

LEGISLATORS WEIGH IN AT SOUTHEAST KANSAS TRANSPORTATION CONSULT MEETING

With a strong turnout of state legislators, task force members gained insight into what the Kansas Legislature will be looking for in a transportation plan during the Pittsburg local consultation meeting on Sept. 26.



More than 100 southeast Kansans turned out for the meeting in Pittsburg on September 26

More than 100 southeast Kansans along with legislators such as Sen. Dwayne Umbarger of Thayer, Rep. Julie Menghini of Pittsburg and Rep. Bob Grant of Cherokee voiced their opinions on topics such as transportation needs and how to pay for them to the Transportation-Leveraging Investments in Kansas (T-LINK) task force which has been traveling around the state to ask citizens about their transportation goals and concerns. The task force met earlier in Hutchinson, Olathe, Topeka, Abilene, Hays and Ulysses.

Russell King, president of Southeast Kansas Inc., said that organization had met in advance to identify regional priorities. SEK Inc. supports highway, rail and airport improvements in the region, including the four-laning of U.S. 69 from 400 junction to U.S. 54.

SEK also supports raising highway-related fuel taxes and other transportation-related taxes and fees. The organization recommends that the Legislature change state law to increase annual funding for short-line railroads from \$3 million to \$5 million, and supports grants for railroad customers and communities that provide matching grants.

"Our group of business leaders realizes that there has to be funding available," King said. "We're trying to be proactive. It's got to come from somewhere."

A BALANCED APPROACH

One of the key issues discussed was how transportation projects should be selected and scheduled. There was general consensus among legislators and other participants that Kansas needs a transportation plan with the traditional or "red map projects", which are selected upfront and also some flexibility to allow the state to capture economic development opportunities.

"We need a mix of both. We need some red map items because people want to know where there community is headed," Menghini said. And there are some projects that are 10 years in the making and people need a heads up that this is happening. On the other hand, there needs to be some pot of money set-aside for economic development. For instance, if you suddenly have a casino being built that you need to get roads to. Or it could be an ethanol plant or wind turbine manufacturer. We have to be able to maximize our economic development opportunities." It was suggested that the new transportation plan could have projects set in the first few years, and then allow new projects to be selected in the later years. "There's been a lot of discussion on how to fund this," Umbarger said. "You're going to have to have a red map. That's the buy-in. You put the flexibility in that after five years, other projects can be added."

FLEXIBILITY, STABILITY

There was some concern that if funds are not dedicated to projects, the Legislature might be tempted to shift transportation funds to other programs to address other state needs.

However, Menghini mentioned that the majority of legislators understand how important transportation is and that's the last place they would take money from. She also said she and other legislators would fight hard against shifting funds if that was proposed.

Rep. Grant added, "I feel like the Legislature and KDOT have fulfilled their promises."

And in doing so, Grant mentioned that the taxpayers have enough confidence in them to allow for more flexibility. He also mentioned that the next plan should include local roads because they are the veins, which lead to the arteries.

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 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.



T-LINK Co-chair Tim Rogers discusses the role of the Task Force in the opening session

CALCULATE YOUR OWN TRANSPORTATION PLAN

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.

Lisa Kuehn, executive director of the Coffeyville Area Chamber of Commerce, said using the calculator would help business owners understand transportation funding needs.

And if those business owners also feel that their voices are being heard, they will support higher taxes and fees for transportation, Kuehn said.

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 – I hope there is a huge marketing program set in place to get a lot of citizens in Kansas to use and look at it," said Fred Gress, city manager of Parsons. "It's high time they recognized how expensive this business is."

The T-LINK calculator can be found at www.kansastlink.com

MANY NEEDS



Terry Heidner reports on highway concerns voiced during the meeting

Participants identified the continued four-laning of U.S. 69 and U.S. 400 as the top transportation needs in the region.

"We want to reemphasize completing 69 Highway," Menghini said. "This is already 20 years in the making. Southeast Kansas has been very patient and very supportive of transportation plans throughout these years. We just want to make sure that it gets finished and we don't get left off."

"It's time to push 400 to the next level, as a four-lane corridor," said Ann Charles, deputy director of the Kansas Army Ammunition Plant Local Redevelopment Authority in Parsons. "Doing so is critical to maximizing what we have at Great Plains Industrial Park."

As in other regions, there was limited support for using economic analysis when selecting transportation projects. Some participants expressed concerns that such an approach would pit urban and rural needs against each other.

And as in other regions, there was little consensus on how to pay for transportation improvements, which face a statewide funding gap of \$1.5 billion a year for the next 20 years.

"Certainly, southeast Kansas has some great transportation needs, especially in the highway area," said T-LINK member Dean Mann, board chairman of Citizens Bank in Fort Scott. "It's going to be a challenge to work through this process, of where we try to match up the most critical needs with the amount of money that's available to spend to meet those needs."

THE ROAD TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Participants at the Pittsburg meeting agreed that transportation improvements are crucial for continued economic development in southeast Kansas.

“Highway construction is the best economic development you can get,” said Kevin Mitchelson of Pittsburg, vice chairman of the Highway 69 Association of Kansas.

Charles said highway improvements are needed to develop the Great Plains Industrial Park at the site of the Kansas Army Ammunition Plant.

“We are attractive to industries that many of you do not want in your local industrial parks,” Charles said. “We are in a rural area. But site selectors are looking at how far we are from a four-lane highway in tenths of a mile.”

Howard W. Smith, assistant to the president of Pittsburg State University, noted that many businesses in southeast Kansas benefit from the growth that has occurred at Pittsburg State.

But the college needs better highway access for that growth to continue as it should, Smith said. “We would like to see the four-laning of 69 to I-44 in particular. We’re the only Regents institution in the state without four-lane highway all the way in and out. The transportation system is certainly going to be a major piece of our growth, which in turn is growth for the region.”

FOR SAFETY’S SAKE

Participants also pointed out improvements needed for safe travel, such as those noted in a letter to the task force from Independence Mayor Derrill Unruh.

Unruh wrote that Independence is asking the state to consider funding the reconstruction of a severely deteriorated portion of U.S. Highways 75 and 160 in Independence. The project would include the widening of traffic lanes to federal and state standards and the addition of center turnlanes.



T-LINK members listening to concerns from southeast Kansans

“Since 2005 there have been 70 motor vehicle accidents reported at this location, which we believe is not only due to the street design, but also conditions of the street paving,” Unruh wrote.

Mitchelson, with the Highway 69 Association of Kansas, said improvements on that highway are essential for the safety of students who attend Pittsburg State.

DIFFERENT MODES ALONG THE WAY

Kansas transportation officials say the next state transportation plan needs to incorporate goals for all modes of travel. As in earlier T-LINK meetings, attendees in Pittsburg participated in modal breakout sessions and told task force members what they thought.

"I want to emphasize the fact that I appreciate the multimodal concept," Menghini said. "Rail helps us keep preservation dollars down by taking some of that weight off our highways. Airports help keep businesses in southeast Kansas."

Among other observations:

Rail: Ed McKechnie, chief commercial officer for Watco Cos. Inc., a Pittsburg-based operator of short-line railroads, cited a 2005 study by Parsons Brinckerhoff that said the state should boost its annual funding for short-line railroads from \$3 million to \$5 million.

T-LINK member Bart Hildreth of Wichita asked McKechnie to explain why taxpayers should help support short-line railroads, which typically use tracks in small communities that have been abandoned by large railroads.

"We've not asked for dollars where the railroad can support itself," McKechnie said. "By and large, through tax policy, we already support other modes of transportation."



Testimony before the Task Force

Aviation: Participants expressed concerns about uncertainty over federal funding for airport improvements, and communities having difficulty providing matches for federal funds.

Ed Young, director of KDOT's Division of Aviation, said an airport is a community's front door and helps attract businesses.

Kenny Howard, manager of Fort Scott Municipal Airport, said he expects more small jets to use the airport. "We hope at some point to be able to do more improvements, such as possibly lengthening our runway to help accommodate these smaller jets."

Transit: As in other regions, participants cited shortfalls in public transit services for handicapped persons, the elderly and employees who need to get to work.

"The issue of public transit is getting to be a bigger problem, especially with the cost of fuel and the cost of buying automobiles," Umbarger said. "Many low-income families just don't have that opportunity."

Rick Knight, advocacy coordinator for the Southeast Kansas Independent Living Resource Center (SKIL) in Parsons, said "transportation services in southeast Kansas vary from one community to the next, and with the possible exception of Pittsburg, do not even begin to meet the needs of people with disabilities or the elderly."

Even where service exists, many public transit vehicles are not easily accessible to persons with disabilities, Knight said.

Tammy Dickson, recruiting manager with Staff Management in Coffeyville and recruiter for the Amazon Distribution Center, said a regional transit system is needed to help employees get to and from their jobs at the distribution center in Coffeyville. Dickson mentioned that there are currently about 800 employees at the distribution center, however in peak times they increase to 2,000 employees. Dickson also said she's been working with local agencies in hopes that through collaboration they could provide transit services

"I want to have something that is cost-effective for the employees to get to and from work, to get more people in Kansas to work," Dickson said. "And it does need to be regional, not town by town, due to the people we pull from the rural communities."



Breakout session: participants discuss the need for bike and pedestrian paths

Bike/Ped: Participants said that while rising gasoline prices and greater interest in healthy lifestyles are pushing people to walk and ride bicycles more, better infrastructure is needed to make these modes safer.

HOW WILL WE PAY FOR IT?

As in other regions, there was little consensus on how to fund transportation improvements.

"Everybody wants to go to heaven, but nobody wants to die," said Terry Heidner, a KDOT legislative liaison who facilitated a breakout session on highways and local roads.

McKechnie, with short-line rail operator Watco, said modern transportation funding should reflect today's service economy, with transportation taxes and fees tied to those who use the transportation infrastructure. Examples could include gasoline sales taxes and additional fees for vehicle weight, he said.

Watco and Southeast Kansas Inc. support grants for railroad customers and communities that provide matching grants.

Andy Haney, Ottawa public works director, said Ottawa is studying the possibility of implementing a local fuel tax to fund local street maintenance. Such a move would require a change in state statutes, he said.

"We're talking about local funding for local roads," Haney said. "The method we determined would be a fuels tax. I don't think we're locked into that as the only solution. We need to find a

way to develop user fees, so people using the resources are paying for the maintenance and upkeep and improvement of those resources.”

Some said raising fuel taxes in border communities would simply encourage more motorists to fuel up in Missouri and Oklahoma.

But Grant, the representative from Cherokee, warned that Kansas motorists who fill up across state lines are hurting themselves in the long run. “Driving across the border because you can save 20 cents on gas - you lose more than that because all the federal taxes that you pay to go to Missouri.”

Southeast Kansas Funding Preferences for Transportation
1. Utilizing Gaming Fees for Transportation
2. Increase Bonding from State Revenue Bonds
3. Add Sales Tax to Gasoline
4. Increase Truck Registration Fees
5. Toll New Roads
<small>*These were the top 5 choices of participants at the Pittsburg Local Consultation meeting.</small>

Some participants from smaller towns said their communities would be willing to help fund bike/ped projects at a higher level than the traditional 80 (federal)/20 (local) share.

As in Ulysses, Hays, Abilene, Topeka, Olathe and Hutchinson, participants at the Pittsburg meeting were asked to fill out a form indicating their preferences on how to fund transportation improvements. Southeast Kansans cited utilizing gaming fees as their top funding preference followed by (2) increasing bonding on state revenue bonds, (3) adding a sales tax to gasoline, (4) increasing truck registration fees and (5) tolling new roads.

More information about T-LINK can be found at www.kansastlink.com