

Editorial

Driving less pays off

Our View: Funds would be wisely spent on commute projects

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One way to fix Spokane's notorious potholes is to patch them with asphalt. Another is to rip up streets and lay new pavement.

Those are remedies we're familiar with – witness the Ash-Maple couplet in recent months, and so many others in the past.

How much of the problem could be resolved by simply getting some motorists to leave their cars at home and use the bus, a bicycle or their own feet? Plenty, according to a coalition of business, environmental, health and local government groups known as the SmartRoutes 2010 Spokane Initiative.

Backers of alternative transportation have identified dozens of projects – involving construction, planning and education – that they estimate could triple the number of "active transportation" trips (biking and walking, for instance) that occur in Spokane County. That would mean an estimated 91 million fewer vehicle miles annually, or the equivalent of taking all motor vehicles off the streets for nine days a year.

Put that way, the payoff begins to look impressive. But payoffs down the road require investments up front, and a source of funds is needed for not only more bike lanes and signage, but for sidewalks in places where pedestrians have no convenient way to access shopping, work or even the bus stop. Also needed are pedestrian and bicycle bridges that let non-motorized traffic connect safely in a communitywide network.

In the Centennial Trail, the community already boasts what SmartRoutes advocates think of as the spine of a future system, but how to provide for the other components to make ambitious goals a reality?

Hope is on the horizon. The national Rails to Trails Conservancy is pushing for Congress to appropriate \$2 billion to follow up on a pilot program funded in 2005 to promote SmartRoutes-type efforts in four communities. Each got \$25 million to see what it could do, and after four years, the results will be evaluated against a fifth comparison community.

The comparison community is Spokane. Rails to Trails believes the results so far are promising enough to expand the project. If the funding comes through, it wants to give \$50 million each to 40 communities to accomplish projects like the ones SmartRoutes backers are talking about. Leaders of the Spokane County movement are optimistic, based in part on the county's role as a control community for the pilot project, that it can be a grantee.

The objectives make sense economically as well as environmentally. It's no wonder such a broad array of community leaders have added their backing.

Be a buddy

The Spokane Bicycle Club's Bike Buddy program provides information for people who are interested in cycling as an alternative means of transportation. E-mail spokanebikebuddy@aol.com.