

State Street, Boise rail upgrades have stalled for years. Can Biden's plan move projects forward?

Rep. Mike Simpson backs the bus project, including it as part of more than \$20.1 million in proposed federal earmarks

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A long-envisioned passenger rail line linking Boise with expanding employment hubs west in Caldwell and Nampa could eventually be in play, transportation officials said, if the immediate chunk of funds come through to improve Valley Regional Transit's bus route along increasingly congested State Street. (Courtesy of the city of Boise)

The Treasure Valley is pinning hopes of upgrading its modest public transit system on an initial pot of federal money that may also jumpstart major investment in a reimagined transportation network and offer expanded service to the region's exploding population.

A long-envisioned passenger rail line linking Boise with expanding employment hubs west in Caldwell and Nampa could eventually be in play, transportation officials said, if the immediate chunk of funds come through to improve Valley Regional Transit's bus route along increasingly congested State Street. The \$2 million project to add bus pullouts, real-time route information and improved shelters and seating is the leading push behind providing residents a proof of concept on the value of building a more robust public transportation system. Boise would chip in as much as \$500,000 more in general fund dollars toward completing the enhancements along the 11-mile route.

"We believe that every car that we can get off the road if there's somebody that's willing and able to try a different method of getting around makes it that much easier for those that need to drive," said Boise Mayor Lauren McLean. "And so really looking at this as a regional transportation option, regional transportation vision that as we continue to grow — and our region in general is one of the fastest growing regions in the country — that we seek to make investments wherever we can, as soon as we can."

Already, Rep. Mike Simpson backs the bus project, including it as part of [more than \\$20.1 million in proposed federal earmarks](#) he submitted centered around infrastructure upgrades in the Republican's 2nd Congressional District.

"The project is an appropriate use of taxpayer dollars," Simpson wrote earlier this spring in [a letter to the U.S. House's committee on transportation](#). "By improving passenger amenities and speeding up transit, this project will make affordable access to jobs and education more attractive and reliable. ... The project improvements will also address safety concerns along the corridor and mitigate traffic impacts of growth through increased ridership."

Valley Regional Transit hopes to widen regional footprint

Valley Regional Transit, which operates nearly two-dozen bus routes throughout Ada and Canyon counties, is aiming over the coming years to widen its regional footprint. First step: Making State Street-Highway 44 the first of three service corridor upgrades to “premium” routes in Boise. The other two are along Fairview and Vista avenues, where established routes already operate.

“It’s not just State Street. State Street won’t work very well if the rest of the regional system doesn’t work with it,” said Kelli Badesheim, executive director of Valley Regional Transportation. “For us, it’s really about figuring out how to put all the puzzle pieces together. We’re not shy to admit we’re far behind, because it really is a funding issue.”

The 22-year-old transit agency remains funded primarily — and voluntarily — by the two counties, plus the cities and districts it serves, at about \$24 million annually for the past three years. Roughly 80% of those yearly revenues go toward existing operations, leaving limited dollars for capital improvements. That, combined with the lack of a dedicated funding source to support Valley Regional Transit, has so far slowed development of the system while roads only continue to swell with weekday commuter and weekend traffic.

Idaho maintains a state sales tax, but is one of just a handful of states nationwide that does not allow voters to tax themselves through retail sales at the local level to fund public services such as mass transit. And across the country, local sales taxes remain one of the most common ways to subsidize the cost of public transit, from buses to light rail to subways to passenger trains.

Oregon, Montana, Delaware and New Hampshire are in that group of states as well that do not permit local sales taxes, because each also does not employ a sales tax at the state level. Alaska does not have a statewide tax on retail sales either, but it does allow cities and local districts to impose their own taxes.

Idaho has resisted a local option tax for years

Idaho has one exception. Since 1978, resort communities, defined as small cities where a major portion of the local economy is based on tourism and recreation — Sun Valley, Ketchum and McCall among them — may assess additional taxes on alcohol and hotel stays for use toward area services. For the past two decades, talk in the Idaho Legislature has seesawed over expanding local option tax allowances through bills or a constitutional amendment, but has rarely progressed further than early discussions.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration continues to pursue an infrastructure bill totaling \$1.7 trillion, down from \$2.3 trillion through negotiations. The original plan called for \$621 billion toward the nation's transportation network. Of that, \$115 billion would be designated for roads and bridges, \$85 billion for public transit, with another \$80 billion for passenger and freight rail systems.

Late last week, House Democrats released a transportation-specific funding package totaling \$547 billion that could bypass a potential stalemate over the infrastructure plan. Included in the proposal is \$343 billion for roads and bridges, \$109 billion for public transit and \$95 billion for the nation's rail network.

Republicans have shown interest in a slimmed-down version of the infrastructure proposal that would represent a compromise, presently at \$928 billion — up from their initial total of \$568 billion in April. The latest counteroffer includes \$500 billion for roads and bridges, \$98 billion for public transit and \$46 billion for passenger and freight rail. However, disagreement persists over how to pay for the massive spending package, and the two sides last week continued negotiations, with Biden for now said to be committed to a bipartisan deal, according to media reports.

It is within these federal funding packages that the Treasure Valley sees its chance to finally develop an interconnected transit system that officials say is

overdue in planning for the influx of new residents to the region. Models suggest the Treasure Valley will grow by about 250,000 people to reach more than 1 million in population by 2040, according to a study by COMPASS, the region's transportation planning agency.

A 'once-in-a-lifetime opportunity' for Idaho transit

Proponents assert that public transit would help limit impacts on the roadways — including the 28-mile commuter rail line from the existing Caldwell Depot to south of downtown Boise, projected to cost about \$300 million to build. A planned bicycle and pedestrian pathway that would run adjacent the rail line has a price tag of \$50 million.

"That's a long-term goal that many people in this community have had for a long time," McLean said, also citing the environmental benefits of mass transit. "I see now ... a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for some larger investments that we haven't necessarily seen before, and there are officials in many of these communities that believe the same, and so we're trying to make that case."

Valley Regional Transit is well setup to add overseeing commuter rail operations to its portfolio of bus operations, said Stephen Hunt, the agency's development director. Outside of convincing Union Pacific, which owns the right of way, to authorize a passenger system atop or next to its active freight line, the biggest hurdle may not be finding the money needed for capital construction, but rather securing the dedicated funds for annual operations to authorize the windfall of federal dollars.

"The challenge is the whole time you need to be able to show that at the end of this you're going to have the resources to operate," Hunt said. "The first domino needs to fall before the rest of it can start. That's what has traditionally, I think, tripped us up in terms of being able to make a lot of progress. So, it's tough.

“There are a lot of hurdles that we have to get over before we can make this a reality. I think, though, that it is worth pursuing,” he added. “If we are creative about how we approach both the funding and the structure of the operating agency, yeah, there’s a possibility that this can move forward. And I think it has the potential to really support the region in terms of how we address mobility, east-west in the Treasure Valley.”

Requests from Idaho’s congressmen for Biden’s transportation plan

Rep. Russ Fulcher

- Did not submit requests

Rep. Mike Simpson

- **Project:** I-15B (US-30) McCammon IC to Old US-91
- **Location:** McCammon
- **Need outlined:** Extend the life cycle of the highway, which is a major trucking corridor in southeast Idaho with a history of deep ruts and cracking.
- **Cost estimate:** \$1,716,660
- **Project sponsor:** Idaho Transportation Department
- **Simpson’s letter on project:** https://simpson.house.gov/uploadedfiles/mccammon_ic_to_old_us-91.pdf
- **Project:** SH-27, Burley city limits to JCT I-84, Minidoka County
- **Location:** Burley
- **Need outlined:** Repair 1.4 miles of pavement on a segment of State Highway 27 that connects Burley to Interstate 84. Route is used by the agricultural industry to transport goods.
- **Cost estimate:** \$3,241,366

- **Project sponsor:** Idaho Transportation Department
- **Simpson's letter on project:** https://simpson.house.gov/uploadedfiles/burley_city_limits_to_jct_i-84.pdf
- **Project:** State Street Premium Corridor
- **Location:** Boise and Garden City
- **Need outlined:** Upgrades for bus information, fare payment operations, shelters and bus stops, pedestrian and bicycle connections and safe bus pullouts.
- **Cost estimate:** \$2,000,000
- **Project sponsor:** Valley Regional Transit
- **Simpson's letter on project:** https://simpson.house.gov/uploadedfiles/state_street_premium_corridor.pdf
- **Project:** First Street Reconstruction
- **Location:** Ammon
- **Need outlined:** Reconstruct First Street from Hitt Road to Ammon Road. Street will be widened to five lanes and curb, gutter and sidewalk to be added. Project will widen the Sand Creek Bridge to five lanes and include sidewalks and add a traffic signal to the Curlew Drive intersection.
- **Cost estimate:** \$5,375,700
- **Project sponsor:** City of Ammon
- **Simpson's letter on project:** https://simpson.house.gov/uploadedfiles/first_street_reconstruction.pdf
- **Project:** Fort Hall Connect-Upgrade of Ross Fork Road
- **Location:** Fort Hall
- **Need outlined:** Upgrade Ross Fork Road just off of Interstate 15 at exit 80, which is going to be reconstructed and expanded. Ross Fork

Road reconstruction will help with traffic flow and safety as more motorists use the upgraded exit.

- **Cost estimate:** \$3,500,000
- **Project sponsor:** Shoshone-Bannock Tribes
- **Simpson's letter on project:** https://simpson.house.gov/uploadedfiles/fort_hall_connect_project.pdf

- **Project:** Center Street Railroad Bridge Underpass
- **Location:** Pocatello
- **Need outlined:** Repair and replace infrastructure relating to the structure's sidewalks and retaining walls. Roadway, pedestrian lighting and stormwater system updates. Project will fund a pedestrian bridge across Center Street.
- **Cost estimate:** \$4.3 million
- **Project sponsor:** City of Pocatello
- **Simpson's letter on project:** https://simpson.house.gov/uploadedfiles/center_street_railroad_bridge_underpass.pdf