



From: Elaine Clegg, Valley Regional Transit (VRT) CEO
To: Ronald Harriman, Chairman of the Concerned Citizens of Canyon County Committee
CC: City of Caldwell, City of Nampa, Treasure Valley Transit, VRT Board of Directors
Date: July 13, 2023

Thank you for sharing your concerns about our vision to expand Valley Regional Transit (VRT) services to improve life for residents of the valley. I'll respond to your concerns and our goals as well as some of the specific items for consideration you have listed.

Before I address individual points, I want to be clear on our objectives. It appears that your concern regarding cost is mostly related to investment in a light rail system. We are not proposing light rail – as you note the expense is too high at this moment in time to see a sufficient return. Rather, through our Better Bus initiative, we hope to increase investment in bus routes and infrastructure. Our adopted system plan – [Valley Connect 2.0](#) – is based on improvements to the bus system.

We do support and plan to pursue regional rail. While details are still to be determined, most analyses indicate that using existing railways for heavy rail service instead of constructing new rail can be done for a much lower cost than other investments in moving more people in this valley. For instance, a heavy rail commuter line can move over 20 times more people per hour than one traffic lane, which meets one of your goals: saving taxpayer money. Especially since the rail corridor has a parallel path to the interstate and other east-west highways, our rail line is uniquely positioned to achieve high ridership.

When we prioritize public transit, people use it. A better bus system can give everyone the freedom to move where and when they want. We know that robust transit systems:

- Improve access, providing accessible options for residents to travel in ways they want, especially for those that cannot drive
- Lower roadway costs, with a reduction in the cost of roadway maintenance and expansion when more travelers can choose transit
- Help develop stronger communities, allowing for more efficient use of space, higher economic output per capita, less time spent as a driver, and higher quality of life
- Improve business efficiency, with higher returns on investment, enhanced access to local businesses, and better attraction of talent
- Improve regional efficiency by connecting more people to more places more efficiently
- Reduce the need for family members to spend hours chauffeuring kids and older adults to destinations they could reach on their own
- Save money, with residents and businesses alike saving on transportation and parking costs

In many cases you cite current conditions as reasons to not invest in transit. We believe these are indicators that investment is needed. Please see below for further comments on your items of consideration, organized by topic.

Cost & funding

I appreciate your desire to ensure our local leaders are aware of the cost and other implications of public transit services. I hope you are also interested in understanding the Return on Investment (ROI) for all transportation projects and the movement of people. I certainly am. We work actively throughout the year with all our partners, including local leaders, elected officials, city and county offices, universities, and other organizations to provide information and answer questions about our service's potential improvements and costs.

One example is the round of visits we make annually to city council and county commission meetings to talk about our performance over the past year and request support for services we would like to offer in the coming year based on that performance. The way we plan and process this work is the Transportation Development Plan, which is a five-year work plan that outlines the projects and funding for service implementation, capital improvements, and other support systems. More information can be found at rideVRT.org/TDP.

Another recent example is our Better Bus Initiative. When I came on board at VRT, I wanted to understand how the public felt about changes that I wanted to explore to make our transit system successful and was heartened to hear that the public also supported that vision. Our Better Bus outreach demonstrated more than 80% support for improving bus service by increasing frequency and hours of service and more than 80% support for local governments to increase funding to support service improvements. [You can learn more about that process here.](#)

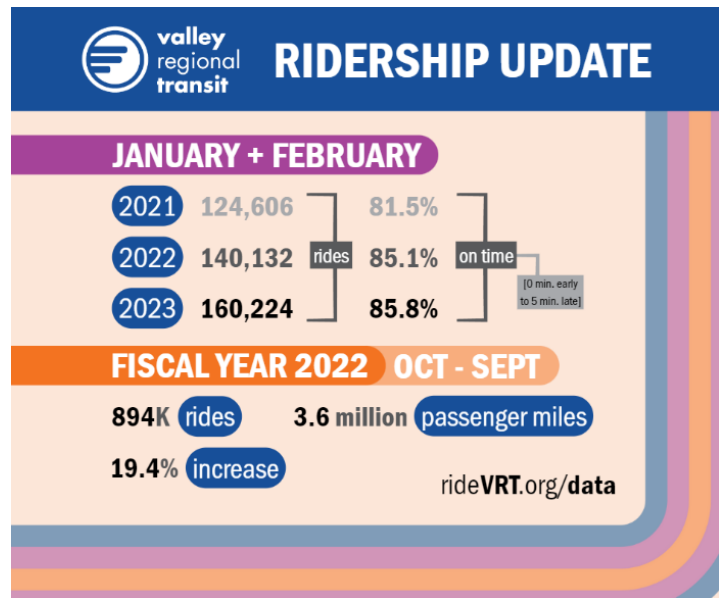
Mass transit systems are not intended to be profitable any more than roads, parks, public safety, or any other service is for the community. Further, mass transit isn't unique in the transportation sector in this regard – no transportation infrastructure offers a positive ROI if all you look at is cost invested – and yet there are dozens of associated benefits to the community. As a region, we invest heavily in our road networks, often at the expense of mass transit, and yet transit moves more people per square foot within the available space. Our roads and bike lanes and sidewalks all require the user to bring something to the table – an expensive vehicle or a bike or a body that can drive or walk. We provide *movement itself*, not just the promise to move if you are able.

Our farebox return is similar to our peers, and we are grateful for the value placed on transit by the federal government. I note that you provide ridership and funding data from 2020, the year transit ridership decreased dramatically, 53% overall, due to COVID-19 and restrictions to combat its spread. In the Salt Lake region for example, ridership dropped from over 150,000 to just over 60,000 per month on its bus system. And there were extra federal funds to mitigate the restrictions. Ridership overall has since recovered to about 75% of pre pandemic levels and continues to gain riders as transit systems respond to the changed pattern of demand generated by the pandemic.

I hope you will agree that using 2020 as a bellwether for whether transit demand is sufficient or the ROI on transit service is worthwhile is an unfair comparison year. You note that you “feel that the cost should be paid by those who benefit from such a system, not the taxpayer.” In fact, of any transportation mode, mass transit is one that most commonly features a usage fee to support services. In most cases, you don't see the same thing on our roads or highways.

Ridership

VRT provides roughly 20,000 trips per week (see right for a snapshot of our recent ridership performance). We have the potential for far more rides with greater investment in our system. You note that the system is underutilized, which is true in places where it doesn't run frequently enough, early enough, late enough, or throughout the entire week. This lack of use where services are lacking is why we are interested in providing better services (hence Better Buses). Those investments pay off in increased ridership and increased access for everyone in the valley, especially the 30%+ of our population that don't own or cannot drive a personal vehicle.



To your point, we, as a nation, have invested heavily in single-occupancy vehicles and related infrastructure, which is why it is currently the most common mode of travel, often more convenient, and has the most use. Let's try that with other modes.

Services

VRT is very selective in how and where we provide services as we look to stretch our meager funding as far as possible. It is no surprise to us that buses that only come once an hour, end service early in the evening, and don't run on Sundays are not well-used. Routes with higher investment have higher returns. Take the 9 State Street for example, which is a route we prioritize where buses arrive every 15 minutes during peak hours, and service starts near 5 a.m. and runs until after 10 p.m. It is full of commuters, students, grocery-getters, and more. These are the kind of services we hope to invest in at other locations.

Our small businesses are some that are having the hardest time finding employees, in part because many employees find it cost prohibitive to travel too far for work. In addition, the customer base is limited by cost of access. Good transit service on commercial corridors where many of our small businesses are located expands the pool of customers and employees for every business.

Some of the modes you recommend as "more cost-effective for the public than driving single to work" are modes we are exploring or that we are already provide:

- *Smaller cost-effective buses*: we are exploring smaller buses as cost- and space-efficient for certain areas while remembering that operating costs for any bus route are primarily the good-paying driver wages

- *Automobiles that can supply a “on demand” system, like Uber:* We currently run an on-demand service – VRT OnDemand – in Caldwell, Nampa, and Eagle, and partner with Lyft to provide connections to bus routes and services at night when the bus doesn’t run
- *Rideshare vans for companies like Micron, State Government offices, Boise State Statehouse, students, etc.:* Our partners at ACHD run the Commuteride vanpool service, which provides great van-based connections in Ada County; we’re also looking at options in Canyon County for a similar service.

Where trips align, modes like commuter vanpools work well. However, they do not always align with all trip demands in our region, which is one of our challenges – how we can provide the best and most efficient service across modes for all users. Providing the best option, whether it be a fixed-route bus on high demand corridors, a small bus on a local route, a neighborhood on-demand service, or a ride hail option for connections or late night is our goal. A useful public transportation system does not take a “one-size fits all” approach, but rather provides the right solution in the right place, with flexibility to adapt to changing needs.

Quality of life

No emission-creating mode of travel “cleans” the air, yet vehicles are one of the largest contributors to air pollution. Reducing those impacts makes people healthier and decreases pollution. According to one UCLA study, “compared with driving alone, taking public transportation reduces CO2 emissions by 45%,”

You contend that transit should be privatized and extoll the benefits of our current car-centric investments. All I want is a level playing field. We might find common ground if all transport, including roadways is privatized. But that approach creates a system that favors those with a lot of money and leaves everyone with less behind. A privatized system cuts off the very thing this country was built on - opportunity. I favor a system that creates opportunity for everyone to participate in the economy and culture.

Finally, I must disagree that the “second most economic method for the taxpayer to transport those who can’t drive to appointments and shopping is via Taxicab or Uber.” Ask any of those riders today whether they consider ride-hailing as a great option, and cost alone prohibits high use by most. The vehicles still create congestion and impact air quality, and this solution turns its back on the benefits of creating good transit system for everyone with sufficient investment.

Travel times

The advantages of travelling by transit can and do include competitive travel time or even time savings on certain corridors. On State Street, for instance, the frequent service, bus priority at signals, reduced dwell time with in-line stops, and more are predicted to equalize travel time. As growth continues, our region will increasingly face the same phenomena other regions have seen with limited benefits from road widening and increased congestion. Transit is one of the few options that can both manage *and* mitigate the growth in congestion. Waiting until we are gridlocked will only make the path to relief that much harder.

A peak hour bus can take up to 19 cars off the road, freeing up space and reducing travel times for cars and buses alike, and bus riders can be more productive on board than behind the wheel. The best way to reduce transit trip times and encourage more passengers is to provide more service. Additionally, the hidden challenges to commuting must be considered, including vehicle cost, maintenance costs, parking costs, stress, and more.

The future

We do not see the need for a transportation system for those who cannot drive as unfortunate. In fact, we are delighted to provide transit services for those that need it *and* those that prefer it. As you note, “all metropolitan areas should have some sort of public transportation and the most financially reasonable transportation is a reliable bus system.” How we fund that system is a question we are eager to explore over the next few years.



BETTERBUS

-  **BETTER BUS ROUTES**

We're moving toward a higher-frequency bus system, which means more buses arriving more often (with fewer routes) and shorter wait times (see reverse side for more info).
-  **BETTER BUS RIDES**

We have onboard stop announcements, free Wi-Fi, and trip planning & payment apps; we're getting more electric buses (they're quieter & more sustainable) and onboard info screens.
-  **BETTER BUS STOPS**

We'll be installing new bus stop signs that are more colorful and easier to read, enhanced bus stations, better benches & shelters, improved lighting, and real-time arrival information.
-  **REGIONAL RAIL**

You want it, we support it - we're working with partners to help bring rail to the region, and we hope to offer a local connection between Caldwell and Boise supported by great bus service.

Rather than raising money for light rail, we envision a highly connected system with frequent buses, park and ride commuting services, neighborhood routes, on-demand services, rideshare options, and more available throughout the day, night, and every day of the week. The best transportation system a community can have is one that provides a variety of choices that connect people to a better life. We look forward to ongoing dialogue about these issues and welcome your group as part of that conversation. We would be happy to come to one of your gatherings to do just that if you are willing.

Regards,



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