

## A possible break in Idaho's road funding traffic jam

by Anne Wallace Allen

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There was a collective gasp when Sen. Chuck Winder told a roomful of local movers and shakers this spring that he would support a local-option tax initiative in the coming legislative session.

As things now stand, only a few Idaho resort communities have the option of raising money by adding a few pennies to the sales tax in their area. In most areas of Idaho, the residents aren't even permitted to put the notion to a vote.

Winder's admission that he supports a local-option tax under certain circumstances almost stole the show at the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce event in April. He was modeling his idea after one used in Oklahoma City. Critically, it doesn't involve debt. Instead of getting approval for the project, paying for it, and then paying off the debt over 20 years, the Oklahoma City model has citizens approving projects and collecting the money beforehand through the local-option sales tax.

Winder's unexpected decision to champion the tax was good news for the local politicians and businesspeople who are fed up with the Legislature's refusal to let local citizens make their own taxing decisions. The matter comes up more and more in the context of deferred road maintenance, which is costing Idaho millions of dollars a year.

In fact, the local-option tax discussion couldn't have happened at a better time for proponents of fixing the state's road infrastructure. Earlier this year, Idaho Transportation Department Director Brian Ness told lawmakers that it would cost \$262 million per year just to keep the roads in the condition they're in. A state task force has reported that transportation in Idaho is underfunded by \$543 million each year.

That news prompted a great deal of statewide head-scratching on how to come up with the money for highway repairs. Nobody seems to think that the Legislature is likely to approve the spending necessary to keep Idaho's roads and bridges in working order. So business people who have a stake in the transportation are trying to come up with some solutions on their own.

On Aug. 28, the Urban Land Institute is holding a forum called Infrastructure: Funding Idaho's Future. Nationally known speaker Ed McMahon will discuss innovations in infrastructure financing seen in other areas of the country. Various local leaders will make their pleas for funding infrastructure as a way to attract business. And a panel that includes Winder will talk about how the Legislature can help resolve some of the gaps in road maintenance.

Winder's decision to talk about the local-option tax measure couldn't have come at a better time. So far, ideas like the gas tax or other user fees have gone nowhere, though they're still on the table.

Lawmakers have shown they don't much want to pay much for road improvements, but the Oklahoma City model of local-option tax means they don't have to. All they have to do is let local voters decide if they want to pay for them.

Winder says the lawmakers he's talked to since the chamber meeting seem to like the idea of the Oklahoma City model. He's met with the Boise Metro Chamber of Commerce and the Boise Mayor David Bieter's office about it, and Bieter, a longtime supporter of raising money through the local-option tax, called it out at his State of the City address.

Winder and others are working on some draft legislation that will be ready to go in January. The bill would limit the local tax increases to a penny, and the tax would require a simple majority to pass.

"The citizens are going to decide whether they want to tax themselves for specific projects," Winder

said. "To me it's the best form of democracy there is."

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