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A bus company purchased and displaced the Boise electric streetcar in 1928. Pictured: buses on the 700 block of Main Street, about 1950.

Bus rapid TRANSIT

by Kelly Foster

Imagine a fleet of sleek buses moving swiftly in their own lanes on congested streets, passing lines of stop-and-go traffic as they deliver their regional passengers to a city's busy downtown core. That scene is unfamiliar to Boiseans, but not to commuters in similar-sized cities like Albany, NY; Eugene, OR and Santa Clara, CA, or in dozens of larger cities that have adopted what is known as "bus rapid transit" (BRT) systems to efficiently move thousands of commuters over crowded streets. What is now a vision in Boise will someday turn to reality. Planners are laying the foundation for what will be the city's first BRT route, which will run on State Street from downtown Boise to the intersection of State Street/State Highway 44 and State Highway 16 west of Eagle.

"Research study after research study has proven that expanding lanes for traffic doesn't solve congestion problems," says Kathleen Lacey, transportation planner for the City of Boise. "Dedicating seven lanes to auto traffic isn't going to solve the problem on State Street at all. We have a much

better opportunity to solve it if we have bus lanes dedicated to transit only.” With a myriad hurdles to jump—environmental impact statements, right-of-way acquisition, road expansion and infrastructure construction, to name a few—the rapid transit system may be several years away. However, should federal funds be received, the day the first specially-designed buses roll down State Street could occur within a fairly short time, says Lacey. Valley Regional Transit (VRT), the regional transit authority, in partnership with the Ada County Highway District (ACHD), is now leading the Traffic and Transit Operational Plan (TTOP). Consultants are currently studying traffic patterns, employment and residential growth projections and possible BRT routes. The finished TTOP report, due the fall of 2010, will determine how to integrate BRT into State Street’s regular traffic flow and to outline the incremental steps needed to implement the system. With that report in hand, planning agencies will draft a master plan that will include land use scenarios along the corridor. Federal requirements must be met and right-of-way property purchased before the construction of bus lines and stations.

How long will all this take? Achieving BRT is a long-term effort, says Lacey. “We know people in the valley desire improved transit systems. We have so many steps to go through that it’s not something we can manage in six years. It is going to take step-by-step, incremental improvements.” But each improvement moves the region closer to achieving the transit vision. More than a million patrons rode the VRT system in 2009 and more frequent service is planned on State Street. Buses currently run every 30 minutes on the corridor. Within the year, VRT anticipates the buses will run every 20 minutes. And, of course, it is all a matter of money. The system will cost millions, and even with an infusion of federal funds, local governments will have to come up with a sizeable sum on their own. Implementation will be “very difficult” without local option taxing authority, says Lacey. A quarter cent increase in the local sales tax, for example, would be sufficient to fund a “high-quality” transit system for the entire valley, she says. The Idaho Legislature has been reluctant in the past to give local entities permission to levy local option taxes. So far, only cities in resort areas can utilize those taxes.

BRT is a new concept to Boise, but not new to transit systems. Cities throughout the world, from London, England to Cleveland, Ohio have selected BRT as a less expensive, but equally effective alternative to light rail or commuter rail transit. BRT is a mass transit system specifically designed for fast intercity/intercounty travel. It uses buses to provide transportation that is of a higher speed than ordinary bus routes or cars. To be effective, BRT

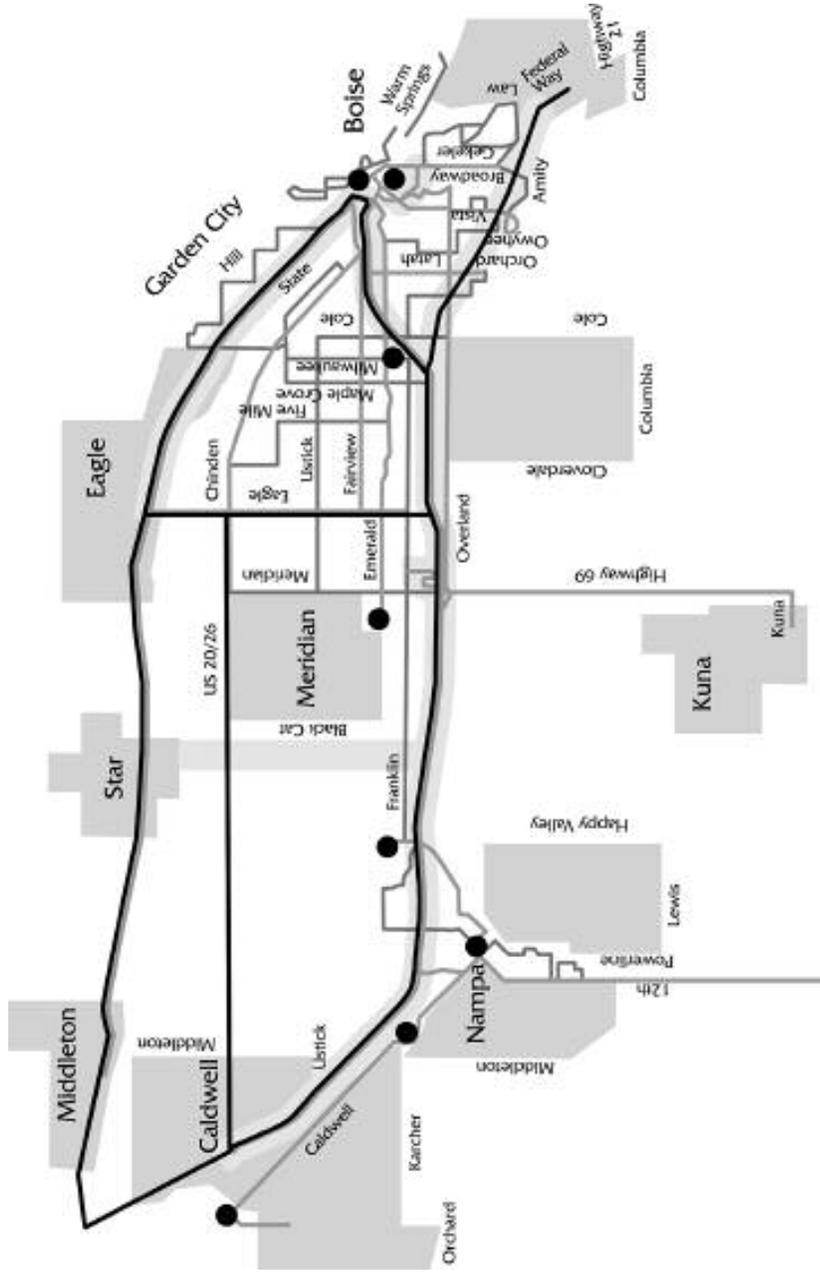
needs special infrastructure so that bus systems can approach the quality of rail service, but at a lower cost. A BRT system is comparable to light rail in that both have stations at regular intervals, use dedicated lanes and travel at speeds faster than regular traffic. Like light rail, BRT also uses park and ride stations.



U.S. Dept. Transportation

The Federal Transit Authority promotes dedicated lanes with high-speed buses. Pictured: a MAX bus in Las Vegas, part of a BRT demonstration project.

One of the first infrastructure requirements is a main station where buses load and unload passengers, who can then walk to work or catch local buses or other modes of transportation. Boise is taking the first steps toward the construction of a multi-modal center in the heart of downtown. The current plan, which is subject to public hearings and City Council approval, calls



This map from Valley Regional Transit shows how high-speed buses would enhance service and increase ridership.

for a multi-level structure on the corner of 11th between Idaho and Bannock streets. The center will include 12 dedicated bus bays to serve both city and commuter bus systems and possibly a parking garage. Valley Regional Transit has \$9 million set aside to buy property and construct the station.

Dedicated bus lanes are another vital BRT infrastructure requirement. The Boise area does not have any bus rights-of-way at the moment. Though ValleyRide, the Boise bus system operated to VRT, utilizes two dedicated bus lanes on four downtown blocks, these lanes are used solely for picking up and dropping off passengers. After loading riders, the buses must merge back into the normal flow of traffic. Like city buses, the Boise/Canyon County VRT shuttles use normal traffic lanes. To dedicate lanes for BRT means widening existing roads to accommodate those lanes or putting the roads on a "diet" by shrinking them by a lane on each side and dedicating those lanes to BRT. A Transit Priority System is also needed so stoplights along the BRT route are timed to give buses an early start through intersections. And transit stations and parking for passengers need to be built along the route. One important element for successful transit is what planners call "the last mile," generally assumed the longest distance that a passenger will walk between the station and work or home. People need to access the system safely and conveniently, explains Lacey, so planners will focus on pedestrian-friendly access and street crossings as well as lighting and other safety features.

While the system may be expensive at the outset, the financial picture has two sides. With BRT comes significant economic and social benefits—decreased air pollution, lower fuel consumption, reduced traffic and more efficient movement of people in and out of the city core. There is also an economic development side to BRT that has the potential to bring commercial and residential vitality to neighborhoods along the route. Along the State Street corridor, for example, planners are working to identify several areas for "transit-oriented development." These are 4-5 block "nodes" around future BRT stations where planners hope to attract high-density private development of offices, retail outlets, residential units and other services. The intent is to create a sense of place with open spaces, pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly access and mixed-use development, all conveniently clustered near a BRT station. "There is a demonstrated correlation between investment in transit stations and an increase in the economic value of the land adjacent to the station," explains Lacey. The TTOP study due this fall will recommend one site for early development as well as provide market data for up to 14 other potential locations along State Street and beyond. The State Street BRT project cuts across several jurisdictions and involves cooperation from a long

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list of parties—the cities of Boise, Garden City and Eagle, Ada County, the Ada County Highway District, the Idaho Department of Transportation, Valley Regional Transit and the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho (COMPASS). “Cooperation is absolutely essential for all



Intergovernmental cooperation is key to long-range planning for bus rapid transit. Pictured: a bus rider on Boise’s Main Street.

those along the State Street corridor. This project cannot be done by just one jurisdiction because people are traveling so far between their employment and residence,” says Lacey. “We have to understand each other’s positions, funding circumstances and long-range planning efforts.” While the State

Street corridor is Boise's first project dedicated to a long-awaited BRT transit system, there could be other places where the system will be implemented in the future. A valley-wide transit study is underway to determine ways to improve high-capacity transit. BRT could be a solution on east-west routes such as Fairview, Franklin or the rail corridor. Lacey says BRT typically requires a density of 12-14 residences per acre, ranging from single-family homes to high-density structures like apartments. Boise offers enough residential density to support BRT, but the Treasure Valley as a whole currently lacks the concentrated residential development required for a wider BRT network. So for now, the Treasure Valley will continue to use the Valley Regional Transit inter-county express system. That system has been in high demand ever since it started in 2000, and the buses are filled to capacity.

The City of Boise, COMPASS, VRT and many other entities understand the impact that a thriving public transit system can have on the economic and social life of the region. Several planning efforts have recently been completed or are currently underway to anticipate the valley's future transit needs and formulate a vision for the next generation of transportation projects—the Treasure Valley High Capacity Transit Study, Communities in Motion, Treasure Valley in Transit and the Downtown Boise Mobility Study. What all of these have in common is the understanding that the region needs a more efficient mass-transit system to move the increasing numbers of people who live in the valley. And in some ways, the future may resemble the past. BRT and the transit-oriented development concept is a throwback to the streetcar days of 100 years ago when stations stimulated developments such as Collister and Ustick. The past may not be prologue, but the streetcar era at least may be instructive as Boise tries to reduce traffic and as people reduce their dependence on the automobile. "It would be nostalgic and idealistic to say we are returning to a past era, but we have historical precedence that is applicable to the needs of today," says Lacey.

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Kelly Foster, a 2007 Borah High graduate, is a junior art history major. After earning a BA degree, she plans to continue her studies with a focus on design.