

# Highway 55 projects for Valley County go begging for funding

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DONNELLY — Valley County has seen more projects fall off the state's priority list for funding highway projects than any other place in Idaho, transportation officials say.

This comes at a time when Highway 55 is a vital north-south link that is experiencing a huge jump in use, said Phil Choate, Idaho Transportation Department senior planner.

"It's a major artery to us," he told locals at an informal meeting on Wednesday in Donnelly.

It appears that relocation of Highway 55 between Smiths Ferry and Round Valley is on the department's "Far Horizon" planning list, putting it 16 or more years after the

current five-year construction schedule is past. A realignment study on the route began in 1999.

"The cost to complete these projects in 16 or more years would be projected at a minimum increase by a factor of six to seven times the current cost," Idaho Transportation Department documents say. Smiths Ferry is included among projects estimated to cost more than \$40 million.

Choate said that factors such as the growing cost of materials and fewer gas tax dollars as a result of better gas mileage for vehicles are winnowing away support.

"Growth is not paying its way," he said.

But there also is a lot of politics involved as communities across Idaho jockey for funding their local improve-

ments by the Idaho Transportation Board. Choate said that residents must get involved to move such road jobs back onto a schedule to take place in the near future.

"I can't think of an area in my region that needs more involvement than this," he said. "You need to be engaged. If we don't have local support, we don't go forward."

The department is in the middle of corridor management planning work for Highway 55 from Marsing to New Meadows.

A number of projects that were in the State Transportation Improvement Program to start work in the next five years have dropped to the "Horizons" planning level.

They include: A rest stop in the Round Valley area, estimated at \$5-

\$10 million; the bridge replacement over the Payette River in Cascade, at \$5-\$10 million; widening for northbound passing lanes in the Cascade area at \$10-\$20 million; widening for southbound passing lane for Cascade, \$5-\$10 million; Donnelly passing lanes, \$5-\$10; Round Valley passing lanes, less than \$5 million; wetland mitigation, cost unknown.

"Most of the bridges are functionally obsolete," Choate said.

Under the "Near Horizon" list of projects 6-10 years after the STIP schedule is the Round Valley rest stop, Cascade bridge replacement, Gardena and Banks passing lanes.

Under the "Mid-Horizon" list of 11-15 years after the STIP are the major widening for southbound and northbound Cascade passing lanes

and Donnelly passing lanes, as well as the Round Valley passing lanes.

The Payette River canyon north of Smiths Ferry is a bottleneck that occasionally closes during vehicle collisions and other issues.

Tamarack officials attending the meeting asked how projects which were deemed so important to be on the funding list had fallen off the STIP priority.

"They apparently were low-hanging fruit that fell off the tree," he said. "If they're important, we need to get them back."

Local governments and citizens need to push for the projects, Choate said.

"It's a story that we need to hear continually to remind the board and the Legislature."

## OURS

### Future looks bleak for improvements to busy Highway 55

Last week's Donnelly meeting on improvements to State Highway 55 was punctuated by a non-fatal vehicle collision on the southern outskirts of McCall.

It occurred in one of the sections with poor visibility through the rolling hills and narrow road base. Trucks are continually turning into businesses there. And, the road is grooved from all the tires, creating good conditions for hydroplaning from rain or gathering ice in the winter.

The message from the gathering with the Idaho Transportation Department is that there is very little money for improving this link and in several years, there may not be enough dollars for upkeep.

The Smiths Ferry-Round Valley relocation now holds a "far horizon" designation, which puts any construction 16 or more years after the current five-year funding cycle is over. So, that project appears effectively dead on arrival.

A kayaker died in the North Fork of the Payette River on Sunday south of Smiths Ferry. The subsequent traffic jam around the scene of the accident created a traffic jam to the north that extended for miles.

Former Gov. Cecil Andrus once referred to Highway 55 and U.S. Highway 95 to the north as a "goat trail" that serves as Idaho's chief north-south connection with the Panhandle.

The traffic jams in the Boise area prompt the agency to allot funding for interstate improvements. The support for projects in the rural towns is dwindling, although a good percentage of Treasure Valley residents journey up Highway 55 to recreate here.

ITD says vehicles are becoming much more fuel-efficient, so there are fewer gas tax dollars arriving. The federal gas tax of 18.4 cents per gallon hasn't changed since 1993 and the state's fuel tax of 25 cents a gallon has stayed there since 1996.

According to ITD, "We are rapidly approaching the year 2011, when the department will no longer be able to fund basic transportation needs such as pothole patching and snow plowing. The day is in sight when we will not have enough state matching funds to obtain the federal funds used for most of our highway projects."

Officials say the rural areas must actively lobby to attract road improvements. So, the way to secure turning lanes or wider highways appears to require delving in politics at the Idaho Legislature or the Idaho Transportation Board meetings.

But people including long-time Valley County Commissioner Tom Kerr literally spent decades lobbying for projects such as a McCall bypass and they never saw the light of day. The Deinhard-Boydston connector gets people across town, but is not the official bypass.

Getting involved may improve things. But also consider laying money aside for new shock absorbers.