

NORTHWEST KANSANS VOICE TRANSPORTATON VIEWS

Citizens of northwest Kansas shared a wide-ranging list of transportation concerns with members of a new Kansas task force that met in Hays Friday, September 12, 2008.

Nearly 80 area residents participated in the local consultation meeting held by 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.



Break out session: Participants discuss Aviation needs

Like those who participated in a T-LINK local consultation meeting in Ulysses the day before, those who attended the Hays meeting drew attention to needs in several transportation modes.

Governor Kathleen Sebelius has directed the task force to:

- 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.**

Transportation issues are a top concern for many northwest Kansas residents said Don Hineman, a farmer and rancher from Dighton who is running for a seat in the Kansas House of Representatives.

“As I was going through the campaign process during the primary, the two issues that came up most frequently were the need for shoulders on Kansas Highways 23 and 27, Hineman said. “The second issue was the loss of Care Van that traveled from northwest Kansas to Hays.”

Changing farming practices and the closing of the UP Rail Road have increased truck traffic on highways 23 and 27, which create a need for wider shoulders to address safety concerns Hineman said. He also said that while the Care Van was not used by many residents it's an important quality of life service since it is predominantly used for residents to receive medical treatments.

STRAINING TO STAY SAFE AND KEEP UP

As did their counterparts in Ulysses, participants at the Hays meeting voiced concerns about transportation shortfalls in their communities and their ability to compete against big urban areas for transportation projects.

Several attendees cited roads that lack shoulders. Cindy Wallace, economic development director for Russell County, said shoulders need to be added to U.S. 281 between Russell and Osborne.

“Between the hills and some of the valleys and the canyons, there’s absolutely no place to go” to get off the road safely, Wallace said. “It’s very dangerous. It’s one of the state’s major highways and it connects through the whole country, and it’s just being ignored. I don’t know how many deaths it’s going to take before it gets looked at.”



Breakout Session: Participants discuss highway needs

Sen. Ralph Ostmeyer of Grinnell said he also worries about road safety. He cited a road next to a recently opened hospital north of Plainville that lacks a turning lane for the hospital.

“I think the state needs to take responsibility any time a new business such as a hospital or an (grain) elevator or a dairy, or any new business opens up,” he said. “The state needs to make it a priority to have a turning lane coming off these roads. I know it costs money, but the state of Kansas should be concerned about safety.”

Leo Inglsbee, streets department superintendent for the city of Stockton, said Stockton roads have been straining under excessive truck traffic since an area railroad closed several years ago.

“It’s turned into a mess,” Inglsbee said. “We don’t get help to fix the streets as they should be to accept the big trucks. I would like KDOT to maybe give our small communities a little more special highway money, to be able to go in and fix the streets around our co-ops.”

Another area of concern was inadequate bridges.

“I just got a call yesterday from a gentleman who said we had recently downgraded some bridges up on Highway 24,” said Dan Johnson, Kansas Rep. of Ellis, Osborne, Rooks and Russell counties. “He said that with the lower limits, farmers aren’t going to be able to cross those bridges legally with loads of their grain.”

Some participants expressed interest in a state program to provide incentives to counties that close little used bridges.

But Troy Sporer, a highway contractor with Sporer Land Development Inc. in Oakley, said he didn’t like that approach. “If you close down the bridge and you’ve got to drive four or five miles in another direction to get to market, that hurts the farmer.”

OTHER MODES RAISE CONCERNS



As in Ulysses, attendees in Hays sought to raise awareness of needs that exist in multiple modes of transportation.

Stockton City Commissioner Darrell Sammons said he would like KDOT to help fund the restoration and future operation of a local railroad. He said the railroad has not been used for several years but has not been officially abandoned.

Break out session: Participants discuss Rail needs

“It has created an economic depression in our town, not having a railroad,” Sammons said. “It is increasing truck traffic in town. There are times when there are many trucks parked along a two-lane highway, 183. They go around streets looking for a place to park. It creates extra wear on streets that were not designed for trucks.”

Martin Miller, manager of Great Bend Airport, said airports must be upgraded to augment health care and foster economic development. The Kansas Association of Airports has said that 52 Kansas counties lack instrument approach capability for their airports.

“You can’t put a price tag on health care and the traumatic needs of a relative or somebody in rural Kansas that needs to get to the hospital,” he said.

Miller added that GPS technology will help airport upgrade programs.



Rep. Eber Phelps talks with T-LINK members

Brian Atwell, executive director of LINK, an agency in Hays that works with people who have disabilities, said the Hays airport lacks mechanical equipment that’s used to lift disabled persons on and off planes.

“They put you in a straight back chair and take you up the steps,” said Atwell, who uses a wheelchair. “It’s hard on the personnel and everybody. There’s a risk of injury.”

Ron Straight, transportation manager of Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas Inc. in Hays, pointed out that 12 Kansas counties now lack transit service. Factors such as higher fuel costs are increasing the need for such service, and it will take more money from the federal government, KDOT and local governments to meet that need, he said.

Pam Bremerkamp, who drove the former Care Van in Hays and the surrounding area, said the van service had to shut down this year because it lost local match money for KDOT funding.

“We need to start this service up again because it serves so many needs for people who have medical needs,” she said.

Kansas Rep. Eber Phelps of Hays said “in this part of the state, you don’t have anything established as far as bicycle paths. Within the city of Hays, we don’t have designated bicycle paths or even areas for people to go off the road and do bicycling. A lot of those are kind of makeshift.”

WHERE WILL THE MONEY COME FROM?

Northwest Kansas Funding Preferences for Transportation
1. Utilize Gaming Fees for Transportation
2. Increase Truck Registration Fees
2. (tie) Tax Vehicle Weight
4. Increase State Sales Tax
5. Increase State Motor Fuels Tax
*These were the top 5 choices of participants at the Hays Local Consultation meeting.

As in Ulysses, those who attended the Hays meeting were asked to fill out a form indicating their preferences on how to fund transportation improvements. The most popular approaches included using gaming fees for transportation, increasing truck registration fees, taxing vehicle weight, increasing the (general) state sales tax and increasing the state motor fuels tax (per gallon).

The idea of taxing vehicle weight was supported by 23 people in Hays, compared with only 14 in

Ulysses. But an identical number of Hays and Ulysses attendees - 16 – indicated support for adding a sales tax on gasoline.

“We on the state level use every bit of funding money we have,” said Johnson, the Kansas House representative from Ellis County “I think it’s kind of redundant to try to increase taxes on fuel (through a sales tax), because fuel costs enough and people don’t like that plan. When you’ve got \$4 a gallon gas and you add a few more cents on it for taxes, that’s bad.”

“One of my main concerns is the method of funding for roads,” said Gove County Commissioner Mark Coberly. “If it’s going to be on a usage basis, almost all the monies are going to go to areas east of Salina. Western Kansas will never receive any monies based on usage of roads, due to the sparsity of population. I just want to make sure there’s something in the funding package that took that into account.”

“Living in a rural area, we have lots of miles to travel,” said Don Hineman, the Kansas House candidate from Dighton. “But the benchmarks that are typically used to decide which projects get funded, because we are in a low population density area, we tend not to score very well on some of those benchmarks.”

WHAT WOULD YOUR PLAN LOOK LIKE?

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.



Brenda Herrman, Hays, serves as a T-LINK member

While transportation priorities may vary from region to region and person to person, KDOT public affairs director Julie Lorenz said state transportation planners “can’t continue to operate the way we have for the last 20 years. Times are simply different. We need to have different business approaches,” such as considering economic development potential when choosing projects.

The meeting opened with remarks by Transportation Secretary Deb Miller.

“What we know about transportation is you never really get to be done,” Miller said. “You all, in terms of representing your communities and your organizations, know full well what your needs are. What we really need to do is bring our technical knowledge together with your understanding about your community, your vision for the state, and see if we can bring that together into a new approach that will work for all of us.”

Upcoming T-LINK task force meetings are scheduled for Thursday in Abilene, Friday in Topeka, Sept. 22 in Olathe, Sept. 23 in Hutchinson, Sept. 26 in Pittsburg and Sept. 30 in Wichita. The originally designated dates for Hutchinson and Wichita – Sept. 15 and Sept. 23 – were changed because of scheduling conflicts with other public meetings.

More information about T-LINK may be viewed on the task force Web site, www.kansastlink.com.