

TREASURE VALLEY TRAFFIC SNARL MAY PAVE WAY FOR BETTER TRANSIT FUNDING

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BOISE -- A molasses-slow Treasure Valley commute is speeding efforts to better fund public transportation.

Despite its Boise-based impetus, the move interests cities like Lewiston, where the public bus system lacks money.

After weeks of behind-the-scenes wrangling, a bill to let regional transportation agencies collect local option sales taxes will surface this week.

"We have drafted the legislation and we'll bring it for a print hearing," said Roy Eiguren, a lobbyist for Valley Regional Transit, the transportation authority for Ada and Canyon counties.

Eiguren is confident the House Revenue and Taxation Committee will let the bill be introduced, possibly on Wednesday, and give it a hearing.

The bill has circulated among tax committee members since the beginning of the session and ideological differences on taxation have been tough to reconcile.

To get support from tax committee members who get heartburn over local option sales taxes, the bill will propose a high threshold for voter approval.

Backers of the bill had originally wanted a simple majority of voters to approve a local sales tax hike. Now, the bill calls for a 66 2/3, or super majority, for passage. Also, elections would be held in May and November and the tax would sunset after 20 years.

"Those were the acceptable elements of local option sales tax," Eiguren said.

Whether that many voters will ever approve raising taxes on themselves is another question.

Across the nation from 2004 to 2006, five of 13 elections passed to approve local option sales taxes for transportation, Eiguren said, about 40 percent

Should the bill pass, Nez Perce County voters would need to create a regional transportation authority before proposing a local option sales tax for transportation.

The proposed bill adds to the 1994 Regional Public Transportation Authority Act. Under the law, a simple majority of voters can create a public agency devoted to transportation needs. The agency would be under the authority of local jurisdictions.

In Idaho, two regional transportation authorities exist: Valley Regional Transit in Ada and Canyon counties and one in Bonneville County.