

KC METRO/EASTERN KANSAS RESIDENTS CITE LINKS BETWEEN TRANSPORTATION NEEDS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT



KDOT Public Affairs Director Julie Lorenz introduces T-LINK to over 150 attendees in the opening session

Economic development issues took center stage when a state transportation planning task force convened in Olathe – astride one of the state’s fastest growing areas - on Monday, September 22.

More than 150 people – the biggest turnout to date - attended the meeting held by the Transportation-Leveraging Investments in Kansas task force, which is traveling around the state to hear citizen viewpoints.

Earlier local consultation meetings were held in Topeka, Abilene, Hays and Ulysses.

“In economic development we compete with other states and other countries,” said T-LINK member David Kerr, Kansas Secretary of Commerce. “We want to keep our companies and bring in new companies. Transportation is one of the things they look at.”

Kerr said Kansas was blessed with a central location and, at present, a strong transportation system. “At a minimum we need to maintain that.”

Others said Kansas needs to push ahead with improvements and expansions in all modes of transportation to compete in the business world and attain its economic potential.

“If it’s not done, economic development will be stifled,” said Johnson County Commissioner Doug Wood.

Participants also stressed the importance of transportation safety and flexible transportation planning.

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 near its end.



T-LINK members listen to testimony during the afternoon session in Olathe

Governor's Charge

Governor Kathleen Sebelius has directed the task force to:

- Commit to keep roads and bridges safe and in good repair.
- Engage in forward thinking that doesn't rely on old business models.
- Take an approach that recognizes tight budgets and creates a framework to prepare Kansas for its transportation future.



Olathe City Council Member Marge Vogt shares what she learned during the morning session

"Here to date, Kansas has been insulated from some of the economic problems other states have experienced," said T-LINK member Marge Vogt, an Olathe city councilwoman. "We have a great work ethic and a great transportation system. We need to continue that."

Mell Henderson, director of transportation for the Mid America Regional Council, cited growing awareness that transportation is related to economic health, social health and environmental health.

"You need to promote social health and the environment and economic development," Henderson said. "You're not just planning projects. You're building communities."

MANY NEEDS, STRONG SPIRIT OF COOPERATION

Participants said their highway and road needs weren't very different from other parts of the state except in terms of the size and cost of needed projects.

Local governments indicated they are willing, to some extent, to pitch in on highway improvements.



Participants discuss highway projects

"This is a new day," said Overland Park Mayor Carl Gerlach. "We're willing to consider local (tax) options for gas. We're willing to step up and talk when those options are made available."

Officials with Leavenworth County said the county would be willing to pay perhaps half of the \$41.4 million cost of replacing the Centennial Bridge over the Missouri River in Leavenworth.

Leavenworth County already levies a sales tax that is funding part of the cost of a new interchange being built on the Kansas Turnpike. The tax will sunset in 10 years.

Most officials from individual communities talked about the need for one or two high-priority projects.

Ronald Norris, Lenexa public works director, said Lenexa needs a new interchange on K-10 and improvements at the I-35/95th Street interchange. The estimated cost is \$53 million.

“The businesses there depend on safe and relatively free access,” Norris said. “If you can’t get people to the front door, businesses go somewhere else.”

Olathe officials pointed out the bottleneck congestion in the area around the intersection of I-35, I-435 and K-10. They said the city is willing to participate in making improvements, including maintenance costs for K-7.

Olathe officials also asked that K-7 be realigned along a straighter route.

Attendees from south Johnson County and Miami County said an expanded transportation network must be prepared for a giant intermodal complex coming to Gardner.

“The intermodal facility is going to be a huge economic engine for southwest Johnson County, including Gardner,” said Gardner public works director David Greene. “It will lead to further transportation needs, such as improvements on Interstate 35, U.S. 56 and the local road system.”

Miami County anticipates economic opportunities flowing from the Gardner intermodal complex.

“But we also recognize we have neither the local or state roads south and east of Gardner to support that,” said Penny Evans, Miami County’s director of engineering services.

Evans said she would like KDOT to help fund a new east-west highway in southern Johnson County or northern Miami County.

Evans noted that Miami County has stopped replacing worn out roads because it can no longer afford the cost. The county now only does asphalt overlays on such roads, she said.

Like those who attended the earlier T-LINK meeting in Abilene, Olathe participants supported economic analysis in transportation planning, but said economic factors should not compete with safety factors.

Similarly, attendees said economic considerations should not pit urban needs against rural needs.

But at the same time, participants said it was more important for the state to fund needed road improvements than to pay counties to close roads that are little used – a phenomenon mostly seen in rural areas.

THE PATH TAKES MANY MODES



Participants discuss transit concerns

As in previous local consultation meetings, those who gathered in Olathe participated in breakout sessions to discuss highways and local roads, public transit, railroads, aviation and bike/ped needs.

“Our roads and bridges network is of the highest priority,” said Wood, the Johnson County commissioner. “Those are what open up economic development and address needs of public safety.”

Participants said it is important to incorporate economic analysis in highway and road decisions, but that economic factors should not detract from safety considerations.

As in other parts of the state, attendees said they liked the idea of a transportation plan that is flexible and responsive to economic conditions, but one that also is firm enough to retain the funds set aside for it.

Others cited a pressing need to increase public transit, where demand has been growing due to high fuel prices.

Marcia Bernard, transit manager of the Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Ks., said the Hard Rock Casino and the Schlitterbahn Water Park are expected to bring 6,000 jobs to Wyandotte County next year.

“Transit is more important than ever in Wyandotte County,” Bernard said. “We already have standing room only on many of our routes. We need increased funding.”

Alice Amrein, Johnson County transportation director, said public transit is a critical component of the “Vision Metcalf” plan to redevelop the Metcalf Avenue corridor. “The plan is dependent on transit to make that happen.”

Bernice Duletski, assistant Johnson County manager, said the K-10 Connector bus route is running at 84 percent capacity.

But federal pilot funding for the K-10 bus route is scheduled to end next year, Duletski said.

“We must find ways to continue that when it runs out,” she said. “We’re prepared to find ways to participate in many projects.”

Wood, the Johnson County commissioner, agreed that Johnson County needs more transit service. But he said the need for public transit may diminish in the future. “In 5 to 10 years, the availability of alternative fuels will diminish the environmental consideration for transit,” he said.



Participants identify rail issues for the Kansas City Metro

Like those who attended the Topeka meeting, rail advocates at the Olathe meeting supported expanding the state’s short-line railroad support program to include shippers and industrial parks.

Rail advocates said they favored raising state support for short-line railroads from \$3 million to \$5 million a year.

Attendees also supported improved grade crossings, more bridges over railroad tracks and freight railroads sharing tracks with passenger trains.

Mark Corrison, Kansas City director of the Northern Flyer Alliance, advocated for more Amtrak service in Kansas. The alliance supports passenger rail expansion between Fort Worth and Kansas City through Oklahoma City and Wichita.

Bike/ped advocates said bicycle sales have gone up 25 percent to 30 percent since gasoline prices started spiking.

Dean Palos, Johnson County planning director, said the county needs more paved off-road bike paths to meet growing demand. He said Johnson County businesses encourage employees to ride their bicycles to work but that insufficient infrastructure limits that potential.

“Bicycle sales have gone up and bicycle repairs have gone up,” Palos said. “For every person you have on a bicycle you have one less person on the road driving. The benefit of that is you’re saving highway capacity, and there is energy conservation as well.”

Palos said KDOT has provided significant funding for bike needs in Johnson County but that more is needed.



Participants discuss bike and pedestrian issues

Dale Crawford, with the Johnson County Bicycle Club, said area bike repair business had shot up 1,100 percent.

Crawford noted that some area residents need bike transportation to get through tough economic times. He said he received a call personally at the bicycle club from a man wanting information about bike trails because he couldn’t afford to buy food and pay rent if he had to gas up a car.

“It’s eye-opening,” Crawford said. “You don’t expect to hear that in Johnson County.”

Crawford said the state should:

*Provide financial incentives for cities and counties to maintain consistent policies relating to bike/ped issues. He commented that the city of Shawnee does a good job in this regard.

*Share the cost of bike/motorist road education programs.

*Consider bike registration and licensing fees. He said such fees might constitute symbolic gestures, because they probably wouldn’t generate much revenue. Nonetheless, they would enable bicyclists to pay at least a part of infrastructure costs.

In the aviation arena, attendees proposed a new airport to serve Leavenworth and Wyandotte counties.

Ed Young, director of the state’s aviation division, noted that the FAA does not consider economic factors in its infrastructure decisions.

Attendees criticized existing air fare subsidies as a patchwork program that lacks coordination.

And as in other areas of Kansas, participants said the state should consider eliminating Kansas’ exemption on jet fuel taxes for commercial and charter jets. The tax is already levied on corporate and private jets.

SAFETY IS CRUCIAL

Jim Hanni, executive vice president of the Kansas Region of AAA, raised concerns about safety on Kansas roads. He said the state should consider a more stringent graduated system for attaining a driver’s license, in which applicants must attain certain milestones before obtaining a full license. Hanni also urged stronger laws and bigger fines to increase road safety.

HOW TO PAY FOR IT

| Kansas City Metro Area Funding Preferences for Transportation |
|---|
| 1. Increase Vehicle Registration Fees |
| 2. Utilizing Gaming Fees for Transportation |
| 2. (tie) Toll New Roads |
| 2. (tie) Increase Truck Registration Fees |
| 5. Make Transportation Development Districts |
| *These were the top 5 choices of participants at the Olathe Local Consultation meeting. |

KDOT and T-LINK officials pointed out that current transportation needs far exceed the funds available to pay for them. For example, KDOT Public Affairs Director Julie Lorenz said there are nearly 3,000 bridges that qualify for federal bridge replacement funds, and it would take almost 75 years to replace all of these bridges if funding levels remain the same.

Wood suggested the possibility of raising state income taxes and returning 90 percent of the money to the areas that generate most of the increased revenue. “This would help all that area of the state that is growing, but would not penalize rural areas that are not growing,” he said.

As in Ulysses, Hays, Abilene and Topeka, participants at the Olathe meeting were asked to fill out a form indicating their preferences on how to fund transportation improvements. Northeast residents cited increasing vehicle registration fees as their top funding preference followed by gaming fees, tolling new roads, truck registration fees and making transportation development districts.

Calculator

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.

Closing

Upcoming T-LINK task force meetings are scheduled for Friday, Sept. 26 in Pittsburg and Tuesday, Sept. 30 in Wichita.

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