

NORTHEAST KANSANS TALK ABOUT TRANSPORTATION NEEDS



Shawnee County Commissioner and T-LINK Member Shelly Buhler discusses the issues she heard

More than 100 Kansans gathered in Topeka to tell a new state task force about their transportation needs, concerns and hopes on Friday, September 19, 2008.

The growth of Forts Riley and Leavenworth, increasing numbers of transit riders and many other transportation needs are creating great challenges for city and county officials. As a result of this region's growing needs, Topeka participants were more receptive than those of previous task force meetings, to new approaches such as having the state create incentives for locals to close roads and bridges, which have low traffic counts.

Terry Heidner, KDOT legislative liaison, said there was little consensus on regional transportation priorities but that individual cities were taking positive steps.

"We heard from cities working on complementary parallel roads," Heidner said. "That's a good thing. If it helps the state system, maybe it's something the state should help the cities do."

The task force, T-LINK, is composed of 35 members who are 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. Specifically Governor Kathleen Sebelius has charged them with the following:

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.

GROWING CHALLENGES, ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES



Breakout session:
Participants discuss highway needs

"The road system in the state is crucial to economic development," said Heather Morgan, Leavenworth County administrator. "Having safe roads for our citizens is crucial for everyday life. We're hopeful that these meetings will lead to a comprehensive transportation plan that looks at both safety and economic development."

Morgan stated that Fort Leavenworth is expected to grow in the next five years. This is due to a new Sergeant-Major school and due to the push to have all Army Colleges be housed at Fort Leavenworth. Currently, all Army leadership training occurs there.

While this growth will be economically advantageous to the region, it will also place increase demand on the surrounding area's infrastructure. The return of the Big Red One to Fort Riley is creating dramatic growth for the Manhattan area, which was another concern that was mentioned.

Participants also mentioned that there is an opportunity to generate transportation revenue from this growth. In particular, one recommendation from the Manhattan Area Chamber of Commerce was to "protect and expand funding for economic development improvements and create a mechanism for KDOT to capture a share of the State's significant increased revenues for transportation improvements associated with a project."

In addition to the expansion of the forts, the northeast Kansas region is experiencing and increased demand for transit services, which resulted in a larger turnout of transit advocates than previous T-LINK meetings.

Christy Caldwell, Vice President of Governmental Relations for the Topeka Chamber of Commerce, said that Topeka's bus system is one the fastest growing in the nation.

"Our transit system is bursting at the seams with new riders commuting to work," Caldwell said.

The Topeka bus system has provided two million rides this year, which is second only in the state to Wichita— and Wichita has three times the population of Topeka, Caldwell said. This increase can be attributed greatly to increasing gas prices. Caldwell said that every one-cent increase in gas prices results in 150 new rides on the Topeka bus system. And these riders have continued to use the service even when gas prices have declined, she said.

"Transportation is an extremely vital issue for people who, for one reason or another, don't drive," said Michael Byington, chief executive officer of the Kansas Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired. "There's a lot more we would like KDOT to do. We'd like to see the percentage of state interest and contribution in public transportation increase."

There are also safety concerns due to quiet running cars such as hybrids or electric cars, which can be difficult to hear for visually impaired pedestrians attempting to cross the street. Byington recommended that the state take action to require these cars to have a sound device to go off both when idling and running. He also stated that the need to have all traffic signals have audible alarms.

Some participants said they were worried about the future of public transit in Lawrence, where voters in November will consider two sales taxes to provide funding for the transit system.

Currently, there are now 12 counties in the state that lack transit service of any kind. Participants also made recommendations for how transit systems could improve efficiency and therefore expand their services. One suggestion was to have a one-call dispatch service rather than calling the provider directly, which is how the process currently works.

Participants also called for the state to evaluate the economic impact of transit services, and base funding not solely on on-going needs but also the potential economic opportunities that will result from providing public transportation. They also recommended tying funding to regional needs and the size of the fleet.

MANY NEEDS, MANY MODES



Breakout session:
Participants discuss transit issues

As in previous meetings, KDOT officials met with attendees in breakout sessions to discuss a variety of transportation modes. Participants in the roads and highways session reviewed projects designed to modernize roads and increase capacity.

Attendees said they liked the idea of greater flexibility in transportation planning, as opposed to an unchangeable 10-year plan. But at the same time, they said transportation plans should be firm enough to protect the funding needed for those plans.

As in Ulysses and Abilene, those who participated in an aviation session said they think elimination of Kansas' tax exemption on sales of jet fuel should be considered. They also recommended having some consideration be given for primary airports to be eligible for state funds.

Tim Ramirez, public works director for the Potawatomi (Prairie Band) nation, said the Potawatomi plan to ask KDOT for access to federal funds to build a general aviation airport for the Prairie Band Casino & Resort in Mayetta, north of Topeka.

"An airport would bring us into the 21st Century," Ramirez said. "We also want to develop a golf course."

Such improvements are necessary for the Prairie Band casino to keep up with new competitors, Ramirez said.

"With the advent of statewide gaming, the number of people who come to our casino will go down," Ramirez said. "We have to do everything we can to assure the continued revenue that sustains the nation's activities. We use those funds for police and fire and road construction, building maintenance, education and all our programs."

Lois Louckes, Economic Development for the cities of Onaga, Wheaton and Havensville, was also advocating for her communities' aviation needs. Louckes asked T-LINK members to consider a project that would convert the Onaga airport runway from grass to a pavement surface. Since there are no state highways that go through Onaga, having access by air would allow the community the opportunity to attract new businesses, Louckes said.

Onaga also has an aging population, which makes having an airport that can support air ambulance services is very important, Louckes said.

Regarding railroads, attendees said Kansas needs improvements such as more rail spurs to industrial parks. Also interest was expressed that the loan program be opened up to shippers and that perhaps a rail car user fee should be instituted as long as those fees are dedicated to rail improvements

“We need to pay attention to what type of player Kansas can be nationally in increased rail capacity in economic development,” said Rep. Ann Mah of Topeka.

Hank Avila with the Legislative Research Department said a KDOT loan program had helped short-line railroads increase train speed to meet Federal Railroad Administration standards.

Weighing in on the needs of bicyclists, T-LINK member and Shawnee County Commissioner Shelly Buhler said highway rumble strips should be positioned to allow bicyclists to travel on a safe segment of the road - while also serving the need to warn motorists who begin to veer off the road. Like Abilene, state should have a role and be involved in education – perhaps using sales tax from sales of bikes.

In terms of highways and local roads, there was greater acceptance than previous meetings for having the state provide incentives to close low volume local roads. Participants also expressed support for the idea that cities and counties could swap their federal funds for state funds.

WHERE SHOULD FUNDING COME FROM?

Northeast Kansas Funding Preferences for Transportation
1. Utilize Gaming Fees for Transportation
2. Increase Vehicle Registration Fees
3. Use More Developer Fees
4. Increase Truck Registration Fees
5. Toll New Roads
*These were the top 5 choices of participants at the Topeka Local Consultation meeting.

The fiscal realities are challenging indeed. Kansas transportation experts estimate that the state faces an annual transportation funding shortfall of \$1.5 billion a year for the next 20 years.

Officials at the Topeka meeting said the turmoil shaking financial markets adds more uncertainty to the federal funding picture.

T-LINK member Bart Hildreth, a public finance professor at Wichita State University, asked attendees about the public’s willingness to pay for a new state transportation program.

“There’s no free lunch,” Hildreth said. “What’s your advice on either cutting the budget to create space for more transportation, or your willingness, as a state, to pay more, in whatever form you think it should be paid?”

As in Ulysses, Hays and Abilene, participants at the Topeka meeting were asked to fill out a form indicating their preferences on how to fund transportation improvements. The top preferences were as follows: (1) utilizing gaming fees for transportation, (2) increasing vehicle registration fees, (3) using more developer fees, (4) increasing truck registration fees, and (5) tolling new roads.

CALCULATING TRANSPORTATION SCENARIOS



T-LINK members listen to afternoon testimony

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.

KANSAS WANTS YOUR PARTICIPATION



Secretary Deb Miller addresses transportation issues in Topeka

Deb Miller, Kansas Secretary of Transportation, said the state's future viability depends on viable transportation planning today.

"There are community livability issues," Miller said. "There are social service issues we need to be mindful of. There are economic development issues, there are safety issues. The work we are going to do, the issues we're going to raise will touch the lives of every single citizen of Kansas."

To participate in the planning process, Kansans can attend the upcoming T-LINK meetings scheduled for Sept. 26 in Pittsburg and Sept. 30 in Wichita. Or they provide input through the T-LINK web site, www.kansastlink.com.