



THE FUTURE OF STATE HIGHWAY 55: PLANNED OR PARKING LOT?

ISSUE: Although large scale residential and commercial development of northern Ada county is increasing apace, ITD lacks a plan for or, any ability to fund, State Highway 55 (or other north-south route) improvements to handle additional traffic from this development. Plans for State Highway 44 and other “downstream” routes are also blind to this reality.

DISCUSSION: S.H. 55 currently handles an average of 6,000-9,000 vehicles per day. Growth pressure in northern Ada County is intense--and has now begun in Boise and Gem counties as well--on tens of thousands of privately-held acres and involving tens of thousands of dwelling units. Significant development has been approved/proposed or is actively being planned in Ada and Boise counties which relies on S.H. 55 for primary access. Pending development in Gem county may contribute traffic to S.H. 55 as well if S.H. 16 improvements are delayed. All will certainly have impact on S.H. 44 and other downstream routes. As shown on the attached table, additional pressure on S.H. 55 is (conservatively) estimated as follows:

- Approved/Proposed Development: 68,460 vehicles per day
- Development in the planning stages: 10,100 to 61,500 vehicles per day
- Grand total traffic load on S.H. 55: 78,610 to 129,960 vehicles per day

Obviously, heavy construction traffic will be using S.H. 55 years long before housing units are offered for sale. We can expect this construction traffic to begin shortly and continue unabated for the foreseeable future.

Current ITD/Compass regional transportation plans do not anticipate or recognize this looming S.H. 55 capacity problem, and there is no program underway (or anticipated) to revise these plans in light of the unforeseen development pressure in North Ada County and northward. Given this, developments have been (and presumably will continue to be) approved with ITD acknowledging impacts and recommending only site-specific, “band-aid” modifications.

Further, ITD has no funds to pay for S.H. 55 improvements. In discussing this issue with agency representatives, one hears such statements as “we are at a crisis stage financially” and “we aren’t sure if we will have the money to properly maintain the state highways, let alone improve them”. Nor does ITD have a statutory mechanism to collect impact fees from developers to ensure that they pay their pro rata share for the state highway improvements made necessary by their developments. While ITD is able to accept “lump sum” contributions from developers for specific improvements (e.g. Micron), the Highway 55 situation is cumulative; the total “end state” improvements/expansions needed cannot be attributed to one developer.

In contrast, ACHD has the authority to impose extraordinary impact fees to fund county road improvements made necessary by this impending development. For the North Ada County Foothills, ACHD has dictated that a master road plan be prepared for this area before development is allowed to proceed and, lacking revenue for development-related improvements, will impose extraordinary impact fees on all new developments

RECOMMENDATIONS (Requiring multi-jurisdictional cooperation to accomplish)

- ITD should immediately begin a comprehensive, detailed plan for S.H. 55/44 expansion or alternatives on a high priority basis, including consultation with Ada, Boise and Gem counties.
- ITD must be provided with resources necessary to accomplish this task in the next two years.
- ITD should be provided (by the State Legislature) with the statutory authority to impose impact fees to ensure that developers pay their share of state highway improvements made necessary by cumulative development.
- ITD should adopt a policy that defers approval of large developments until the highway improvements they necessitate can be built. (Note: the Cities and County can and should also adopt this policy).

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