

Treasure Valley traffic congestion: When will it get better?

Tami Tremblay, KTVB 10:27 PM. MST February 27, 2017



(Photo: KTVB)

BOISE - Idaho recently wrapped up a decade-long program that invested nearly \$860 million in road and bridge improvements. The program, called Garvee, was an innovated highway bonding process.

Garvee delivered 59 transportation projects across the state. Now that the program is over we wanted to know what plans are going to be put in place to continue building our infrastructure and cut down on traffic congestion.

Traffic congestion is a big issue for thousands of us in the Treasure Valley. One of the worst spots identified by traffic planners is the stretch of Interstate 84 between Nampa and Caldwell.

"We probably should have widened that about 10 years ago," said Matt Stoll, Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS) executive director. "Right now we're trying to catch up."

COMPASS is an agency made of local governments to plan for the future. The Idaho Transportation Department is part of COMPASS. Adam Rush is the public involvement coordinator.

"We have to balance all of our needs on a statewide basis," said Rush.

COMPASS conducts long-range planning every four years. The last time the planning was done was in 2014.

"That identified 33 corridors that needed to be improved," said Stoll.

"We look at where accidents are occurring, we look at where growth is occurring," explained Rush.

COMPASS has identified four corridors in the Treasure Valley that are the main priorities:

1. Interstate 84 between Nampa and Caldwell
2. Highway 44 from Exit 25 in Caldwell to downtown Boise
3. Highway 20-26 from Middleton Road to Locust Grove
4. Highway 55 in Canyon County from the Karcher Interchange to Marsing.

"Anyone can see driving around those four corridors are really the critical ones both from a congestion standpoint but also safety, said Stoll.

Stoll says Eagle Road is also congested, but it's as wide as it can be so not much can be done to address that stretch of roadway. He says some improvements to help traffic move smoother, like more streamlined traffic signaling, is in the works.

Back to the four main corridors identified by COMPASS: When will we start seeing improvements? Stoll says there is no money to deal with them at this point in time. Right now state and federal funding will only cover maintenance. Stoll says there's even a \$150 million shortfall when it comes to maintaining the system we have.

In 2015 the Idaho Legislature did take some action. They passed a bill increasing the gas tax and registration fees.

"It generated about \$97 million statewide," said Stoll.

"We have projects in place, we have plans in place, we can take advantage of using that funding," said Rush.

However, the money can only be used for maintaining our current infrastructure. Last year, Idaho got a \$16 million boost in federal highway funds, but again, earmarked for maintenance.

"The reality right now is the hold back in the availability of money to build projects," said Stoll.

Cities like Salt Lake, Tucson and Denver have created a local taxing authority to overcome the financial problem. It allows residents to decide on taxing themselves to fund a transportation project.

"So it's putting the power in the citizens' hands," said Stoll. "Are they willing to pay or not?"

The Idaho Constitution allows for local option taxing authority, but the Legislature would need to authorize it. Stoll says that might be the only way we'll see major improvements in the foreseeable future.

The Idaho Transportation Department does have funding already in place to widen Highway 20-26 to four lanes between Eagle and Locust Grove roads. The one mile of construction is expected to start in four years. Interstate 84 in Canyon County will also be re-paved this summer.

Traffic planners across the nation are waiting to see what the Trump administration does. One of President Trump's campaign promises was to build back up our transportation infrastructure.

The Idaho Transportation Department is holding two public meetings to address needs of Highway 20-26 and take comments for improvements:

- March 7 from 4-7 p.m.: Ambrose School, 6100 N. Locust Grove Rd, Meridian
- March 9 from 4-7 p.m.: Thomas Jefferson Charter School, 1209 Adam Smith Avenue, Caldwell

COMPASS is also planning on holding several open houses in the Fall. You can find out more about the agency and how it is planning for the future [here](#).