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Eugene's Rosa Parks Plaza combines bus shelters, shopping, public art and a city library. Renamed for the civil rights pioneer in 2009, the plaza has been cited as a possible model for the proposed multimodal transit center in Boise's downtown.

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# Moving TARGET

by Jennifer Otto

Some of the region's transportation needs, such as light rail and a high-capacity corridor, may be years away, but another key project is near the end of a long political and procedural journey—a downtown center that will serve as a hub for various transit services. Funding is already in place; the next step is to decide which location best suits transit needs and meets the litmus test of neighborhood acceptance. Called a multimodal center, transportation planners said it will enable the region's transit system to function more efficiently. Operated by Valley Regional Transit, the center will consolidate local and regional transit services in one location, serving as a hub for buses, vans, car pools and taxis. Bus rapid transit, streetcar and light-rail systems can be added as they develop.

The center will serve as a transfer or exit station for patrons using public transportation to reach Boise's downtown. Once at the multimodal center, they will be within walking or cycling distance of their destinations or can easily transfer to connecting bus routes or other modes of transportation.

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The building will offer other services such as transit information, bike racks and commercial/public space. It will also serve as a storage area for various transit vehicles. The estimated cost of the center is \$11 million. Valley Regional Transit received a Federal Transit Administration grant of \$9.2 mil-



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A well-designed transit center can contribute to urban renewal with city buses, regional bus rapid transit, light rail, streetcars, taxis, bike lockers and commuter vans. Pictured: bus-friendly municipal library at Eugene's Rosa Parks Plaza.

lion and the City of Boise and the Capital City Development Corporation provided the required 20 percent match for the federal funding.

One of the pivotal—and most controversial—decisions is the center's location. A site-selection committee composed of representatives from transportation agencies, planning organizations and local governments carefully examined five sites, including the current transit mall on the one-way streets of Main and Idaho. Between fall 2007 and spring 2009, the committee solicited public comments from business owners and citizens during three

open houses, various downtown business meetings and newsletters. The site selection committee is now considering two potential locations. "Both are viable ... both will work equally well," said Rhonda Jalbert, who is overseeing the multimodal center project as Valley Regional Transit's capital infrastructure project manager. One, designated Site H, is along 11th Street between Bannock and Idaho streets, west of the Empire Building. The other, Site D, is along 12th Street between Idaho and Main streets, west of the Record Exchange. Both locations fit the criteria determined by the selection committee—they are downtown and within walking distance to many destinations, while also on existing bus routes and along a proposed downtown circulator route.

The selection committee preferred the 11th and Bannock location (Site H), but that choice drew strong opposition from neighbors, in particular the real estate development firm of Rafanelli & Nahas, which plans to construct a \$100 million complex that includes a hotel, condominiums, office buildings, a park and plaza on land it owns across Bannock Street. In its May 6, 2010 issue, the *Idaho Statesman* reported that Rafanelli & Nahas, owner of the Boise Plaza, threatened to halt its own development plans for the nearby land. Citing security concerns, the developers wrote in an e-mail to city officials that they will "continue to oppose (the site) with all our efforts, influence and resources."

In December 2010, the City of Boise identified the 12th and Idaho property (Site D) as another location to consider. That site was one of the originals under consideration, but the property owner at the time was not interested in selling. But that has changed, and now both sites are under consideration. City spokesman Adam Park told the *Idaho Statesman* on December 14, 2010, "The alternative site may offer greater economic development benefits because of its potential for transit-oriented development to be built in coordination with the center itself." Rafanelli & Nahas project manager Scott Schoenherr also told the *Statesman* that the site was "less problematic for us."

There are a number of steps to be taken before construction begins. An environment assessment on Site H was completed and accepted by the Federal Transit Administration in June of 2009. A similar assessment is now underway for Site D; much of the material from the original study remains relevant and will help inform the new document. Jalbert says the new environmental assessment could add an additional six months to the selection process. Valley Regional Transit will conduct an open house to inform the public about the plans for Site D. Once the site selection is made, the

property will be appraised to determine the fair market value and land acquisition requirements. The appraisal and eventual contract must be submitted to the Federal Transit Administration for approval. After the agency approves the appraisal, the entitlement process will begin, which includes additional environmental, site grading, building elevation and utility studies along with the required application for a conditional use permit from Boise's Planning and Zoning Commission. Once the entitlement process is completed the design phase can begin, which is projected to take at least six months. The construction design plans need city approval and building permits must be issued before the project can finally move into the construction phase. While no official construction groundbreaking date has been determined, Jalbert says that Valley Regional Transit would like to start construction one year after the site has been selected, which could be in the early spring of 2012. The actual construction of the multimodal center is projected to take one year.

Regardless of which site is selected, the City of Boise ultimately will be a major player in the decision, even though Valley Regional Transit, in conjunction with other planning agencies, is responsible for planning, funding and building the center. Boise's Design Review Committee must ultimately approve the site design and the Planning and Zoning Commission will issue the conditional-use permit. Both of those steps require a public hearing process in which an appeal by a private business or individual can be filed. It already has been a long and involved process since the funds were approved in 2005. While the money is not currently in jeopardy, Jalbert said it "is expected that there is forward movement and that the grantee does not just sit on the funds."

Selection committee members have conducted visits to other transit centers to glean ideas, but Kathleen Lacey, a comprehensive planner with the City of Boise, explained that the actual design depends on the final building site purchased, community needs and available funds. Once those are determined, Zimmer, Gunsul and Frasca, the architectural design firm from Portland that won the bid, will complete the design. Multimodal centers, said Lacey, don't have to be monolithic concrete structures that distract from the surrounding area, as evidenced by the award-winning centers in Charlotte, North Carolina, Boulder, Colorado or Bellevue, Washington. A well-planned and constructed multimodal center can include a variety of functions. Jalbert said the proposed plans for Boise call for a two-story structure, with the ground floor holding the transit ticket office, a public lobby, a bus operators' lounge, a passenger plaza and sheltered waiting areas, 12 bus bays, public restrooms, a visitor center, transit information kiosks, bicycle



Boise State University has won a COMPASS award for promoting mass-transit alternatives to the automobile. A new transit center in the Student Union has a waiting lounge with a live GPS feed on shuttle buses.

storage, vanpool and carpool drop-off/pick-up areas, a taxi stand, retail development and a police substation. The second level could be for public parking to replace the current spaces lost in development of the site.

How important is the multimodal center to the overall transportation picture in Treasure Valley? Lacey pointed out that building the center as a first step is important since it will be a major component in the region's long-range plan. She explained that a central hub improves patron services and the transit system because buses and other transportation modes can arrive and depart from one location, which in turn offers riders more options for easier transfer to other transportation. A long delay in the construction of the multimodal center could affect the other phases of the regional

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transportation plan—a downtown circulator and a high-capacity corridor—that will move the valley closer to meeting the goal of reducing traffic congestion and improving air quality, Lacey added.

A mass public transit system in Boise is a long-term project, but transportation systems in other cities can help gauge the need for one in Boise. In



Architecture Things

Fabric cones recycle rainwater from the roof of the \$22 million Rosa Parks Transit Center in the heart of downtown Detroit. Boiseans have cited Detroit as an innovative example of bus-shelter architecture.

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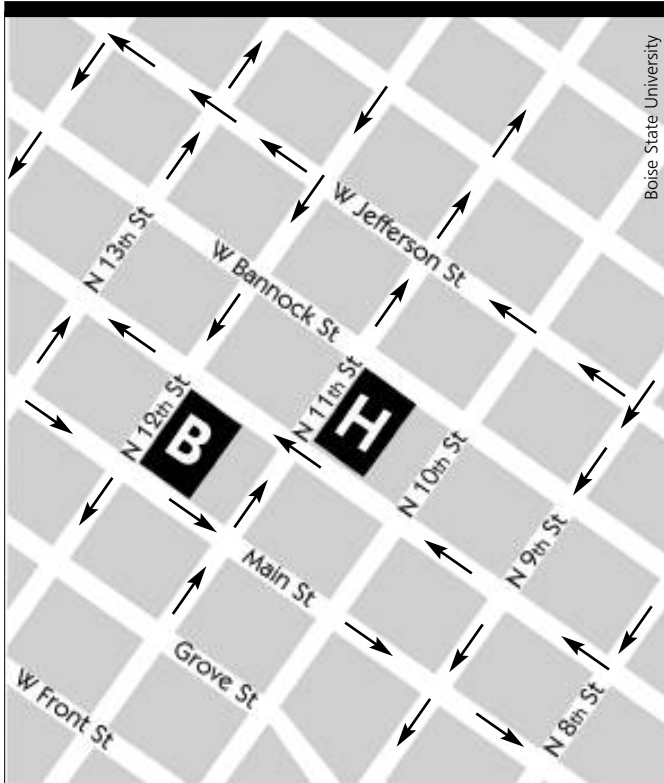
the 1970s, Portland was much like Boise is now—a growing city in beautiful surroundings with a population of about 380,000 and a county population of more than 550,000. With an eye on the growth potential of not only the city but also its many suburbs, three counties formed the TriMet transportation district that now consists of high-speed light rail, buses and streetcars that serve the region. The Portland Streetcar, opened in 2001, has successfully helped revitalize areas of the city that had fallen into disrepair. Now places like the Pearl District, Brewery Blocks and the River District are destination

spots with restaurants, small businesses and mixed-use housing for people of different income, job types and cultures.

If the past is prologue, Boise will be facing even more growth in the next 25 years. According to the data gathered for 2006 Communities in Motion, a regional long-range transportation plan, the valley currently holds

42 percent of the state's population, with a total of 504,000 residents and a projected growth to more than 1 million by 2035.

People and jobs most likely will be spread out over a multi-county region, which means planners are looking for ways to move the increased numbers of people. In 2007, planners initiated the Treasure Valley High Capacity Transit Study to deal with the projected traffic and



Possible locations of Boise's multimodal center include Site H (11th at Bannock) and Site B (12th at Main).

growth. The valley-wide mobility plan included all forms of current transit

services, such as ValleyRide bus services and Commuteride, in addition to future projects such as Bus Rapid Transit or light rail. The study concluded that three related projects were essential for the valley's transportation future: a multimodal transportation center, a downtown Boise circulator and a high-capacity corridor. These three projects are to be phased in over time



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World Resources Institute

Bus rapid transit, or BRT, provides trainlike bus service with shelters and dedicated lanes for long-range regional commuting. Pictured: Transmilenio BRT in Bogotá, Columbia.

to help solve both the traffic congestion and the poor air quality in the valley.

The Boise region already has some basic-level transit centers in place but none offers the myriad of services planned for the downtown Boise multimodal center. For example, a center located in the Boise Towne Square Mall parking lot consists of just two covered shelters and bus lanes. Jalbert notes that one of Valley Regional Transit's goals is that as the population increases there will be more types of these small transit centers to serve as hubs throughout Ada and Canyon counties, but none would be as complex or visible as the multimodal center.

Boise State University just opened its own transit center, funded with a Federal Transportation Administration grant and 20 percent matching from the Student Union and Transportation Services. Built on the west entrance of the Student Union, Smart Growth and the promotion of alternative types of transportation are at the forefront of this project, said Casey Jones, director of transportation and parking services. While Boise State's transit center is a completely separate project from the downtown Boise multimodal center, it operates on the same concept—consolidating transit information and services; carpool/vanpool, regional bus and Bronco Shuttle stops; an indoor lobby and waiting lounge; and bicycle parking all at one common location. The current Boise Bronco Shuttles are already outfitted with GPS units and students can utilize a website with a live feed to locate each shuttle and the expected arrival time for each of the 19 stops. The website can be accessed by computer or cell phone and in the new transit center lobby. Valley Regional Transit is working toward having many of the same capabilities for their buses in the future.

Mass transportation can be part of the answer to the complex problem of limited resources, sprawl and individual needs. The Boise Valley has grown to a size where the need to look at mass transportation modes is becoming critical. For many, the benefits of a public mass transportation system in the valley far outweigh the costs. Let us hope that in the coming decades, we look back at the multimodal center as just one footstep in the beginning phase of a larger transit project that changed the course of history in the valley.

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