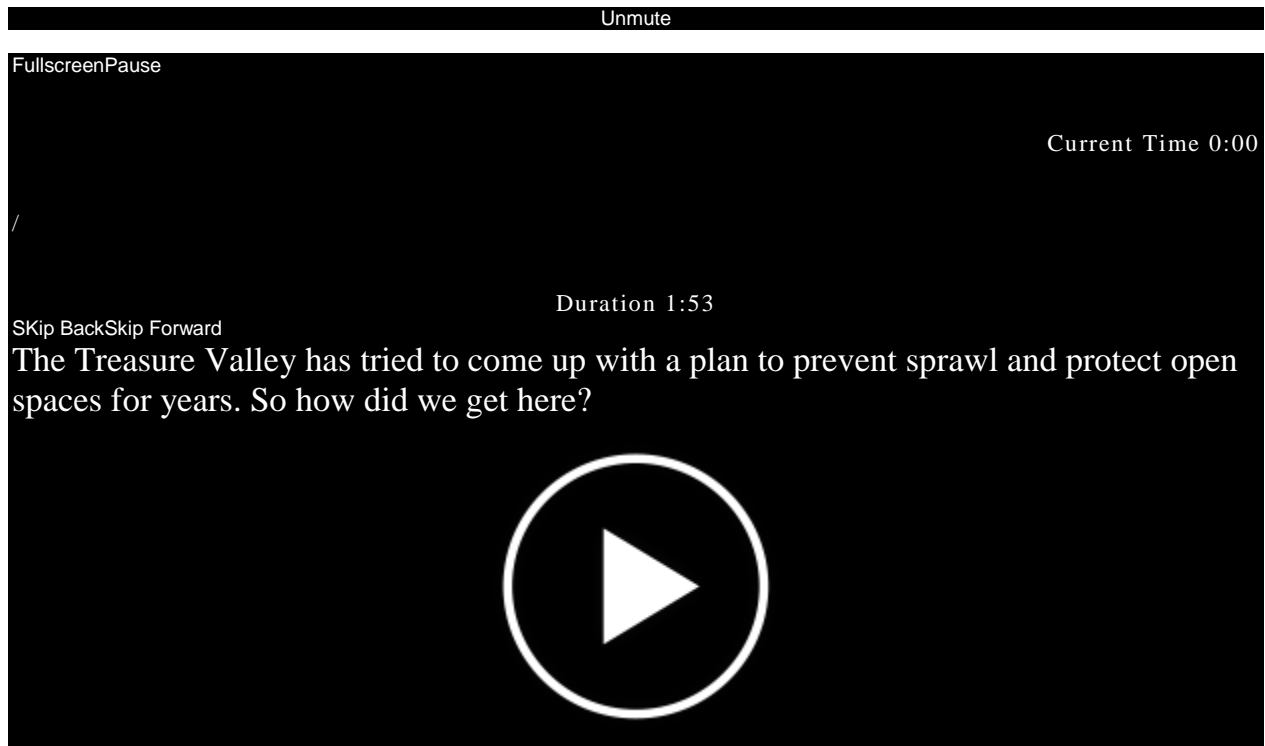


Treasure Valley faces regionwide problems. Its fragmented governments don't solve them

[BY KATE TALERICO](#)

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When the Boise area started to grow in the 1970s, many planners hoped the region might be able to implement policies that would keep it from making the same mistakes past cities had: consuming farmland, sprawling out, increasing traffic. We failed.

BY [KATE TALERICO](#)

It was 2007, and the elected officials of Ada County were at each other's throats.

Attacks played out in Statesman headlines and op-eds. Kuna was pushing into Meridian. Meridian was pushing into Eagle. Eagle was pushing into Star. Boise was mad at

everyone for swiftly ignoring growth plans they'd just spent millions of dollars on. And everyone was mad at the Ada County Highway District.

That July, after months of infighting spurred by the region's rapid growth, [then-Eagle Mayor Nancy Merrill called all the mayors](#) to her home for a retreat with a conflict-management leader to work out their issues.

The mayors turned their cell phones off upon entering the retreat — there would be no contact with the outside world, and certainly not the media. “We discussed our differences and how we could work together,” Merrill said. “Each one of us had issues that were hard for us.”

The mayors knew they had to find a way to work together quickly. A panel of experts from the [Urban Land Institute](#) had just predicted serious consequences if Ada County and the county's six cities didn't start coordinating their growth management plans.

Behind the traffic jams and infrastructure breakdowns was a different kind of breakdown in the region's political infrastructure. Cities were acting unilaterally, sometimes approving developments that weren't even in their comprehensive plans, which are state-mandated plans meant to guide future land use decisions. Unlike zoning, the plans are not legally binding.

Such approvals in turn affected ACHD, which bases its roadway projects on the comprehensive plans.

COMPASS, the regional transportation planning agency, was seeing its master plan for the area ignored as cities approved land-use decisions where transportation improvements didn't yet exist.

And leaders in each city felt like the highway district was fixing the roads in every city but theirs, and that their residents had been cheated.

The system was fragmented, with land use and transportation decisions in their own silos. To overcome these divides, Urban Land Institute researchers suggested the county, its cities and ACHD create a local-government alliance — an institution that would add sharper teeth to the various regional plans drafted over the previous decade.

If the mayors at Merrill's house were to carry out such an ambitious idea, talking to each other would be the first step.

The retreat accomplished that much. The mayors came up with a few shared goals: To repair deteriorating infrastructure. To find effective ways to fund growth.

They exchanged numbers and agreed to air their grievances over the phone rather than in print. And they decided to hold meetings about the local government alliance.

Kuna, like some other cities in Ada County, has sprawled into farmland as it seeks economic opportunities in growth. Darin Oswald DOSWALD@IDAHOSTATESMAN.COM

Their efforts produced some lasting change: Today, the city councils meet regularly with the Ada County Highway District commissioners to talk about their transportation needs. The mayors of the six cities in Ada County also get together to talk about regional issues, and each sends a representative to sit on the board of COMPASS.

But the various agencies still act unilaterally, despite problems like air pollution, sewage facilities and traffic, which pay little notice to city limits. COMPASS is toothless outside of its role planning for long-term transportation projects. Land use decisions still fall on the cities — which have continued to sprawl into farmland as they seek to pay for growth by expanding their tax bases.

In Meridian, the City Council approved deviation after deviation from its comprehensive plan, deciding only last year to call on developers to stop coming to them with projects that propose such changes. Kuna, sprouting subdivisions and businesses, two years ago expanded its area of impact — the area beyond its city limits that it expects eventually to annex — east toward Boise. And Boise and ACHD remain embroiled in philosophical differences about widening roadways and funding transit.

“The mayors are first and foremost concerned with the boundaries within either city limits, because there is no government body that has the entire region in their interest,” said Downtown Boise developer Clay Carley, who has participated in regional planning efforts for the last two decades.

Other cities have benefited from regional institutions that manage growth. Through their state legislatures, cities like Portland and Minneapolis have created regional governments that coordinate infrastructure and development issues.

Boise Mayor David Bieter said he supports further regional coordination. “The resources are finite for infrastructure,” he said. “And with limited funds and investments affecting most — if not all — jurisdictions, it’s in our interest to do this.”

Years ago, the Treasure Valley did experiment with a form of regional government. A few forms, actually. But over and over, these institutions have crumbled without the ability to enforce the vague goals for growth city leaders preach.

BEHIND OUR REPORTING

Why we wrote this story

Many readers have asked: What are Treasure Valley leaders doing to coordinate growth? This story provides one part of the answer. As we keep covering growth, we expect to report more stories that not only identify problems but offer solutions. We welcome your questions, comments and ideas. Email reporter Kate Talerico at ktalerico@idahostatemsan.com.

Ada’s first shot at regional governance

In the 1970s, the local governments also struggled to deal with growth — albeit at a smaller scale. The cities and county voluntarily formed the Ada Council of Governments — ACOG for short — a regional planning agency that had authority over zoning code administration across all the cities.

The planners who staffed the council saw the Treasure Valley as virgin territory, a chance to right the mistakes so many other cities had made in allowing development to sprawl and consume farmland.

ACOG had some successes: It revived Boise’s bus system and put together a comprehensive plan for the region.

But the limits of its power were quickly tested by the Boise City Council. Developers had recently inquired about developing in the foothills, and Boise wanted to allow it to move forward. ACOG was opposed. It drafted a moratorium on development and funded a study to determine the ecological impact of building homes in the Foothills.

A 1972 proposal from the Ada Council of Governments would have limited Boise's urban growth to the boundaries above. The area outside the boundary would be limited to agricultural uses. *IDAHO STATESMAN ARCHIVES*

Boise rejected ACOG's advice, with Mayor Jay Amyx calling ACOG's opinion merely "information" and "nothing taking official action." ACOG was powerless to discipline a rogue city.

After that, ACOG struggled to hold the cities to the shared vision they'd created.

Many of ACOG's ideas never got off paper. Under the helm of Director Robert McAbee, ACOG's staff planned for an 11-block pedestrian shopping area on Vista Avenue to connect the Bench with Downtown. Another plan would have added frontage roads alongside Fairview Avenue for business access, which would have sped up traffic. But McAbee's most controversial idea was to create an [urban growth boundary](#) as Portland had, with the hopes of shortening commutes and preserving open space.

Susan Stacy, a former planner with ACOG, said plans were met with resistance. An anti-communist group, the John Birch Society, labeled regional planning a "communist" idea.

"They thought regional planning was going to be the end of property rights," Stacy said in a phone interview. "We saw people openly carrying rifles into public hearings."

A land-use plan proposed in Ada County in 1976 would have regulated growth, urban sprawl and Foothills development. It was a controversial plan. It drew support from groups like the Idaho Conservation League and the League of Women Voters, but developers and construction workers were heavily opposed. Sam Green *IDAHO STATESMAN ARCHIVE*

The fractures that Boise had caused deepened as each city splintered off. Impotent, the council disbanded in 1977.

Next came the Ada Planning Association, which became the region's official metropolitan planning organization — a federally mandated organization meant to ensure

that local governments would coordinate on planning transportation. In the 1990s, the agency pulled Canyon County into its jurisdiction and changed its name to the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, or COMPASS — the current regional transportation agency.

Around that time, Boise Mayor Brent Coles brought together city and county leaders under the Treasure Valley Partnership, a forum for leaders to work together on region-wide issues.

But cities still handled their land use decisions. And the growth boom of the early 2000s revealed that behind the talk of coordination among the jurisdictions lay real tensions. Officials within some government agencies began to antagonize each other.

The most frequent target was ACHD. As the agency responsible for all local roads in Ada County, it was one of the first agencies to start to feel the strains of growth as traffic piled up. Residents blamed their city leaders for traffic. In turn, the city leaders pointed their fingers at ACHD for failing to complete the road improvements they'd requested.

Boise Mayor David Bieter was — and still is — the most vocal critic of ACHD. But others silently worked in the background to undermine the agency's power. A coalition of mayors, including Bieter and Eagle's Merrill, circulated a bill in the Legislature that would break up ACHD and put power to maintain roads back into cities' hands.

“We failed spectacularly,” Merrill said in a phone interview.

Feeling their authority under threat, ACHD asked the Urban Land Institute, or ULI, to evaluate the agency's performance. Despite the cities' complaints, the panelists perceived that the ACHD model was working — except for one thing: how it was governed.

Coordinating land use and transportation decisions

It could be said that ACHD was Ada County's first real attempt at regional governance. The agency must coordinate with Boise, Meridian, Garden City, Eagle, Kuna and Star on their six visions for the future.

That has proved difficult. In an email to the Statesman, ACHD President Rebecca Arnold wrote, “The land use decisions made by the cities and the Ada County Commission, along with their changes to their comprehensive plans, often add more vehicles to the roads than anticipated, creating congestion and forcing ACHD to modify infrastructure plans.”

In 1976, the Ada Council of Governments drafted a land use plan that would have limited urban development and protected the region’s agriculture by prohibiting development there. The plan eventually passed, but just a few years later it was effectively nullified after cities started to pull out of ACOG. *IDAHO STATESMAN ARCHIVE*

To better maintain growth, that divide between land use and transportation planning had to be bridged, the panel of Urban Land Institute experts argued.

The panel proposed that Ada County create a local government alliance that would consist of elected officials from the county, the highway district and the cities, plus a citizen representative to act as the executive director. It was the Ada Council of Governments all over again — an idea from 1970 resurrected for 2007. The members would create a unified plan for growth, which would in turn help ACHD plan its road improvement priorities.

Proponents said it would give cities a vote in roadway project and force jurisdictions to look beyond their borders.

Bieter enthusiastically threw his support behind the recommendation. But other local leaders felt bullied.

“Bieter pushed the ULI to recommend a local government alliance, which was viewed by some of the other cities as yet another attempt by Mayor Bieter to take control of ACHD’s transportation responsibilities in his never-ending quest to limit growth in other communities and provide funding for his proposed street car system called ‘Desire,’” Arnold told the Idaho Statesman.

“It required giving up power,” said Matt Stoll, COMPASS’s executive director. “The pressure to coordinate transportation and land use wasn’t there.”

The cities held meetings of the alliance for less than a year. The mayors’ lack of enthusiasm showed. The group couldn’t agree how to structure the alliance. Would

representation be proportional to city population? What could give the alliance teeth, so it wouldn't disintegrate if cities decided to pull out, as ACOG did when Boise defied it?

The alliance died with a whimper.

In 1977, the Ada Council of Governments board agreed to reorganize itself as the Ada Planning Association after the smaller cities dropped out of the alliance. *IDAHO STATESMAN ARCHIVES*

Are plans for regional collaboration dead?

Today, the jurisdictions remain fragmented. Issues like disappearing farmland and a lack of funding for a public transportation system span the region. Yet we're no closer to creating an authority to handle regional growth than we were a decade ago.

For all the turmoil it caused in 2007, the local government alliance would have been nowhere nearly as powerful as Portland or Minneapolis's metro councils, which set policy and oversee various regional departments on behalf of the cities. Those institutions derive their authority from their states' legislatures. Building something like that would take years of wrangling in Idaho.

"Political pressure is ultimately in the Legislature," Bieter said.

Treasure Valley leaders are also leery of creating another layer of government.

"Each city has its own personality, and each has its own desire to be its own area," Merrill said. "To make it one huge metropolitan government — I don't think any of the cities have a desire to do that."

Yet less-formal, less-powerful regional agencies can be successful, said David Bragdon, the first president of Portland's Metro Council, who now serves as executive director of TransitCenter Inc., a nonprofit that works to improve public transit systems.

A TriMet light rail car in Portland. The region's Metro Council has coordinated transportation and land use as the Portland area grows. Proposals for rail-based transit in Boise have gone nowhere. Tim Jewett *TRIMET*

He points to Denver, a metro area that used [its transportation planning agency](#) — the equivalent of COMPASS — to start planning for the region’s land use. “There’s just relationships and a shared tradition of working together over the years and decades,” he said.

That’s the kind of system that Boise City Councilwoman Elaine Clegg wants to see. She also thinks that the border wars could be avoided if each city committed to their area of impact.

“Each city should look anew at their city of impact based on today’s data and their ability to serve it, and adjust the borders as needed,” she said.

There’s another important factor, Bragdon said: “You really have to have citizen pressure demanding that the government get its act together.”

Stoll, the executive director of COMPASS, isn’t sure if city leaders have felt that pressure yet.

“If we work together, it’s going to work out for the region as a whole,” Stoll said. “There has to be a willingness to cooperate.”