



LOCAL

Hey Boise: Salt Lake City has commuter rail, buses people use, and lessons for you

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It started out as a conversation about how to bring passenger rail to the increasingly traffic-choked Treasure Valley and what planners here could learn from the Salt Lake Valley transit system.

But the presentation by Steve Meyer, interim executive director of the Utah Transit Authority, quickly turned into a lecture on the fine art of lobbying.

Because, he told the 40 or so transit enthusiasts at a forum Wednesday in Meridian, there is no transit without dependable funding. And what Utah learned, Meyer said, is that there is no dependable funding without local taxes. And there are no local taxes without the state Legislature's blessing.

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When the Utah Transit Authority wanted to increase rail and bus service along the Wasatch Front, Meyer said, it reached out to the region's business community to help persuade the public at all levels.

“We had advertisements from the local head of UPS saying, ‘We need these projects, because my trucks need to get through traffic to deliver packages’,” Meyer told the audience at the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or COMPASS, the regional planning agency. “The head of Utah Power and light ... said, ‘My crews need to get to outages, and they can't fight this traffic’.”

Tap those “high level business people,” Meyer exhorted, “probably some guy at Micron that says, ‘I’m having trouble hiring employees, good quality employees who want to live where they want to live, work where they have to. How do I get them to work?’”



Commuters board the "Frontrunner" commuter rail line after arriving at a Salt Lake City train station in 2014. Treasure Valley transportation agencies have studied the possibility of a commuter-rail system using existing railroad tracks between Boise and Caldwell.

Rick Bowmer - AP

Salt Lake: 44 million passengers. Boise: 1.2 million

COMPASS invited Meyer to talk about his six-county system and how it has grown in the past 19 years to carry an annual 44 million passengers up and down the Wasatch Front. His agency operates 700 buses, 400 vans, 100 light rail vehicles, 60 commuter rail trains and 140 miles of track.

The idea was to see if this Gem State native, who went to Capital High School and the University of Idaho, could impart a little transit wisdom from the heart of the Beehive State.

The capital of the fastest growing state in the U.S. can use some as its traffic grows but ridership on its skeletal bus system doesn't. The Treasure Valley has less than half the Wasatch Front's population. Valley Regional Transit, which operates in Ada and Canyon counties, serves 1.2 million passengers per year with 75 buses.

The Utah Legislature created Meyer's agency in 1970 "out of a dying public transit system," he said. "We took over the buses. [The Legislature] felt there was a need for a transit system. There certainly was a need for people who wanted to ride transit and people who needed to ride transit."

Not long after that, Utah legislators passed a bill that allowed local governments to enact local sales taxes. When cities joined the transit authority, they agreed to an ongoing sales tax of a quarter cent, which went to run and improve bus service. But when a late 1970s recession gave way to an early 1980s boom, Meyer said, Interstate 15 began to fill up.



For a fee, I-15 drivers in the Salt Lake City area can use high-occupancy vehicle lanes to travel faster during rush hours if their cars carry at least two people.

Rick Bowmer - AP

Conservative Utah voters resisted

But Utah, like Idaho, is a conservative state, and voters resisted higher taxes for transit. The law allowed counties to raise the sales tax to half a cent, but only if voters approved. The first time a transit-related sales-tax increase Utah went on the ballot, in 1992, it failed in Salt Lake County by 14 percentage points.

When transit officials regrouped after that loss, they decided that seeing is believing. They went ahead and built the first stretch of light rail with money raised from the initial quarter-cent tax. It opened in 1999.

It worked. Voters in some counties approved the second quarter cent, and when the Legislature authorized them to raise the tax even higher, four of the six counties did. Today, Salt Lake County has the highest tax, 0.68 cents per dollar; Utah County has the lowest, 0.52 cents. In the two other counties involved, taxes have been passed city by city.

The four counties extended the rail system by 70 miles at a cost of \$2.2 billion, including local and federal funds.

“There was a lot of opposition to the first line,” Meyer recounted. “There were protesters out. ‘Light rail kills babies’. ... And there was a group of business owners downtown ... concerned about what it was going to do to the viability of their businesses.”

Some businesses did close during the lengthy construction process. The next time the transit authority built a rail line, Meyer said, the authority worked harder to help affected businesses, at one point giving out coupons to get people to shop in the construction areas.



A commuter taps a button to board the Utah Transit Authority's "Frontrunner" train after it arrives at a Salt Lake City station from Ogden. Ridership on the authority's commuter rail lines increased by 103 percent in 2013 after a new 45-mile rail line from Salt Lake City to Provo opened in late 2012.

Transit 'can actually save money'

Still, "there's a business case to be made for this," Meyer said. "And you need to make your case to the Legislature. ... A balanced transportation system can actually save money. That plays to conservative principles."

Don Kostelec, an independent transportation planner who lives in southeast Boise, said he has used and worked with UTA's transit system extensively. Although the Wasatch Front is more densely populated than the Treasure Valley, he considers it more comparable to Boise in terms of politics, finances and pace of growth than other cities with rail systems, such as Portland.

"The service types offered in SLC conform to the prevailing land use patterns: light rail in denser, urbanized corridors; commuter rail to more suburban areas; and bus rapid transit on other corridors that bridge the two areas," Kostelec said in an email. "They also have a great system of coach-style commuter buses that serve longer-distance commutes."

"In my personal experience in riding UTA services," he said, "I have seen solid ridership, as well as things like independent groups of teenagers riding it. That's a great indicator of freedom and independence."

Another fan of Salt Lake City's approach is Mark Klinger, who likes the network of high-occupancy vehicle lanes. "I always use them when passing through Salt Lake," he said. "[They] usually make for a easy passage unless I hit the area at rush hour. Then all bets are off."



A Utah Transit Authority Trax light-rail train pulls into its stop in front of the City Creek shopping center in Salt Lake City. Boise Mayor David Bieter has proposed a light-rail train circulating through Downtown from east to west, with an extension south to Boise State University. But the city lacks money to build it.

Rick Bowmer - AP

Treasure Valley rail: Always talk, never action

A rail system for the Treasure Valley commuters has been talked about for a generation, said Mark Carnopis, a spokesman for Valley Regional Transit. The region's population has swelled from about 430,000 to nearly 700,000 in that time. COMPASS figures that, by 2040, the population will reach 1 million.

“As people get more and more aware of the need for a more robust public transportation system, the issue of light rail or a commuter-rail line comes up on a regular basis,” Carnopis said. “Funding would be a major hurdle.”

Carnopis said a 2003 study estimated that it would cost \$108 million to build a light-rail line between Caldwell and Boise with trains arriving every 45 minutes, and \$4.8 million to operate it for a year. Today, he said in an interview as he waited for Meyer to begin his presentation, “the cost would be easily more than double.”

The route considered in the study would use existing Union Pacific and Boise Valley Railroad rights of way.

In fact, it was immediately and abundantly clear — from the very first audience question Wednesday night — what the biggest roadblock is between the Treasure Valley and a functional passenger rail system: money.

The lack of money has kept Boise from building a light-rail system serving Downtown that Mayor David Bieter has sought for at least 10 years. The most recent proposal, unveiled 13 months ago, would build tracks for light-rail trains to circulate from east to west on Idaho Street from Broadway to 15th Street, and back east to Broadway on Main Street, with side trips down 9th Street to Boise State University and back up Capitol Boulevard. A spur along University Drive would extend to the Student Union Building.

The city estimated start-up costs at \$111 million, for which Boise could scrape together \$26 million to \$38 million from existing sources. If the federal government or other sources could cough up the rest, City Council President Pro Tem Elaine Clegg thinks a circulator could be the first piece of an improved transit system for the Treasure Valley.



Traffic moves along Eagle Road near the intersection with Fairview Avenue, one of the congested Treasure Valley's busiest areas. On Wednesday, the head of the Utah Transit Authority, told a group of Idaho transit enthusiasts how the Salt Lake Valley built and funded a robust system to alleviate traffic.

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Fares cover no more than 20 percent of cost

As Meyer points out, transportation as a whole is subsidized. Government funds are used to build roads and bridges and rail roads, pay for buses and trains, operate transit systems. User fees pay a part of the cost: think gas taxes and bridge tolls and bus tickets.

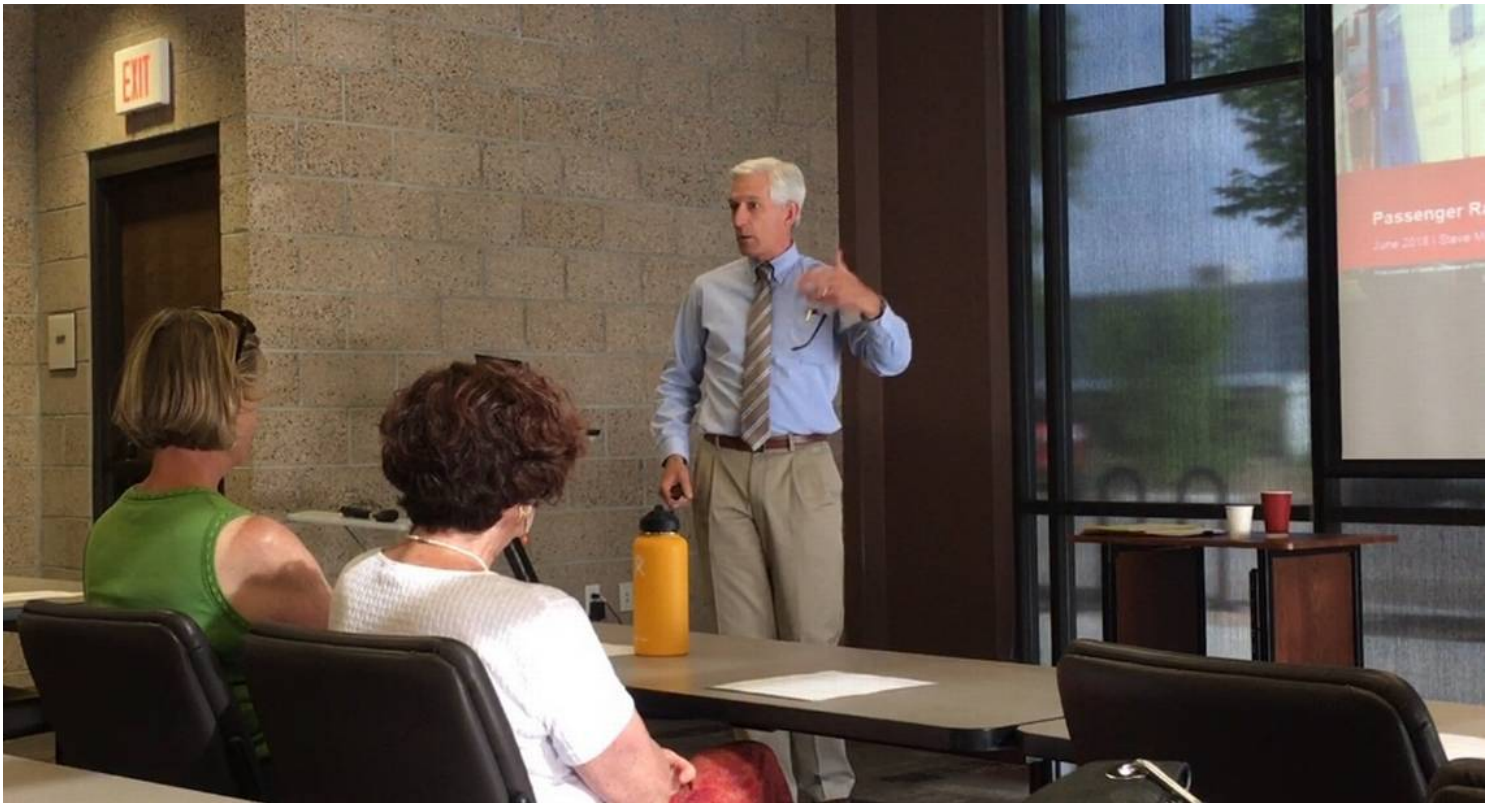
"Fare-box recovery is 13 percent to 20 percent on overall transit systems," Meyer said. "Taxpayer dollars have got to go into it."

Portland uses a payroll tax to help pay for transit. Other possibilities include rental car fees, room taxes, special assessment districts for businesses, and emission fees.

But Idaho is tax-averse. Just ask Wayne Hoffman, president of the Idaho Freedom Foundation, which describes itself as a free-market think tank.

Hoffman believes ride-share services such as Uber and Lyft could take the place of mass transit and actually get people where they want to go. He says many transit systems "bleed out money" and notes that "for much of our history, roads and other transportation options were built privately."

As for a local-option tax? "If the plan is to get rid of the property tax and replace it with sales tax, that's a conversation I'm willing to have," Hoffman said. "But local governments want to keep their high property tax and add on top of it a sales tax that will forever adversely impact the local economy."



Steve Meyer, interim executive director of the Utah Transit Authority, told a group of transit enthusiasts Wednesday, June 6, at COMPASS headquarters in Meridian that the only way to build a transit system is with a dependable stream of revenue.

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Brad Little: Local-option taxes make 'hodgepodge'

Lt. Gov. Brad Little, the Republican candidate for governor in November, also frowns on allowing local governments to pass taxes. Local-option taxes pose "many challenges in maintaining a fair, simple, predictable and competitive tax system for Idaho," he said in a statement to the Statesman. In other states, he said, they have "created a hodgepodge of tax rates, affecting the predictability of the overall tax system."

Paulette Jordan, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, did not respond to a request for comment.

Not all Republicans agree with Little. State Senate Majority Leader Chuck Winder, who represents part of west Boise and Meridian, is a mass-transit supporter. He believes the region needs a better bus system first as a transition to passenger rail. The Treasure Valley has a natural route for a rail system and would be remiss if it didn't take advantage of the region's good transportation bones, he said. He has introduced legislation to institute a local-option tax and plans to do so again.

"It did not come up in the last session," he told the Statesman. "We talked about it a little bit. There wasn't the interest. There were other things that were higher priority. We'll bring it up again."

He asked a reporter about Meyer's presentation: "Did they suggest getting the Olympics?"

Yes, actually, though in similar tongue-in-cheek fashion. Utah started working on passenger rail before Salt Lake City won the 2002 Winter Olympics. The transit system built its first line in 1999. It did, however, receive a hefty infusion of federal funds to expand the system in time for the games.

What a new Ada County poll says

And there's the question of whether Treasure Valley residents would even vote for a local sales tax to fund some kind of a rail system. Craig Quintana, ACHD spokesman, said his agency is finishing a poll about funding priorities in Ada County, and the answer is mixed.

"One of the questions was 'Would you support giving some ACHD money to transit?'" said Quintana, whose agency cares for the county's roadways. "In the overall poll, that didn't make it as one of the top three priorities."

Residents on the county's older east side said they wanted ACHD's money to go for things like bike lanes, safer routes to school and transit. But on the west side, where residents tend to commute greater distances, Quintana said the priorities are congestion reduction and "big-ticket

road projects, which we define as like replacing aging bridges across the Boise River.”

One other consideration in bringing transit to any region, Meyer told the COMPASS audience, is planning.

The Salt Lake area began planning for transit decades in advance. Officials traveled to other states to gather information about how their rail systems worked. Commissions were formed. Studies were conducted.

A woman toward the back of the audience piped up during the last half of the two-hour presentation: "I just am wondering if anyone knows if there's a group in Idaho that's getting organized and working toward this?"

There was a long silence. Some nervous laughter. Then COMPASS spokeswoman Amy Luft spoke up.

"Compass is planning for passenger rail," she said, "but it's unfunded. ... We are planning for it, but we can only go so far."

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