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Keep working on transportation solutions before it's a crisis

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A ValleyRide bus makes a stop in Nampa.

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At what point does a mere problem become an all-out crisis?

When talking about transportation issues in the Treasure Valley, that might be a tough question to answer. Are we already in a crisis? Perhaps. Are we headed for a crisis? Most certainly.

So at what point should we do something about it?



We believe we should be doing something about it now.

That's why we're encouraged that the Idaho Transportation Department is "looking to innovate in our long-range planning approach," according to a guest opinion that ran in the Idaho Press last week.

To that end, the Idaho Transportation Department has put together a survey focusing on three areas: prioritizing strategies, allocation of new revenue and decision-making trade-offs.

To participate in the survey, visit: <https://idago2040.metroquest.com>. ITD says the survey takes less than five minutes to complete.

The survey is part of the department's process of updating the long-range transportation plan for the state highway system. The plan is called IDAGO 2040, looking at what Idaho will look like in the year 2040 and what challenges we may encounter as we move forward.

It's no secret by now that Idaho is the fastest-growing state in the country, according to the Census Bureau, and Boise is the fastest-growing metro area in the U.S., according to Forbes magazine.

Many people who now call the Treasure Valley home have come from other parts of the country, and many have come from big cities, such as Seattle, Salt Lake, Phoenix and San Francisco.

Those folks know how bad the traffic is in those places, and they come here and see how good we have it — for now.

Based on the experiences of these other cities, we know that with this growth comes the inevitability that our traffic will become just as bad, commute times will become longer and air quality will get even worse.

So we are encouraged that the Idaho Transportation Department is looking more than 20 years down the road, not just one or two years from now. We're also encouraged that they've made a commitment to work with other agencies and planning organizations.

We should all be paying more attention to the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or Compass, which has been sounding the alarm for years.

A special series in the Idaho Press-Tribune in 2014 reported that a Compass study projected that a commute from Caldwell to Boise will take 70 minutes in the future and a drive from Nampa to the Boise Airport, currently about 25 minutes, could be 40 minutes to nearly an hour.

We should be doing a better job of heeding these warning signs.

This all comes at the same time that Valley Regional Transit is putting together its “Valley Connect 2.0” plan, which aims to expand the range and quality of service in the Treasure Valley’s public transit system.

Whether you like it or not, public transportation has to be a key part of the solution. But we recognize it’s a Catch-22: Not enough people ride it because it’s not convenient enough; it’s not convenient enough because there aren’t enough routes; there aren’t enough routes because there’s not enough funding; there’s not enough funding because cities and counties don’t pay VRT enough money; city and county officials don’t spend enough on VRT because not many people ride the bus; and so on.

What if VRT had enough mega-buses to ride along in a dedicated route on I-84 every 15 minutes? What if the Ada County Highway District completely closed State Street in Boise and operated a commuter rail in and out of downtown Boise? What if the state budgeted \$10 million, \$20 million, \$50 million for public transportation in Idaho?

The problem isn’t that we don’t have answers to those questions. The problem is that we’re not even asking the questions to begin with. Simply widening I-84 every few years is not going to be the solution. Having a state Legislature deride any discussion about it with the tired comeback “the great state of Ada” isn’t going to get anything done, either.

We support the efforts of the Idaho Transportation Department, Compass and Valley Regional Transit in looking far into the future and pushing the discussion toward solutions.

We encourage everyone, from residents and city officials to planners and state legislators to get on board with solutions — before it becomes too clear that we really are in a crisis situation.

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