

Connecting the DOTs Across Greater Yellowstone

Those of us who live in the tri-state region around Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks are well aware that we have few public transportation options and must rely on our cars to go almost everywhere. As a result, the scenarios describe below unfold on a daily basis in our region:

- *Arriving at the Billings, Montana airport, a European teenager searches for a bus to Yellowstone National Park. Finding no bus service, and being too young to rent a car, the young man decides to hitchhike.*
- *At 5:00 a.m. in Victor, Idaho, a hotel housekeeper hoping to stay ahead of a thousand commuters this winter day starts her 22-mile solo commute over the snowy, 8,431-foot-high Teton Pass to Jackson, Wyoming.*
- *Its driver unfamiliar with winter's black ice on I-15 in eastern Idaho, a van of Japanese tourists enroute to Grand Teton National Park slides off the road and rolls three times. Three tourists die.*

Made up? Unfortunately, not. These scenarios are especially relevant because they occur in a region that is a world-famous tourist destination with over four million visitors per year. Given the expected increase of international visitors to our national parks, the absence of integrated transportation services across our three states will become even more evident and underscore the need for better cross-state, multi-modal connections.

But it wasn't always so—the old Yellow Bus and railroad transportation played a major role in the early visitation to our national parks. Since World War II, car travel has replaced these modes across our region with significant social, economic, and environmental implications. Today's rising gas prices, far-flung rural developments, and lack of affordable housing in job centers all detract from the very quality of life we value on all sides of the national parks.

Since 2005, civic, business, and government leaders in the Greater Yellowstone have been discussing the prospects for a regional transportation system. Following up on that discussion, the Yellowstone Business Partnership has received a \$30,000 grant from the Idaho Transportation Board to lead development of a "Concept of Operations" plan to connect the region's communities and national parks. USDA Rural Development and Partners for Prosperity in Eastern Idaho have added an additional \$25,000 to engage people interested in improving regional mobility.

Over the course of this annual conference our "Concept" consultants will share what they've learned to date and will discuss the region's unmet transportation needs. What follows are an introductory paper and five mobility scenarios to stimulate group dialogue and generate new ideas. We thank chair Basil Barna along with Lisa Ballard, David Kack and Tim Young for their ongoing work on this important project.