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Treasure Valley should study Denver's model for transit funding

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Statesman Editorial Page Editor Bob Ehlert made a good point in one of his columns in early June about riding the bus: Would you be willing to spend some extra time and money to ride it? The answer to that question may determine the future expansion of public transit investment in Idaho. Will commuters use it, and will funding be available to pay for it?

To examine what may lie ahead for Idaho's public transit system, let's look east. Denver's Regional Transportation District Adopted Budget 2016 is a fascinating read for those interested in this topic and willing to digest a 250-page award-winning report. RTD's vision is to deliver regional, multimodal transportation and infrastructure that increases transit market share "significantly and continually."

RTD drew a line around the greater Denver area to create a transportation district, with an elected citizen representative from each zone. The district has taxing authority that includes user fees and sales taxes. Federal grants, rider fares and advertising revenue provide additional income. Colorado's Taxpayer Bill of Rights, or TABOR, prohibits the district from incurring unfunded fiscal obligations without prior voter approval.

The RTD system is multimodal and includes buses, light rail, commuter rail, Americans with Disabilities Act access and vanpools. Connectivity, accessibility and convenience are essential elements of its success. The logistics challenge is enormous: Serve 3 million people and cover

2,349 square miles. RTD employs 2,600 workers, but a shortage of heavy-construction commercial contractors did limit infrastructure expansion in 2015.

Public transit is not cheap: RTD's annual operating budget is \$635 million. Interest expense, debt payments and new capital improvements add up to a capital budget of \$1.6 billion. Public bonded debt is a large part of the capital structure, and many bonds were approved by a judge, not voters.

Ridership is flat to slightly down, despite population growth in the Denver area, and labor costs and fringe benefits are rising much faster than the rate of inflation. Car-friendly think tanks like the Cato Institute are not big fans of public transit.

Yet RTD is a model for the entire United States. Denver has made a massive investment.

What can business leaders, politicians, taxpayers and the commuting public in Ada and Canyon counties learn from the RTD model?

You may wish to ponder this question the next time you're waiting to make a left turn onto Eagle Road during rush hour.