

## SOUTH- CENTRAL KANSANS SPEAK UP FOR COOPERATON, PARTNERSHIPS FOR TRANSPORTATON



Opening presentation in Hutchinson

South-Central Kansans rallied for regional cooperation and state-local partnerships to improve transportation when they gathered in Hutchinson on Tuesday, Sept. 23.

About 105 area residents attended the meeting held by the Transportation-Leveraging Investment in Kansas (T-LINK) task force, which is traveling around the state to ask citizens about their transportation needs. Earlier meetings were held in Olathe, Topeka, Abilene, Hays and Ulysses.

Participants at the Hutchinson meeting said the region's biggest transportation priorities were building a Northwest Passage Highway to connect Wichita to I-70 by way of Hutchinson and Great Bend – plus four-laning K-61, U.S. 50 and U.S. 54 in the area.

Attendees said they would support projects outside their own immediate areas if they would benefit the region as a whole. For example, Great Bend city administrator Howard Partington said the Northwest Passageway should begin with a route from YaggyRoad to a point just north of Sterling – even though that segment would end about 40 miles from Great Bend.

“The regional approach is very important,” Partington said. “In this case, three counties and all the cities along this route favor this project. It’s crucial to economic development and safety. It will allow future growth. Now people select other routes because the existing K-96 portion between Nickerson and Sterling is so dangerous.”

T-LINK member Mary Birch, from the Kansas City area, complimented Great Bend for talking “less self and more region.”

Participants also asked for continued state funding for local transportation projects through the KLINK (City Connecting Link Resurfacing), Economic Development and Geometric Improvement programs. Because of funding uncertainties, KDOT is not providing money for these programs at the same level as it has in the past.

Participant comments indicated:

- Limited support for flexibility in transportation planning.
- Limited support for economic analysis in transportation planning.
- Limited support for a multimodal approach to transportation.
- Limited support for tolling.

## T-LINK

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.

### Governor's Charge

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.

"Without a plan, without a blueprint on how to take care of transportation needs in our state, we won't be able to take advantage of good economic times when they come," said T-LINK co-chair Tim Rogers of Salina.

### FLEXIBILITY, ECONOMIC ANALYSIS AND MULTIMODALISM

Kansas wants to make transportation planning more flexible and responsive to economic development opportunities. That differs from past transportation programs, which strictly adhered to goals laid out in 10-year plans that were based on engineering considerations.

"Flexibility is a good thing," said Rep. Mark Treaster of Pretty Prairie. "You don't know what the conditions are going to be 10 years from now. We're in a down economy. If we limit ourselves to just what we see available today we might be shortchanging what we can do in future years."

Partington also voiced support for flexibility and economic analysis. He said transportation is important to everyone as evidenced by a hairdresser and jeweler from Great Bend taking off work to attend the T-LINK meeting.

"While I do not have specific details today on the jobs or the new industry that may be created by the improvement to the highway system, I feel certain that there would be many economic benefits," Partington said.

Partington said it's also important for the state to continue the KLINK, Economic Development and Geometric Improvement programs.

"Maintaining what we have is the most important thing," Partington said. "If we don't maintain what we have we'll go backwards, and that's a real economic problem."

Dave Kerr, president of the Hutchinson/Reno County Chamber of Commerce, said the Northwest Passage would help serve a new ethanol plant in Lyons that pulls in 135 trucks a day. The project also would provide better transportation for people who travel to Wichita for health care services, he said.

T-LINK member Bart Hildreth of Wichita asked if members of the Great Bend Chamber would support additional funding for the Northwest Passageway project.

Jan Peters, president and chief executive officer of the Great Bend Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development, said its members are committed to the project and “will take on any effort to connect with KDOT for this project.”

Lyons City Administrator John Sweet said Lyons had increased sales taxes to fund capital improvements. He said the Legislature must fund the next state transportation program, as well as the KLINK, Economic Development and Geometric Improvement programs.



Breakout session: Participant discuss highway needs

Former Kansas Senate President Dave Kerr said he’s seen candidates who had signed pledges to not increase taxes or user fees, end up voting for transportation programs that include those increases because their constituents were so emotional about the importance of highways.

Some participants said transportation planners must take a multimodal approach.

“It’s a multimodal opportunity for us,” said Mickey Fornaro-Dean, executive director of the Harvey County Economic Development Council. “We have a strong airport. We’ve got a lot of rail opportunities. If we upgrade the road system too, that’s going to be kind of a trifecta there.”

But others cautioned that flexibility, economic analysis and a multimodal approach posed dangers of unintended consequences. An example would be a plan that is so flexible that money would be easily moved around and not guaranteed for certain projects.

At the same time, several participants stressed the importance of transportation improvements in moving the economy forward.

Participants who attended a breakout session on roads and highways said growth in agriculture, oil and gas was generating more truck traffic on county roads.

“Right now we’re sitting on the cusp of great oil and agricultural production,” said Peters, with the Great Bend Chamber. “Our economy is looking great. Tourism will play a role. We need good upkeep on the highways we do have, and then hopefully, piece by piece, we’ll get that Northwest Passage.”

Treaster noted that his region is still waiting for the four-laning of K-61 between Hutchinson and McPherson, which was called for in the 10-year transportation plan that’s nearing its end.

“We’ve been a long time waiting,” Treaster said. “It’s an important part of economic development in this region.”

Officials from Newton and Harvey County said their area comprised an “Economic Development Triangle,” with Harvey County forming a link between Wichita and communities to the north via I-135, K-96 and U.S. 50.

They said the area now has underutilized assets, but could develop along the lines of Johnson and Wyandotte counties, which are anchored by Kansas City, Mo.

### OTHER MODES

As in earlier T-LINK meetings, attendees participated in breakout sessions that focused on specific transportation modes.

Among their observations:

Public transit: The largest regional need for public transit is for access to medical treatment, especially dialysis.



Breakout session: Participants discuss transit issues

Attendees said they were concerned that a multimodal approach to transportation would lead to competition between modes, as well as rural vs. urban competition. They did indicate support for a multi-modal approach when addressing big new projects. And participants advocated for a mode specific approach that would have funds designated for transit programs.

Participants also expressed interest in cooperation among the state’s many transit providers. They said cooperation is now impeded by barriers, such as insurance issues that are raised when certain providers cross county lines.

Rail: Participants said short-line railroads are crucial for the future of specialty grains produced in south-central Kansas. They asked for grade crossing upgrades to improve safety and said there should be more robust analysis of rail improvements generally, both before and after the work takes place.



Breakout session: Participant discuss aviation needs

Aviation: Participants asked for preservation of landing strips, airport modernization and better planning. They said modernizing airports is important for economic development as well as medical care, such as through improved air ambulance service.

Attendees said better planning would enable co-existence between airports and wind farms.

Participants also supported good highway and rail access to airports and a tax on sales of all fuels, including jet fuel, which Kansas now exempts for commercial and charter jets.

Bike/Ped: Participants said they would like to see some funding of bike infrastructure, but they acknowledged that that might not be realistic. As an alternative, they said the state might provide an inventory of bike paths and match private donations.

Nick Gregory, Great Bend assistant city administrator, said health issues and high gas prices call for more attention to bike/ped needs.

### HOW TO PAY FOR IT?



Similarly to other regions, there was little consensus on how to pay for better transportation. Nonetheless, some attendees expressed willingness to consider tolling as a means to fund some area road improvements.

“The real issue is how do we pay for it?” said T-LINK member Don Linville of Garden City. “We need to find a way to coordinate the various modes. We also have to coordinate regionally.”

As in Ulysses, Hays, Abilene, Topeka and Olathe, participants at the Hutchinson meeting were asked to fill out a form indicating their preferences on how to fund transportation improvements. Utilizing gaming fees for transportation was the top preference for south central Kansans, followed by (2) increasing motor fuel’s tax, (3) add a sales tax on gasoline, (4) increasing the state sales tax and (5) increasing vehicle registration fees.

### How Would You Calculate Transportation Funding?

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](http://www.kansastlink.com).

### Closing

An upcoming T-LINK task force meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, Sept. 30 in Wichita.

More information about T-LINK may be viewed on the task force Web site, [www.kansastlink.com](http://www.kansastlink.com).