

Bus riders find merit in public transit

By: Teya Vitu | March 24, 2017 | 0



Boise Young Professionals members Heather Kimmitt (left), Chase Erkins, Amy Probert and Wyatt Schroeder aboard a ValleyRide bus discussing the merits of public transit for the younger generations. Photo by Pete Grady.

There’s a stigma to riding the bus in the Treasure Valley.

Donna Bernardelli, who rides to work at the Moffatt Thomas law firm every day, hears it all the time.

“Are you afraid to drive? Do you have a DUI?” she said. “I get a lot of ‘Don’t you ride with a lot of weird people?’ The overall impression is it’s dirty and there are strange people on it.”

Office workers, the elderly, school children, young adults, refugees and others use Valley Regional Transit buses, Ada County Highway District’s Commuteride vans or Treasure Valley Transit rural bus service. But those riders make up less than 1 percent of the local population, according to the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or COMPASS.

“There is the attitude to ‘those people,’” said Bernardelli, who rides the bus to work between Middleton and downtown Boise.

Nowhere in America is public transit a universal mode of transport. Even in New York City, only 54 percent of commuters ride public transit. Portland, Ore. has a transit ridership of only 12 percent, according to Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.

This story is part of an eight-part series on public transportation that Idaho Business Review is running in print and online this winter.

But public transit advocates say transit ridership has been steadily increasing since bottoming out in the mid-1970s. Cities in the 1970s that essentially rejected public transit, such as Los Angeles, Dallas, Phoenix, Denver, and Salt Lake City, in the past 20 years have invested billions of dollars in public transit as the foundation of their growth strategies, said Art Guzzetti, vice president of policy at American Public Transportation Association in Washington, D.C.

Groups that promote economic development, such as Boise Young Professionals and Boise Regional Realtors, support public transit. Some even use the bus.

“In winter, I rely heavily on the bus,” said Amy Probert, a BYP member whose employer, CTA Group, pays for her bus rides.

“I don’t want to deal with the parking,” Probert said. “It’s a lot faster to go with the bus. I definitely considered selling my car a few times.”

New arrivals to the Treasure Valley don’t see the existing commute – which is generally a half an hour from downtown Boise to Nampa in rush hour – as onerous.

“My buyers are really happy about commute times,” said Brandi Holaday, an agent at Hughes Real Estate Group in Boise. “They don’t see that growth but I do. I think it’s important to look at long-term growth (in terms of increasing public transit).”



Boise Mayor David Bieter recalls hearing of a Pacific Northwest real estate consultant who said, “If you’re not showing me a project with rail transit, don’t even show them to me.”

Bernardelli drives 4 miles to a bus stop to catch the single morning run of Valley Regional Transit's Route 44 bus, which she has ridden since the route started in June 2007. She does drive once a week, usually.

"Money. It's all about the money," Bernardelli said, adding that her employer pays half of parking or half of bus fare for employees. Her half of parking would be \$780 and her half for the bus is \$258.

"There's no wear and tear on my car," Bernardelli said. "No traffic to deal with. I can play games or sleep. I don't understand why more people don't do it."

She said the bus ride takes 15 minutes or so more than the 45-minute drive from beyond Star. And "you're not going to stop on the way home to shop. You can't swing by your parents' house on the way home."

Many public officials know that more people would ride the bus if there were more routes available.

"Experiences from other regions indicate that people will use public transportation if it is robust enough to make it convenient, high quality, and service is frequent enough that it can compete with the option of driving a personal car," said Kelli Badesheim, executive director of Valley Regional Transit.

Better public transit would also help very low-income people get to work, said Wyatt Schroeder, executive director of Charitable Assistance to Community's Homeless (CATCH).

"Families spend \$250 a month on a car with an income of \$800," he said. "For those families, transportation is a lifeline. With transit, they can live farther out of town (where it's cheaper to live)."

Refugees often rely on public transportation as well, said Joe Swenson, who owns Square One Advisory Services, a business consulting company.



Joe Swenson catches up on work while riding the No. 3 bus to the airport. Photo by Teya Vitu.

"Chances are the transit system doesn't support getting them to work," Swenson said. "They have to drive. They get old junkers that don't work particularly well. If they had an alternative, they would do it."

The elderly and disabled also tend to rely on public transit.

"As you get older, your reflexes slow down," said Lupe Wissel, state director of AARP Idaho, which has 178,000 members in Idaho. "How can folks still get around safely? Right now, we are pretty limited with what's available. You cannot afford a cab. The (Treasure Valley Transit buses) go by every hour. If you have some illness, how long do they wait?"

Wissel noted that for many of the elderly and disabled, transit means

independence.

"Once you can't drive, you are at the mercy of someone who can drive you," Wissel said. "I think it's happening more than we know."

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.

ABOUT TEYA VITU



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