

Kansans discuss growing need for public transportation

As Kansans envision the shape and scope of their future transportation system, one of the key issues is how to accommodate the state's growing need for public transit.

Transportation experts, government officials, employers and consumers in every part of the state say more bus and van service is needed to take Kansans to jobs, medical appointments and the other destinations of their lives.

Kansans who stand to benefit from public transit include low-income persons, people with disabilities, senior citizens who can no longer drive safely and people who simply want to take the bus to save on gasoline and help the environment.

Public transit provides a lifeline to Kansans who must travel long distances to receive cancer treatments or dialysis treatments.

Others need public transit to lead a dignified, independent life.

In addition, many Kansas business owners say a dearth of public transit makes it tough for employees to come to work - a shortfall that poses a potential threat to economic development.



T-LINK TASK FORCE INVOLVEMENT

All of these concerns drew attention when members of the Transportation-Leveraging Investments in Kansas (T-LINK) task force held a series of local consultation meetings around the state recently to gather citizen input. The task force has been assigned by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius to develop recommendations for a new strategic transportation approach as the state's 10-year transportation program comes to an end.

"Mobility for all aspects of daily life is critical to economic development, to meeting social needs, and is important to the health of the state," said T-LINK member Pat Weaver, executive director of the Kansas University Transportation Center. "The amount of transit service in the state is inadequate to meet the needs that exist, in both rural and urban communities."

GROWTH IN SERVICE AND USAGE, BUT WHAT ABOUT FUNDING?

Transit service in some areas has been growing to meet the need. The K-10 Connector transit route between Johnson County and Lawrence serves the needs of numerous students and professionals who ride the route, which recently was reported to be running at 84 percent capacity.

Garden City launched fixed-route service in September 2007 and provided more than 30,000 trips this year through September. “There’s been a huge demand for public transportation in our community,” said Bonnie Burgardt, Transportation Director of Finney County Transit. “We have a Tyson Meat plant nearby. They recruit immigrants, and many of them don’t have cars or they only have one vehicle.”



The transit program in the Unified Government of Wyandotte County/Kansas City, Ks. recently expanded to include Sunday service. Demand for public transit is expected to jump there next year, when the Hard Rock Casino and the Schlitterbahn Water Park are expected to bring 6,000 new jobs.

“Transit is more important than ever in Wyandotte County,” Marcia Bernard, transit manager of the Unified Government, said at the Sept. 22 T-LINK meeting in Olathe. “We already have standing room only on many of our routes. We need increased funding.”

Of the \$44.7 million allocated for transit funding in Kansas last year, 42 percent came from local governments, 13 percent from the state, 31 percent from the federal government and 13 percent from rider fares.

State support for public transit has not kept pace as demand has grown. For example, ridership on Topeka’s public transit system has risen by 51.2 percent since 2000, to 1.85 million rides in the fiscal year that ended June 30, according to the Topeka Metropolitan Transit Authority.

During the same period, the amount of money provided by KDOT to Topeka Transit has not grown beyond an annual outlay of about \$460,000 a year, out of a total budget of \$9.1 million, according to the Transit Authority.

“I am very optimistic that KDOT will update the formula to be fair, based on the ridership and growth that each system is experiencing,” said Janlyn Nesbett-Tucker, chief executive officer of the Topeka Metropolitan Transit Authority.

Nesbett-Tucker added that Topeka would love to participate in a transit connector service with Lawrence, along the lines of the K-10 Connector between Lawrence and Johnson County. “I have people call me every day, asking if there is any possibility of an inter-county connector (between Topeka and Lawrence),” she said.

But amid the growth in transit services in some parts of the state, 12 counties in western Kansas have no transit service that receives any funding from KDOT.

“When you have no service, it’s hard to know what demand is,” said R.E. “Tuck” Duncan, executive director of the Kansas Public Transit Association. “When you put in service, there’s typically twice as much demand as the service you put in there. We know we have a lot of unfulfilled need.”



ON THE BALLOT

In this breakout presidential election year, one of the hottest ballot issues in Lawrence is a 0.2 percent sales tax to fund operations and capital investment for the Lawrence Transit System, known as “the T,” and a .05 percent sales tax for route enhancements and vehicle and facility improvements.

The vote is coming amid higher transit operating costs, especially for fuel, that have outpaced growth in local property tax revenue in Lawrence.

What’s riding for Lawrence on the sales tax questions? “Very simply, whether or not we continue to have public transit,” said David Smith, an organizer with the “Campaign to Save the T.”

Smith said the T provides an average 1,420 rides a day, including paratransit rides for persons who have disabilities. “Some people feel that’s a low number, some people feel it’s a high number,” he said. “I feel the buses are half full, not half empty.”

Besides not obtaining the proposed sales tax revenues, defeat of the tax proposals will mean that Lawrence will lose \$1.8 million in state and federal funds for annual operating expenses and more than \$1.9 million in federal funds for bus replacement.

But the potential impact of losing the T can be seen more clearly when one considers who uses it the most. According to a Lawrence Transit System 2007 survey, 70 percent of the people riding the T earn less than \$25,000 a year, 78 percent do not own vehicles and 45 percent are nonwhite.

“It’s quite a few seniors, quite a few students, many people going to and from work,” Smith said. “People may think they don’t need public transit, but anyone could suffer a vision problem or a lower back injury or leg problem that could make it difficult to drive. Then they face the question of how to get to work or to the doctor.”

Casey Toomay, Lawrence interim transit administrator, said the city receives about \$251,000 a year from KDOT for the transit system, or about 12 percent of the total transit budget

“Additional state resources would help us continue to provide transit services to our community,” Toomay said. “It would alleviate some of the burden on local taxpayers and would free up resources to spend on other services needed in the community.”

SEEKING REGIONAL SOLUTIONS, TAX CREDITS

In Coffeyville, this is the time of year when the Amazon.com distribution plant starts gearing up for the holiday rush. The seasonal expansion will boost employment at the plant from about 800 to 2,000.

That's a wonderful thing for a region that has lost several large employers recently. The problem is that many workers - and potential workers - live a long way from the Amazon plant.

"We have many people in our area who can't afford a car or there's only one car per family," said Tammy Dickson, a recruiting manager for Staff Management who works with the Amazon plant. "They need public transit to get to work."

Dickson said she will testify in Topeka next month before the House-Senate Joint Economic Development Committee about the need for a regional transportation system in southeast Kansas.

"It doesn't make sense to just have each town set up its own bus system," Dickson said. "Since we are a rural community, we need a rural bus system."

Dickson also will ask that for-profit bus companies receive fuel tax credits if they take employees to and from work in areas that suffer from a transportation shortage.

"I want the state to help make this cost effective for the bus company, and make it cost effective for the person to ride the bus," she said.

Sen. Dwayne Umbarger of Thayer said recent job losses in Southeast Kansas magnify the importance of transit service to connect workers to the jobs that are available.



Umbarger added that many rural dwellers have to travel farther to get to work and make less money than their urban counterparts. As a result, rising fuel costs make transit options crucial for rural workers, he said.

Umbarger said regional transit systems and transit fuel tax credits are options that should be considered.

"It's hard for bus companies to pass their costs on to their riders, who are already on a fixed income and are already challenged to pay utility bills at home," he said.

Indeed, KDOT calculates that fares amount to only 13 percent of transit funding in Kansas, and transit experts say raising fares poses the danger of reducing ridership.

TRANSIT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

At the local consult meetings around the state, T-LINK members were told repeatedly that more transit service is needed for persons with medical needs and those with disabilities, whether they live in big cities or rural towns.

“When we are providing specialized transportation to citizens who are disabled, we are giving them the ability to be taxpayers instead of tax consumers,” said Paul Faber, board chairman of the Kansas Public Transit Association and executive vice president of the Heartspring School in Wichita. “That’s critical to their self esteem. Those individuals can now get out in the community, attend social functions, go to work, do their shopping. Without transportation, they’re stuck at home and cannot get around.”

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Burgardt, with Finney County Transit, told task force members who met in Ulysses on Sept. 11 that there is a great need for transit to take people to regional cancer and dialysis centers. She said the previous week she had heard from two disabled veterans who said they were unable to get to veterans medical centers that were located three hours from where they lived.

Ron Straight, transportation manager of Developmental Services of Northwest Kansas in Hays, told task force members who met there on Sept. 12 that transit services need more money from the federal government, KDOT and local governments.

MORE FUNDING, MORE EFFICIENCY

KDOT has presented to T-LINK members for their consideration a range of possible state funding scenarios for transit, from the current \$6 million a year to about \$24.3 million a year. Under a “medium-range” scenario, state funding would be increased to \$15.9 million a year. The total would consist of \$8.3 million for urban transit, \$4.4 million for rural/specialized transit, \$1.2 million for commuter transit and \$2 million to create a suggested new business model known as mobility management districts.

The mobility management districts would be designed to increase efficiency. The business model calls for KDOT to directly fund one mobility manager position. That manager would be required to provide a specific level of service and could subcontract with other transit providers. The lead agency would use “one-call” dispatching to promote cooperation among multiple providers.

Burgardt said she liked the mobility management district concept. “That’s kind of like what we’re looking at now,” she said. “The advantage would be better use of buses. When there is a dispatch center open from 5 in the morning until 8 at night, people have more of an opportunity to call and schedule a ride.”