go to areas with larger population bases. While she appreciated the 60/40 split proposed for the surplus eliminator funds, and the 40 percent set aside for local governments, she claimed it is not enough compared to what Idahoans will have to pay.

With an \$18 million some-odd surplus projected next year, that means local government entities will split around \$3 million, Stennett said.

Sen. Abby Lee, R-Fruitland, said the bill is not just an act of charity for Canyon County. She said the legislation will impact the rest of the state because the goods everyone uses — from groceries to mail — are hauled and shipped along the corridor.

"And if you live in Idaho, you benefit from a transportation system infrastructure whether or not you drive that particular road," Lee said.

Sen. Shawn Keough, R-Sandpoint, said she has always supported measures to fund transportation, but "process matters." Keough objected to there not being public input or at least the input of a joint committee on the matter.

Keough also argued in favor of raising the gas tax to fund roads, calling it a "user fee" that would pay for the state's transportation maintenance if increased.

"It's OK to get into debt, but it's not OK to raise the revenue to offset the debt that impacts us?" Keough asked.

The Legislature is expected to wrap up business as early as Wednesday.

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