

A path forward: Officials plan for pathway connectivity despite key barriers

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Mark Pemble rides his bike along the Greenbelt near Clearwater Lane in Boise, Monday, May 3, 2021.

[Brian Myrick / Idaho Press](#)



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BOISE — Mark Pemble woke up May 4 with sore calves, but other than that he felt good. Not just good, but accomplished.

The day before, he biked from west Caldwell to southeast Boise's Lucky Peak State Park and back, an estimated 100-mile round trip.

Pemble, an active cyclist and member of Caldwell's Pathways and Bike Routes Committee, had to navigate around gaps in the path along the way, including riding on the shoulders of busy roads.

Still, he said he's impressed with the connectivity in the valley, and he sees potential for more.

"It's interesting to see some of the spots that still need some work," Pemble said. "I trust that people are planning for the future."

As the Treasure Valley's population grows and boundaries between cities become less distinct, people involved in pathway planning see connectedness as a quality-of-life issue, though it faces the hurdles of securing funding and land-use rights.

"We are transcending from small communities," said Bill Gigray, president of the Foundation for Ada/County Trail Systems, or FACTS. The foundation, founded more than 30 years ago, invites members and elected officials to monthly meetings to discuss pathway connectivity.

Gigray, a 74-year-old Caldwell native, remembers the 1950s when the combined population of Ada and Canyon counties was around 123,000, according to the 1950 census. Now, it's almost 762,000, or six times as populated. And there's more overlapping between cities than ever.

"It's going to be really important, I think, for the valley for us to continue to develop our greenbelt and pathway system so that they're usable by people in all of the communities and intersect and interrelate," Gigray said, "so that you can go from one to the other with ease and with safety."

Statistics show an uptick in pedestrian and cyclist deaths in recent years. More than five people a year, on average, died while walking or cycling in Ada and Canyon counties from 2010 to 2014. That grew to nearly nine deaths a year from 2015 to 2019, according to the Idaho Transportation Department.

It's not just a dream to have a connected path from Boise to Caldwell, Gigray said. "I'd say it's the plan."

Though most people might not opt for a 100-mile bike trip like Pemble, filling the gaps in the pathway system would improve accessibility for more residents who want to walk or bike rather than take a car trip around town.

Boise City Councilman and co-founder of the Boise Bicycle Project Jimmy Hallyburton said the Boise River Greenbelt is great, but people who don't live nearby might need additional pathways to bike safely.

Depending on where someone lives and works, they might cross through multiple cities, putting an onus on collaboration.

“We need to make sure as we build further out that we build the same opportunities,” Hallyburton said.

The Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho, the regional transportation planning agency, is creating a 30-year master plan that includes an improved pathways network across Ada and Canyon counties. The goal is to make sure cities and other planning agencies aren’t working in silos, Principal Planner of Transportation Liisa Itkonen said, noting an example of a cyclist having nowhere to go once they hit a county line.

“The vision really is to have a regional — as in across the two counties and beyond — network of off-the-road pathways and bikeways, what you could call multi-use pathways that could function as an alternative to the roadways,” she said. “People who really want to walk and bike, some may want to bike longer distances, could use that as their commute routes.”

COMPASS data shows there are approximately 339 combined miles of pathways in Ada and Canyon counties. That figure doesn’t include sidewalks or bike lanes that are part of roads, a statement from the agency said. “It is an approximate number given the differences in definitions,” the statement said.

COMPASS hopes to have the major pieces of the 2050 master plan in place by next spring. For now, there are about a dozen federally funded transportation projects in the Treasure Valley that involve pathways already in the works for the next several years.

COMPASS tracks usership on pathways and is seeing increased demand. The Eagle greenbelt, for example, saw an average of more than 550 pedestrians each day during weekends in 2020, a year-over-year increase of 36%.

Since Eagle is surrounded by Boise and Garden City to the east, Meridian to the south and Star to the west, the city is critically positioned in the conversation about connectivity.

Right now, the Boise River Greenbelt ends seven-tenths of a mile from the eastern edge of Eagle Island State Park. Closing that gap and building a connection to Linder Road west of the park would open up a way for a path to continue west toward Star and Middleton.

The city of Eagle is in the middle of securing easements with the landowners to make it happen. Still, that would only be one part. Paying for the project and actually building it puts it further off. But the planning is underway.

Steve Noyes, the city of Eagle's trails and pathways superintendent, has connectivity "top of mind every single day." Since pathways are easier to build before development occurs rather than after, he plays a key role in making sure everything lines up.

Noyes pointed out how Eagle has lots of paths that might only be 300 feet in length with a dead end on both sides. His idea is to think long term.

"It's done in puzzle pieces," Noyes said.

In Star, city officials are working on putting together a transportation master plan. Councilwoman Jennifer Salmonsén has been involved with FACTS since she was elected in 2019. Her idea is to have a plan that supports not just people living in newly developed neighborhoods, but one that connects and therefore serves more people.

She views it as a quality-of-life issue. More connectivity means more access for people to enjoy outdoor opportunities. And as a councilwoman, she wants to help implement those things.

"If you don't have a plan, it's hard to negotiate with developers. Once it's built, you can't go back," Salmonsén said. "To have those public easements is really important because it's hard to go back to a property owner and say, 'Hey, do you mind if we put a pathway close to your backyard?'"

COMPASS Assistant Planner Braden Cervetti said the biggest obstacle is "the F word" — funding. Without the money, these projects will take time.

That's why COMPASS and various cities are pursuing opportunities with federal money or grants. Or by requiring pathways before development takes place, cities can take care of this on the front end.

The idea of a rail-with-trail project connecting Caldwell, Nampa, Meridian and Boise has been discussed for more than a decade. Essentially, a path would run alongside train tracks. One issue, though, is Union Pacific owns the land.

In 2016, Meridian City Council approved \$77,600 for the design of the first half-mile paved "rail-with-trail" segment. It was the first piece of what could turn into something much bigger. Three years later, COMPASS estimated the full cost of a Nampa to Boise rail-with-trail pathway would cost \$49.5 million.

Before being elected to Meridian City Council in 2017, Treg Bernt was the president of Meridian's Parks and Recreation Commission and served on the city's Planning and Zoning Commission. He said a connected pathway system is "extremely important." He's also heard about these types of plans for years, and a massive challenge still remains.

"It's just dollars and cents," Bernt said. "At the end of the day, who's paying for it? How are we going to get there? What's it going to look like? That's the million-dollar question."

Though Bernt said taking action on some of these plans is still elusive, having plans in place helps move projects forward.

While progress may be slow, elected officials are the ones tasked with steering the direction of planning efforts and implementing certain ideas.

Gigray has a simple response to the money issue. Governments pay for what they prioritize, he said. That's why he feels it's important for local leaders to rendezvous at his monthly meetings. It gives them a chance to share what each city may be working on and how those plans relate to each other.

Both Gigray and Pemble were on Caldwell's Pathways and Bike Routes Committee when the city adopted its Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan in 2017.

During his May 3 ride, Pemble had to bike on the road in a few locations, including along state Highway 44 in Middleton, Joplin Road in Nampa and State Street in Eagle, just outside Eagle Island State Park.

While taking a brief pause on the Boise River Greenbelt, where the path continues under state Highway 21, Pemble pulled an orange juice bottle out of his drawstring bag and took a sip. A walker passing by said, "Howdy." A few cars whirred by.

Pemble kept biking to Lucky Peak, then turned around and began his trek home. Still with time to mow the lawn before it got too dark, Pemble arrived back in Caldwell just before 9 p.m.

When Pemble reflected on the nearly nine-hour trip, he thought about what he saw that day: wild turkeys on Canyon Hill in Caldwell, beavers slapping their tails in the river, kids swimming in the river by Eagle Island, people surfing in Garden City.

Witnessing those things was possible because of the pathways already in place. And his goal is for those opportunities to only grow.

“Hopefully in the future,” Pemble said, “people will realize how easy it is to ride a bike in the area.”

Paul Schwedelson covers growth, Nampa and Caldwell. Follow him on Twitter @pschweds.