

Article Search

- Website (7 days)
 Archive (from 1999)

Main Menu

Quick Links

Best-laid growth plans often just gather dust

Local officials say two land-use and transportation plans now being drafted aim to avoid the pitfalls that often doom the best-intentioned government efforts.

Cynthia Sewell

The Idaho Statesman | Edition Date: 09-18-2005

[Email This Article](#)

[Printer Friendly Page](#)

Scores of Treasure Valley land-use and transportation plans and studies in recent decades have ended up sitting on shelves or being only partly implemented.

That doesn't necessarily mean that planners failed or that planning for roads, traffic and growth is wasted effort. But it does mean that the results that impatient taxpayers want from plans often never materialize.

"All the plans are doing is building bigger cities, not better cities," said David Reed, a fourth-generation Idahoan who worked as an engineer for Morrison-Knudsen for 20 years. "We do all these plans but don't enforce them."

Reed's sentiment is not new. "Plans are worthless, planning is essential" is a famous Dwight Eisenhower quote often cited by Michael Lauer, a Kansas-based planner working on the Blueprint for Good Growth, a new Ada County land use and transportation plan.

An Idaho Statesman review of Treasure Valley plans from recent decades reveals that five common pitfalls often keep plans from succeeding: a lack of money to make them work; no mechanism for enforcement of recommendations; changes in leadership and visions; incorrect or bad data; and vague or unrealistic goals.

Studies are time-consuming, and seeing them through takes even longer, said Charles Trainor, planning director for COMPASS, the Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho. "There are so many things — legal and environmental issues, twists and turns. One project can take 10 or 20 years to go from a gleam in someone's eye to ribbon-cutting," said Trainor. But, he said, nothing good gets done — such as Interstate 84 or the I-184 Connector — without a plan: "Everything built stemmed from a study."

Two new long-range plans in the works propose to be different from disappointing plans of the past. Communities in Motion, a six-county transportation plan, and Blueprint for Good Growth, a land-use and transportation plan for Ada County, are intended to provide unified and fiscally responsible visions for managing growth and getting results.

Blueprint for Good Growth, in particular, is being written to avoid some pitfalls, Lauer said. The county and cities will rework codes and ordinances so they can enforce its objectives — such as encouraging infill development in existing neighborhoods and providing a variety of housing choices. Annual reports and regular updates will keep the plan on track.

"Blueprint is structured to provide local agencies with the tools required to effect the plan," said Lauer.

Enlarge 



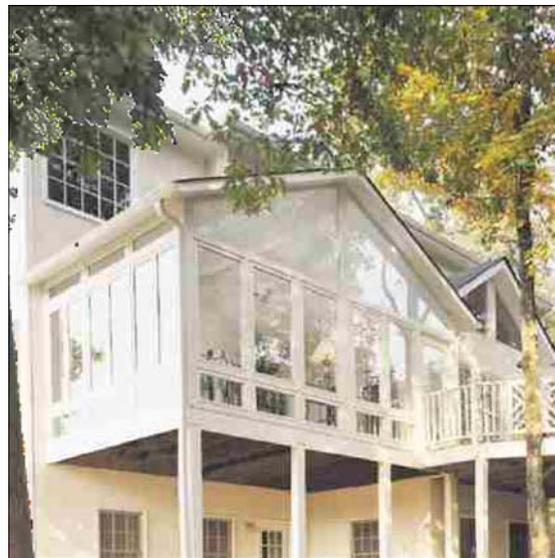
Darin Oswald / The Idaho Statesman

David Reed, a Fourth-generation Idahoan, wants to see enforceable land-use plans that protect rural lands like his — and the birds and wildlife that live there — from runaway growth.

Related Links

[Blueprint for Good Growth](#)

[Communities in Motion](#)



Additional Images

Enlarge 



Joe Jaszewski / The Idaho Statesman

David Reed, a Fourth-generation Idahoan, wants to see enforceable land-use plans that protect rural lands like his — and the birds and wildlife that live there — from runaway growth.

Additional Information

What we've already done

But such concerns have been raised before — with questionable results. In fact, twice in the last 10 years national planning experts have taken note of the area's abundance of disjointed plans.

In 1995, Mayor Brent Coles invited the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit land-use research and education group, to Boise to evaluate the city's growth planning and management practices.

The panel's 1995 report concluded local governments needed to:

- Work together in a regional, coordinated effort.
- Put into action the many plans now sitting on a shelf or yet to be finished.
- Form a regional metropolitan government.

"Despite the existence of many planning documents that express a variety of policies, very few specific guidelines and standards have been adopted to serve as bases for decision-making and implementation," the 1995 report said.

Ten years later, a new Urban Land Institute panel came to Boise to evaluate growth management. Its February 2005 findings echoed the 1995 report:

- Governments need to stop talking about working together and start doing it.
- The Blueprint for Good Growth study now under way must be enforceable and must be implemented.

"Ada County and its cities need to come together and stop acting unilaterally ... This is imperative because the consequences of unilateral action are unplanned and disconnected growth, wasted resources and infrastructure, increased traffic, and a decline in the region's quality of life," the new report said.

Boise developer Peter O'Neill, whose projects include River Run, Surprise Valley and Bown Crossing, participated in both Urban Land Institute visits.

"I've lived in this community for 40 years, and I'm getting a little impatient," O'Neill said. "We are very good at doing studies. We are very good at making plans. We are really terrible at implementing them."

Why do plans fail?

1. No money to carry out recommendations Plans are relatively inexpensive to put together and by their nature encourage visionary or blue-sky scenarios. For instance, this year's \$637,000 Downtown Mobility Study called for \$100 million in downtown transportation improvements but offered no specifics on how to pay.

But reality prevails: Government monies are tight. Planners can quickly pencil out a downtown Boise scenario with trolley cars or light rail connecting Canyon and Ada counties. But once the costs are tallied up, the plan may not be feasible.

Numerous plans and studies fill the shelves of local government offices. Some are federally mandated, like road studies. Others are voluntary. Here's a sampling:

- Past plans
- Bench/Valley Transportation Study, ACHD, 1995, \$1.25 million.
 - Boise Smart City Initiative, Mayor Brent Coles and CCDC, 2002, \$50,000.
 - Boise Visions, Mayor Dirk Kempthorne, 1992, cost unavailable.
 - I-84 Corridor Study, COMPASS, 2001, \$550,000.
 - North Meridian Area Plan, private developers, 2002, \$50,000.
 - State Street Corridor Study Phase 1, ACHD, 2003, \$290,000.
 - Regional Transportation Task Force, Mayor Brent Coles, 2004, \$40,000.
 - Treasure Valley Growth Scenario Analysis, Treasure Valley Futures Project, 2001, \$510,000.
 - Transit Development Plan, ValleyRide, 2001, \$80,000.
 - Treasure Valley Corridor Study, Ada Planning Association, 1997, \$550,000.
 - Treasure Valley Alternative Transportation Analysis, Ada Planning Association, 1995, \$190,000.

Ongoing plans

Long-range plans: Federal regulations require that metropolitan planning organizations have a long-range transportation plan, which must be updated every three to five years. Community Planning Association of Southwest Idaho is the Valley's metropolitan planning organization. Communities in Motion (2006) is the newest update of the Valley's transportation plan.

Comp plans: Idaho state law requires every city and county to have a comprehensive plan, which is a long-range plan for future development of a community. Seven comp plans are in force in Ada County: Ada County, Boise, Eagle, Garden City, Kuna, Meridian and Star.

What we're doing next

Blueprint for Good Growth and Communities in Motion will be completed in February 2006. Here are some other new plans:

Downtown Mobility Study

Agencies: CCDC, COMPASS, ACHD, Valleyride

Cost: \$637,000

Completed: 2005

Recommendations: \$100 million of transit improvements in downtown for the next 20 years.

Status: Draft complete. Awaiting public hearings and approval.

Eagle Road Arterial Study

Agency: ITD

Cost: \$425,000

Completed: 2005

Recommendations: Install curb, gutter and sidewalk the entire length, three new traffic signals, center median, bike paths, lower speed limit to 45 mph.

Status: One traffic signal will be installed this summer; other improvements over next five years.

Regional Transportation Task Force

Agency: Mayor Coles created 50-member task force in 2002.

Cost: \$40,000

Completed: 2004

Recommendation: Change state law to create a regional transportation authority; consider local tax options, user fees or I-84 toll to fund improvements.

Status: Presented to COMPASS board July 2004.

COMPASS staff examining the suggestions.

State Street Corridor Study

Agencies: ACHD, Boise

Cost: \$365,000

Completed: 2003

Recommendation: Widen State from 23rd to Eagle to seven lanes; two lanes for buses and carpools.

Status: ACHD, Ada County, Boise, Garden City and Valley Regional Transit in the process of signing an agreement to move forward with recommendation.

Keeping up with basic infrastructure alone is fiscally challenging for public agencies. A 1999 Future Foundation report on Treasure Valley infrastructure expenses to 2015 estimated the total costs for parks, schools, roads, sewer and water at \$1.9 billion. Based on current tax and fee structures, the Valley's roads and parks face a \$360 million shortfall, and schools will need \$730 million in bonds for new construction.

Coming up, for example, with \$30 million or more for former Mayor Brent Coles' proposed Regio Sprinter light-rail system is a much more expensive proposition.

2 Leadership and visions change Short-term governing and long-range planning do not go together. Every two or four years, mayors, council and commissioners change. But plans are written for 10, 15 and 20 years. "The test of the plan is its continued relevance to the community," said COMPASS' Trainor.

Former Boise Mayor Dick Eardley watched Boise grow from a small community to a thriving metropolis.

"I think, for the most part, we do one plan after another, and then they sit on the shelf and draw dust. This is not done intentionally," said Eardley, whose 12 years as mayor ended in 1986. "Changes in leadership and disputes between community leaders on what to do and not do — because of all that, it never comes to pass. Plans look good, and then get shot down by individual governments."

"Boise Visions" was created in 1992 at the request of Mayor Dirk Kempthorne to chart a 20-year course for Boise. More than 400 politicians, professionals and citizens spent two years crafting the 370-page plan. Kempthorne directed his staff to conduct annual reviews. The next year, Kempthorne became a U.S. senator; Brent Coles became mayor and put together his own plans, including a push for light rail and the Boise Smart City Initiative for the River/Myrtle urban renewal district to combine sustainable urban design and state-of-the-art telecommunications. His replacement, Dave Bieter, is now backing Blueprint for Good Growth.

3 The plan isn't enforceable Good intentions do not get plans implemented. How many city and county officials campaign on a promise to encourage sprawl? Yet, cities sprawl. Plans must have "teeth," say observers like John Petrovsky. Cities and the county must have enforceable codes and ordinances. But that creates another dilemma: Within Ada County more than 40 local governments operate, including six city governments, a highway district and other agencies like school, sewer and fire districts. One city can say it wants denser development, with three or four homes per acre; another city can say it wants one home per 1- or 5-acre lot. This creates challenges for road planning, schools and other infrastructure as the county and its cities all approve development with separate plans.

"Too many studies and plans appear to have stirred controversy but little action," national planners told Boise officials in 1995. "Regulations should be consistent with comprehensive plans."

4 Goals are vague or unrealistic In 2002, Boise Mayor Brent Coles put together a regional transportation task force to find better ways to move commuters through the Treasure Valley. The group's findings were forward-thinking and innovative: Create a regional transportation authority and consider a local option tax and a toll system on I-84 to fund transportation projects.

But, how realistic was a new regional government or an I-84 toll road?

Some of Kempthorne's Boise Visions recommendations were specific, like creating a parks and recreation plan. Others were vague, like "develop and maintain public infrastructure in a manner which supports an upwardly mobile population and work force."

5 Incorrect or poor data Planning for growth requires accurate growth forecasting — not just how many people are coming, but where they will live and work. For example, Boise Metropolitan Plan in plans in 1978 called for a regional mall downtown. When the city approved Boise Towne Square mall instead in the late 1980s, planners were not ready for the traffic and commercial growth on the West Bench and had to move quickly to get roads in place.

"An effective plan needs to be reality-based — meaning that our recommendations must be based on credible numbers for the plan to be effective," said planner Michael Lauer.

Understanding "the pipeline" is one example Lauer cites — meaning making sure planners account for development for which building permits are not yet issued. For instance, if a new 500-home subdivision has five homes under construction and five homes to be constructed in the next year, growth forecasters might count 10 new homes — with a minimal impact on nearby roads and sewers. But 490 more homes are in the pipeline, which is a much more valuable measure of likely impact. "The initial Communities in Motion scenarios did not account for development in the pipeline, a deficiency that was quickly remedied," said Lauer.

COMPASS' difficulty in predicting and tracking growth spurts has caused problems for planners.

"We did plan for growth, but not for so much growth so quickly," said Elizabeth Conner, who served as director of

the Treasure Valley Partnership from its inception in 1997 to 2004. "Thirty-year comp plans were being built out in 10 years," Conner said.

How can new plans avoid these pitfalls?

Two new plans under way aim to avoid previous planning pitfalls and to address past failures.

- Communities in Motion, a joint project of COMPASS and the Idaho Transportation Department, is a new approach to writing the federally mandated long-range transportation plan that covers Ada, Boise, Canyon, Elmore, Gem and Payette counties.

The plan is evaluating growth and transportation issues with an emphasis on creating policy rather than a list of projects. A draft of the \$1 million plan should be completed by the end of the February.

- Blueprint for Good Growth is a cooperative land-use and transportation study financed by its participating agencies: Ada County, its six cities and Ada County Highway District. The blueprint is supposed to shape the development patterns that create transportation demands, bridging the gap between land use and transportation planning. The study is supposed to serve as a tool for Ada County and its cities to update their respective comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances and planning policies. A draft of the \$800,000 plan should be completed by the end of February. The idea behind Blueprint for Good Growth is to identify and map out a "preferred growth scenario" for Ada County's future — a literal blueprint. The plan is supposed to specify where and when growth should occur, and how services such as police, fire, education and transportation are provided.

'This is so different from any other study'

"Blueprint is the mechanism to marry land-use and transportation planning," said Ada County Commissioner Judy Peavey-Derr. "This is so different from any other study and plan that has been done to date."

Because the Blueprint project is not like previous plans, Boise Mayor Dave Bieter said, it's too early to judge its fate.

"We've not tried this before — the development of the growth scenarios, the level of sophistication with modeling — we've never been anywhere near this and that is exactly why this effort is so different and has a chance," said Bieter.

Blueprint and Communities in Motion also differ from past plans because they are not specific to one city.

"The biggest change that is needed in the Valley is to think like a valley," said Michael Blankenship, dean of Boise State University's College of Social Sciences and Public Affairs. He likes that the plans go beyond individual city or county boundaries and instead cover a regional area.

COMPASS' Charles Trainor agrees with Blankenship.

"This is a metropolitan area," said Trainor. "One community cannot hope to succeed in its goals without the involvement of others. Traffic and air quality don't stop at city or county lines."

So how will Communities in Motion and Blueprint for Good Growth avoid the pitfalls? That's where the answers get less specific.

Because Blueprint is a collaborative plan for ACHD, Ada County and its six cities, it is not as susceptible to individual leadership changes, many officials say. And its recommendations will be written into county and city law, officials promise. That will weave Blueprint's aims into each community's and agency's long-term planning documents and ordinances, which should provide some immunity to leadership turnover.

Have they really learned?

But some people watching these planning efforts are skeptical that city and county leaders and planners have truly learned from past failures.

Eagle resident John Petrovsky thinks Blueprint for Good Growth and Communities in Motion sound good on paper. But enforceability and political will are key. If plans languish or fail, Petrovsky said, citizens must make their voices heard.

"The average citizen believes the public process is useless and that deals are already made," said Petrovsky, who organized a citizens group that advocated better planning in north Ada County. "When that happens, the citizen has to take it to the next level and scream to be heard."

Petrovsky and others wonder what will happen when city or Ada County officials want to do something not called for in Blueprint for Good Growth. Because participation in Blueprint is voluntary, skeptics worry, there's nothing to keep city or county officials from veering away from the regional plan.

"Enforcement will be a challenge — and also our greatest opportunity," said Meridian Mayor Tammy de Weerd. "Clearly defining our cities' and county's roles in the success of Blueprint is critical. No government can give up its authority to govern. Therefore, no local government will have an enforcement mechanism over another local government. So the answer is, as stated by the Urban Land Institute panel, 'no unilateral decision-making.' "

[Statesman Homepage](#) | [News](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Idaho Outdoors](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Homes](#) | [Apts](#) | [Cars](#) | [Shopping](#) | [Customer Service](#)

[About IdahoStatesman.com](#) | [About the Real Cities Network](#) | [Terms of Use & Privacy Statement](#) | [About Knight Ridder](#) | [Copyright](#)

