Open house planned on the return of the downtown circulator

By: Teya Vitu March 13, 2017 0



A streetcar remains an active option for the idea of a "downtown circulator" in Boise. Image courtesy of Gehl Studio.

The coming months could see decisions on the route and mode of transportation for a "downtown circulator" to get people across town and to Boise State University.

Expect to see a return of Boise Mayor David Bieter's pet streetcar project.

For now, a steering committee has reached consensus on a route for a downtown circulator to recommend to the City Council.

The high-profile steering committee deliberated for more than two years on a route. The result is familiar to many, as it has been in play since 2014 and has existed in earlier guises since 2005's Boise Mobility Study.

In tandem with the steering committee's efforts since Feb. 2014, the city of Boise's Public Works Department has completed a five-year alternatives analysis for the circulator – a requirement if the city hopes to procure federal funding for the project. The analysis was funded with a \$375,000 Federal Transit Administration grant.

The results of the analysis and the route will be revealed March 14 at an open house from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. at Boise City Hall. Public input is welcome, as it has been at other circulator open houses and workshops over the years.



The recommended route for a downtown circulator is a familiar one, though the Lusk Street section was added after the opening of several student housing complexes. Image courtesy of city of Boise.

The T-Route, as it's referred to, calls for the circulator to run up and down Idaho and Main streets between First and 15th streets, up and down Capitol Boulevard and Ninth Street, turn in to Lusk Street to tap into student housing, and run down University Drive to the Boise State Student Union.

The T-Route is just a recommendation. And there is no recommendation from the steering committee or Public Works on what mode of transport to use, such as streetcar, bus or some other means.

The City Council can alter the route and even decide what mode to use when the recommendation is brought before it in the spring, said Jim Pardy, city engineer and project manager for the circulator.

The council's decision would become the "locally preferred option" as the city potentially proceeds to seek federal transportation funding.

Steering committee member Clay Carley, general manager of the Old Boise real estate company, said the 18-member steering committee remained deliberately vague with its recommendations based on a fixed-route circulator along the T-Route. The recommendations urge accommodating emerging technologies, meeting the stated goals of the city's alternatives analysis and defining the required local financial commitment to build and operate a circulator.

"It was a very diverse group with opinions that varied from A to Z," Carley said. "There was no real consensus for one thing or another (other than a route recommendation). There is so much more information needed before any group can determine if it's the right thing to do or not."

The city's alternatives analysis estimates a \$111 million cost to install a streetcar system on the 5.3-mile route and a \$23 million cost for a bus shuttle systems.

Pardy is encouraged with the steering committee's recommendation.

"The steering committee could have just said 'cancel it, we don't need it,' – the no-build option," Pardy said. "They didn't do that. This is still on the table."

The steering committee included CEOs of J.R. Simplot Co., Idaho Power, developers from Gardner Co., Rafanelli & Nahas, and Old Boise, representatives from the Boise City County, Capital City Development Corp., Greater Boise Auditorium District, Ada County Highway District, Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, St. Luke's Health System, Idaho Conservation Votes, The Grove Hotel, and the Hardy Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Boise.

"The mayor wants to build a streetcar," said Mike Journee, the mayor's spokesman. Bieter has pushed for a streetcar for a decade. He encountered strong resistance from the public when he presented a streetcar proposal in 2008. Pardy acknowledged the city in 2008 had not done its homework when it sought and in 2010 failed to get federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) funding, the predominant source of federal support for streetcar construction in recent years.

The analysis underway now will determine estimated costs, daily ridership, economic activity and funding options for construction as well as operations and maintenance.

The T-Route may not have changed much in four years, but downtown has evolved dramatically. Eighth and Main, Idaho's tallest building, was constructed; Boise State moved its Computer Science department

downtown; hotel and apartments/condos are under construction, and St. Luke's Health System downtown has planned a major expansion.

"The culture has changed, too," Pardy said. "The Millennials look at this and say 'why wouldn't you do this?' What I do know is now there is more interest and people are much more interested in the circulator. It's a conversation people want to have. Transit is much more popular than four years ago." Carley cautioned that making a commitment to a streetcar could be risky in an era of rapid change, with a sharing economy and autonomous transportation emerging.

"If it's a rail car, it's over \$100 million. If it's not a rail car, it's a fraction of that," Carley said. So far, the 21st century resurgence of streetcars in about two dozen American cities has spurred economic development. Developers have found a sweet spot with tracks planted in the ground, implying the route will be there for decades and not altered on a whim as can happen with a bus, Journee said. Once the City Council identifies a preferred alternative, city staff will determine if the downtown circulator is viable in terms of costs and potential funding sources.

"There is a local funding mosaic of options," Pardy said. "A local improvement district, tax increment financing, parking revenues. In the next $1\frac{1}{2}$ years we really roll up our sleeves. The one thing not there is local option tax."

The local option tax is a common tool for public transit projects across the country, where ballot measures typically ask to increase sales tax in specific cities or counties. Local option taxes are prohibited in Idaho except in small resort cities.

Among the questions to be considered is how much would passengers be charged, or would the service be free such as Denver's 16th Street MallRide. This bus service runs up and down the 1-mile 16th Street Mall, a pedestrian street where the MallRide buses have been the only motorized vehicles since the mall opened in 1982.

"We don't know yet," Pardy said. "That will be the work coming up."

_

Members of Steering Committee for the Downtown Circulator Alternative Analysis, which met from February 2014 to October 2016 to determine recommendations for down circulator to shuttle people across downtown and to Boise State University.

Mayor David Bieter City Council President Elaine Clegg David Eberle, former Boise City Council member Sara Baker, Ada County Highway District Jim Hansen, Ada County Highway District Chris Roth, St. Luke's Health System Bill Whitacre, J.R. Simplot Co. Darrel Anderson, Idaho Power John Brunelle, Capital City Development Corp. Matt Stoll, Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho Scott Schoenherr, Rafanelli & Nahas Tommy Ahlquist, Gardner Co. Clay Carley, Old Boise John Cunningham, The Grove Hotel Hy Kloc, Greater Boise Auditorium District Courtney Washburn, Idaho Conservation Voters

Gregory Kaslo, Hardy Foundation