

T-LINK HEARS CITIZEN CONCERNS IN SOUTHWEST KANSAS

Members of a new Kansas task force journeyed to Ulysses last week to hear what citizens had to say about their regional transportation needs and how to pay for them.

More than 80 people attended the local consultation meeting held by the Transportation-Leveraging Investments in Kansas (T-LINK) task force. The 35 members, drawn from the arenas of business, labor and government, are charged with developing a set of recommendations for a new strategic transportation approach as the state's 10-year transportation program nears its end.



T-LINK members talk with local residents

Transportation raises critical concerns in this region, which brims with growing industries like cattle feed lots and dairies, as well as budding ethanol plants and a casino heading for Dodge City.

Those in attendance cited needs in multiple modes of transportation. There was no broad consensus on how to pay for transportation needs, but local voices spoke out for greater regional cooperation.



Breakout session: Participants discuss rail needs

As directed by Governor Kathleen Sebelius, the focus of the task force is three-fold:

- A commitment to keeping roads and bridges safe and in good repair
- Forward thinking without relying on old business models
- A new approach that reflects today's fiscal realities and creates a framework to prepare Kansas for its transportation future.

"We would encourage KDOT to weigh the effectiveness of the current piecemeal project strategy against the potential gains that could be achieved through regional and statebased projects," said Paul Joseph, president of the Garden City Area Chamber of Commerce.

TRANSPORTATION NEEDS IN AN EVOLVING REGION

Cliff Mayo, Finney County commissioner, said the region lacks the transportation infrastructure it needs to support a diversifying economy.

“We need some interstate highways in southwest Kansas,” Mayo said. “We’re the only part of the state that does not have them. And we lend a lot of support to the economic engine of Kansas. We have feed yards, we have ethanol plants, and we have dairies. We have oil and gas. We will fund our share, but there is no way we can fund what we need.”



T-LINK members listen to testimony during afternoon session

Garden City Mayor David Crase called for the four-laning of existing highways. “Regionally, Highway 83 and Highway 50, that’s the biggest concern,” Crase said. “With the building of the casino in Dodge City, Highway 50 is going to have to be addressed pretty fast here by getting some decent four-lane road. This casino is supposed to draw about a million people a year.”

Jack Taylor of Liberal, executive director of SPIRIT – Southwest Passage Initiative for Regional and Interstate Transportation – said U.S. 54 must be four-laned to serve the region’s economy and military needs.

“Highway 54 is one of the heaviest traveled two-lane highways in the United States,” Taylor said. “We don’t have the voices of the Kansas City area, but we have the economic development to be heard.”

Earl Willis Jr. of Syracuse said U.S. 50 needs to be four-laned from Garden City to Kinsley. "Traffic counts exceed four-lane specifications," said Willis, chairman of the Highway 50 Association. "Fifty years ago Highway 50 was a safe road. Today it is not." Rep. Jeff Whitham of Garden City stressed the importance of preserving existing roads.

"Out here in western, rural Kansas, the primary need is to maintain the roads we have in place," Whitham said. "I don't think there's an actual need for a lot of new roads. It's figuring out how to allocate dollars."

IT TAKES MANY MODES

Participants also pointed out the need for improvements in other modes of transportation. Madison "Matt" Traster, Grant County Commissioner, gave the task force a joint petition from Grant, Morton, Stanton and Stevens counties that urged greater funding for short-line railroads.



Bike & Pedestrian break-out group discussion

"Our four counties have made a significant financial commitment to upgrade existing rail infrastructure to assist local businesses," the petition stated. "The state of Kansas should continue their commitment to short-line railroad assistance programs. Increased funding for short-line rail programs can reduce the number of trucks transporting goods through our communities."

"With the advent of ethanol plants and other economic development ventures we are promoting, we felt it was necessary to improve our railroad," Traster said. "We believe this new transportation plan, with an emphasis on short-line railroads, is an endeavor that KDOT should undertake."

Garden City Mayor David Crase said both rail and highway improvements will be needed to support a \$500 million ethanol/cellulose plant being built in Hugoton, in Stevens County.

"Even if they use the railroad to transport the ethanol out, they will still be using the highways to transport the grain in, and to distribute the distillers' grain to the feed lots," Crase said.

A petition from the Kansas Association of Airports was presented to the task force by Steve Phillips, manager of the Syracuse-Hamilton County Airport and a board member of the association.

The petition notes that 52 Kansas counties lack instrument approach capability for their airports.

“In addition, many approaches to Kansas airports are becoming obsolete,” the petition stated. “This means that even though a Kansas resident may live within 30 miles of a suitable air ambulance runway, the weather, not the pavement, will determine if that resident is delivered to a critical care facility.”

“In a time-critical situation, especially with heart patients, this causes great concern,” Phillips said.



T-LINK members listen to southwest Kansas concerns

The petition said current Kansas airport infrastructure needs exceed \$80 million a year. It asked that state Kansas Airport Improvement Program funding be increased from \$3 million to \$25 million a year.

Bonnie Burgardt, transportation director for Finney County Transit, said there is a great need for transit to transport 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.

Kathy Sanko, office manager of the Good Samaritan Center nursing home in Liberal, said a van service that takes people to Wichita for medical services is under strain.

“A lot of people who have to go to Wichita are going to be admitted to the hospital,” she said. “There are no funds for us to stay overnight and bring them back the next day.

I see a need for more funds in assisting those who are disabled or low-income to get transportation to the medical services they need.”

Steven Cottrell, city engineer for Garden City, cited a need for more bike/ped infrastructure.

“I’ve got about 125 miles of streets and 118 miles of sidewalks (in Garden City),” Cottrell said. “We have entire neighborhoods that don’t have sidewalks. You have kids walking to school who either have to walk in the street or cut across the yard. That creates an unsafe situation for pedestrians.”

Cottrell said Garden City continually applies for bike/ped-related funding from KDOT.

“City government recognizes the need for sidewalks and trail facilities, but they always get cut come budget time because of all the other competing needs that are deemed to be higher priority by the elected officials,” Cottrell said.

He added that hopefully, the economy will improve and generate more local and state revenues for bike/ped needs.

WORKING TOGETHER

Several voices were raised for greater regional and statewide cooperation to tackle vital transportation issues.

“I was born and raised in western Kansas and lived in Garden City for 30 years,” said T-LINK member Don Linville, with the Garden City Chamber of Commerce. “I understand the concern, perhaps skepticism, perhaps cynicism, as we look at Topeka vs. western Kansas.”



Break out session: Participants discuss highway needs

But Linville noted that the “economic impact of southwest Kansas is huge to the state as a whole, though the population is not as huge as it is in the metropolitan areas of Kansas City or Wichita or Topeka.”

Paul Joseph, with the Garden City Area Chamber of Commerce, said southwest Kansas cities, counties and chambers of commerce “are going to begin working politically, legislatively and economic development-wise on a regional basis.”

HOW TO PAY FOR IT

Those who attended were asked to fill out a form indicating their preferences on how to fund transportation improvements. The most votes went to raising vehicle registration fees, raising the existing motor fuels tax, raising general state sales taxes and using gaming fees to help fund transportation.

The least popular choices included raising property taxes, raising the local match requirement for state projects and increasing bonding from state revenue funds.

Sixteen participants voted for adding a sales tax to gasoline. “I think a sales tax is fairer, because it catches everybody,” said Delmar Hammond, road supervisor for Hamilton County. “That would be a way to help fund what we need to fund. It takes a lot of dollars to keep our road system going.”

“Funding is always a major concern,” said Tanner Lucas, communications specialist for Garden City. “Because of our population base we obviously have high taxes in this region. I think there’s going to be some hesitancy on the part of many residents to raise taxes across the board.”

DO YOUR OWN CALCULATIONS

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.

The meeting was opened with remarks by T-LINK co-chair Tim Rogers, executive director of the Salina Airport Authority.

“Something that really makes the economy work out here is the transportation system,” Rogers said. “All the good products, the good work that comes out of southwest Kansas, have to be delivered somewhere. The workers have got to travel in and out of the communities here. It takes the types of transportation that we have today to keep this area of the state vibrant and growing. That’s why we’re here today.”

Julie Lorenz, director of KDOT public affairs, said the T-LINK task force wants to obtain as much citizen input as possible as it develops its recommendations.

“We spent over a year working on our long-range plan,” Lorenz said. “That certainly provides a lot of suggestions to this T-LINK group to consider. But none of those recommendations that come out of the plan are set in stone.”

Southwest Kansas Funding Preferences for Transportation

1. Increase Vehicle Registration Fees
2. Increase Truck Registration Fees
3. Utilizing Gaming Fees for Transportation
4. Increase state motor fuels tax (per gallon)
5. Increase State Sales Tax

*These were the top 5 choices of participants at the Ulysses Local Consultation meeting.

The T-LINK task force also held a local consultation meeting Friday in Hays. Upcoming meetings are scheduled for Thursday in Abilene, Friday in Topeka, Sept. 22 in Olathe, Sept. 23 in Hutchinson, Sept. 26 in Pittsburg and Sept. 30 in Wichita.

The originally designated dates for Hutchinson and Wichita – Sept. 15 and Sept. 23 – were changed because of scheduling conflicts with other public meetings.

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