

TASK FORCE HEARS TRANSPORTATION VIEWS OF NORTH CENTRAL KANSANS



T-LINK Co-chair Tim Rogers at the opening presentation

More than 95 north central Kansans met in Abilene on Sept. 18 to discuss how the state's transportation system could be more responsive to 21st century challenges.

Participants voiced concerns pertaining to all modes of transportation in the region, including how to fund future improvements amid challenging economic conditions, to the Transportation-Leveraging Investments in Kansas (T-LINK) task force.

T-LINK's 35 members - leaders in the fields of business, government and labor - have been assigned to develop recommendations for a new strategic transportation approach as the state's 10-year transportation program comes to an end.

The potential to attract wind-turbine manufacturers and the need to have better coordinated transit services were among the issues that distinguished this region's needs.

"Transportation is not just a KDOT issue and it's not just a roads and bridges issue for cities and counties," said Phyllis Anderson, director of community resource development for Salina-based OCCK Inc., a nonprofit organization that provides transit and other services.

"It's an issue for employers," Anderson said. "It's an issue for human service organizations that are trying to deal with people's needs. We're only going to be able to solve everybody's problems if everybody is at the table at the same time and talking about the needs of all of us."

Rep. Elaine Bowers, Concordia, said that a multimodal approach to transportation is necessary to generate new economic opportunities. Bowers, who has two wind farms in her House district, stated that both rail and four-lane highway access is encouraging a Concordia manufacturer to make windmill towers to serve wind farms, a growing addition to the state's economic development portfolio.

In addition to hearing about the needs of north central region, T-LINK members were also presented some new strategies for meeting transportation challenges, which is part of their charge. As directed by Governor Kathleen Sebelius, T-LINK's focus is three-fold:

- 1. Commit to keep roads and bridges safe and in good repair.**
- 2. Engage in forward thinking that moves beyond old business models.**
- 3. Take a new approach that recognizes today's challenging fiscal realities and creates a framework to prepare Kansas for its transportation future.**

NEW APPROACHES



Breakout session: Highway Group

Dennis Lauver, president and chief executive office of the Salina Chamber of Commerce, encouraged task force members to use the process Saline County is using to shift to a two-mile grid system, which requires closing roads and bridges, as a model for how to respond to transportation challenges.

We were dealing with a road system and bridge system that worked in the late 1800s, but was not right for a 21st century county. Or for a county that wants to grow and create economic development opportunities, Lauver said.

He added the process was not easy and it required a lot of communication and some tough decision-making. However, Saline County's transportation system is better because of it, he said.

"We're now healthier than we used to be," Lauver said. "Our percentage of roads, streets and bridges that are deficient has dropped dramatically."

He cautioned that in order for this model to work the state cannot allocate transportation funds to counties based solely on deficiencies—otherwise there will be no incentives for local governments to make tough decisions like closing certain roads.

The issue of closing roads and bridges has been discussed at previous task force meetings. It's notable that this concept garnered less support from participants at the Abilene meeting than it did from their counterparts in Hays and Ulysses.

MORE FLEXIBILITY FOR ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Two key approaches that have been suggested for the new transportation thinking is that major decisions must be made more often than every 10 years – and decision makers must consider economic development.

"Making another 10-year plan is probably not the best approach in terms of providing flexibility for the state and for local communities to create the infrastructure that makes Kansas appealing to those that make capital investments to create jobs for Kansans," said Lauver of the Salina chamber. "A 5-year approach would be more flexible and allow us to do a better job of bringing jobs into communities."

Dana Peterson, producer policy specialist with the Kansas Wheat Commission and Kansas Association of Wheat Growers, said Kansas wheat growers need a strong transportation network to contend with worldwide competition.

"We're seeing major growth in China and India," she said. "Being able to transport our goods to consumers is of primary importance for wheat farmers."

Peterson added that the state is losing revenue from farms housed in counties near neighboring states, because farmers are opting to haul their grain across state lines to get a better basis price for their grain. The price differential can be attributed to transportation aspects such as having access to rail.

T-LINK member Jane Westerman, a Cargill official from Dodge City, said the state needs to remember the economic impact of central and western Kansas when it maps out transportation projects. “We don’t have the population, but we do have the economy,” she said.

Participants were very receptive to having economic analysis be a component of project selection; however they did warn that safety should not be forgotten in the process.

FACING TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES

Like citizens who participated in T-LINK local consultation meetings in Hays on Sept. 12 and Ulysses on Sept. 11, attendees in Abilene voiced many needs and concerns about their transportation network.

“You’ve got main arteries that are heavily, heavily traveled,” said Rep. Tom Moxley of Council Grove. “They’re not safe, because there are no shoulders and they’re hilly. If you fall off the edge of the road, you’re upside down. Everyone knows someone who’s been killed on those roads.”

Dickinson County, Abilene and several other cities submitted a joint resolution to the T-LINK task force, asking for a new state Comprehensive Transportation Program to fund numerous transportation improvements.

“The failure to undertake these transportation capital improvements will impede and may prevent the economic needs and goals of the county and cities from being accomplished,” the petition stated.

The projects listed by the petition include replacements of several bridges considered insufficient or obsolete.

“We’re fortunate to have all the state and federal highways we’ve got,” said Dickinson County Commissioner Joe Nold. “Most roads and bridges are in pretty good shape. But for the things we know we need to do, we can’t pull the wagon on our own.”

In addition, the return of the Big Red One to Fort Riley has generated much growth for the surrounding areas, which has led to an increase in transportation needs for the region. These new challenges were also brought up frequently to T-LINK members.

THE FUTURE LIES ALONG SEVERAL MODES



Breakout session: Transit Group

Another crucial aspect of the state's transportation thinking is developing the full potential of all modes of transportation.

A shortfall in any mode poses dangers. For example, 52 Kansas counties lack instrument approach capability for their airports, which impedes air ambulance service in bad weather.

Peter Van Kuren, Manhattan Airport manager, noted that state funding for Kansas airports has been limited to \$3 million a year since the state's most recent transportation plan kicked in a decade ago.

"It's important to recognize the quality of life airports provide and the economic development importance of airports throughout the state of Kansas," he said. "Aviation programs within the state have been underfunded for the past 10 years. This is a great opportunity to evaluate and understand the needs each airport in Kansas has, and to determine a way to fund them to a level that will best serve the people of Kansas."

The need for more public transit services was also a concern. State transportation officials recently determined that 12 Kansas counties lack transit service – even as demand for such service grows.

Unlike the groups that gathered in Ulysses and Hays, participants in the Abilene meeting said they favored state funding for bike/ped projects, including education for bicyclists and motorists.

Participants also asked that the state continue its support for short-line railroads, which reduce truck traffic and contribute to economic development in small communities.



T-LINK Member and Abilene resident Fred Bailey reports on his group's discussion

HOW TO FUND IT ALL – OR AT LEAST PART OF IT

“Looking at overall funding in a multi-modal aspect, are we causing competition between the various modes for funding?” asked T-LINK member Don Linville from Garden City. “We must put all competition aside and continue to be engaged. We do not want to adversely affect what we are trying to improve. We must consider all funding options carefully.”

Participants were encouraged to recommend new funding sources. In particular, members of the aviation breakout group suggested that taxing jet fuel could be a potential new revenue source. They also suggested adding a medical surcharge on air ambulance flights. These revenues would be utilized to finance airport improvements.

As in Ulysses and Hayes, Abilene participants were asked to fill out a form indicating their preferences on how to fund transportation improvements. Using gaming fees to help fund transportation was the top preference for participants followed by increasing vehicle and truck registration fees, increasing motor fuel’s tax and using more developer fees.



YOUR TRANSPORTATION CALCULATIONS

Transportation officials want Kansas stakeholders themselves to think about the complexities of funding priorities. To that end, the T-LINK calculator, an interactive tool that will allow users to create and fund their own theoretical Kansas transportation program, was developed.

Calculator users can develop their budget by making assumptions about current funding sources and choosing from a variety of potential new funding sources.

Calculator users then will allocate their budget on a variety of transportation modes and highway programs. The purpose is to help Kansans understand the possibilities and trade-offs associated with various transportation and funding priorities.

The T-LINK calculator may be accessed on the T-LINK Web site, www.kansastlink.com.

WORKING TOGETHER



T-LINK Members hear afternoon testimony

There was general consensus that the key to confronting these challenges is for state and local governments to work together. Participants pointed out that the Kansas Collaborative and KDOT’s Road Scholars are good examples of state and local partnerships that are benefitting the state.

T-LINK members also had complimentary words for the meeting participants.

“The thing that really strikes me the most is the intuitiveness and the wisdom that comes from all of you as participants,” said Bernie Hayen, a T-LINK member from Manhattan. “There are going to be more needs probably than we have the resources to fill. Stay engaged.”

Kansans can stay engaged by attending upcoming T-LINK members, which are scheduled for Sept. 22 in Olathe, Sept. 23 in Hutchinson, Sept. 26 in Pittsburg and Sept. 30 in Wichita. Or by visiting the T-LINK web site, www.kansastlink.com.