

WICHITA MEETING BRINGS OUT SUPPORT FOR A NEW TRANSPORTATION PLAN



T-LINK Co-Chair Tim Rogers is interviewed

Kansas must enact another transportation plan as the state’s current 10-year transportation plan nears its end, said participants at a September 30 meeting to gauge South Central Kansas transportation needs.

Supporters – including a state senator from the region and a former Kansas Secretary of Commerce - said a new plan is critical for Kansas to keep growing businesses and jobs.

“Infrastructure and an educated work force are the two drivers for economic development,” said Rep. Geraldine Flaharty of Wichita. “It’s very important that we develop another (transportation) plan and continue with the highway plan. “

Harland Priddle, executive director of the K 96 Corridor Development Association and former Kansas Secretary of Commerce, said a new transportation plan is vital for the state’s future.

“Without a plan, you don’t know where you’re going,” said Priddle. “As transportation systems are developed, lots of things happen. As we look across this country, economic development and commercial activity happen along transportation lines.”

Priddle added that the funding of the next transportation plan “is an issue that may have to be addressed in phases, separately.”

The discussion took place at the eighth local consultation meeting held by 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 Pittsburg, Hutchinson, Olathe, Topeka, Abilene, Hays and Ulysses.

REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE



Participants discuss transportation issues

Participants voiced support for a regional outlook on transportation in areas such as construction, maintenance and funding.

“Clearly, the state should focus its transportation funding on infrastructure of regional and statewide importance, rather than on city streets and country roads,” said Kathy Sexton, city manager of Derby and Transportation Task Force Chair of the Regional Economic Area Partnership of South Central Kansas, which includes seven counties and 27 cities.

“When you’re looking at a comprehensive highway program, you have to select projects that are regional type projects, not just a local project that benefits just a few people,” said David Spears, Sedgwick County Public Works Director.

Troy Carlson, who represented Harvey County stakeholders, said Harvey County is “developing into a regional economic development center. Harvey County is linking Wichita to communities to the north. We have the fundamentals in place for a major intermodal presence. It needs a little bit more of a nudge to make that happen.”

Priddle noted that the K 96 Corridor Development Association consists of two counties – Reno and Sedgwick – and the cities of South Hutchinson, Haven, Mt. Hope and Maize. “Coalitions are extremely important as you develop highway programs,” he said.

Valley Center community development officer Eldon Miller advocated regional funding mechanisms for transportation projects, as opposed to strictly local funding.

“We’ve got small cities in Sedgwick County that have talked about doing a sales tax for recreational projects. Their businesses say, ‘we cannot compete if you put the sales tax on us and Wichita doesn’t.’”

Participants also supported balanced transportation planning that is flexible enough to react to economic development opportunities, but firm enough to protect funds designated for particular projects. Attendees said they didn’t want economic analysis of transportation projects to hurt rural areas in favor of urban areas.

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’s Charge

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.**

“We need to think as a state,” said T-LINK member Don Linville of Garden City. “We each have local community needs, we each have regional needs. But each one of those things feeds into the overall state need. None of us operates in a vacuum, and those needs are very important as we look at the economy, at health and safety and quality of life issues. And those needs need to dovetail into each of the various modes.”

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.

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 can 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.

HIGHWAYS AND ROADS



Kyle Schneweis leads a breakout session on highways

As in other regions, participants at the Wichita meeting voiced strong concerns about the need for highway additions, expansions and improvements.

Many in attendance asked for help in obtaining a Northwest Bypass that would move traffic around Wichita's west side. Supporters said the bypass would alleviate traffic congestion and spur economic development.

"The Northwest Bypass is something that's been on the books for about 20 years," said Sedgwick County Commissioner Kelly Parks. "If there's any doubt that there's economic development to be had from this, just look at the Northeast Bypass on the other side of town. Even if it's 20 more years down the line, we need to start buying a little bit of right of way out there. I would like to see this finished in my lifetime."



Terry Heidner and Ron Seitz lead another highway breakout session

Patrick Quaney, president of the West 21st Street Business Association in Wichita, said the city needs a bridge across 21st Street over Wichita's "Big Ditch," which protects a large section of the city from flooding.

"In our opinion, that's the most important street improvement in Sedgwick County," Quaney said. "There are 60,000 residents west of the Big Ditch and north of Kellogg."

If that were a separate city, it would be the fourth largest city in Kansas. We don't have east-west access (except) for Kellogg and K 96. There are millions of dollars of business on 21st Street. This is not only just a convenience for citizens. This is an economic issue."

Rep. Flaharty said motorists face hazardous conditions at clogged interchanges along 47th Street South, the Kansas Turnpike and Interstates 235 and 135 in south Sedgwick County. The corridor contains "one of the most dangerous bridges in the area," she said. "There's congestion. It's a safety issue. That's a project we hope to have funded. KDOT's doing an engineering study on that now. That's a local thing, but would affect all of south Sedgwick County."

"Highway 50 is clearly the most dangerous highway in the state," said Carlson on behalf of Harvey County stakeholders. "For every 180 travel miles there are 3.3 deaths. People don't want to take it."

RAIL AND FREIGHT

As in other regions, participants in a breakout session on rail and freight said they were concerned about congestion at railroad switch yards.

"We do have a terrible bottleneck in Wichita, trying to get through WTA (Wichita Terminal Association terminal railroad)," said Charles Swayze, general manager of the Farmers' Coop in Isabel and member of the Barber County Development Board of Trustees. "It's very important that we move grain as efficiently as we can. If there's a better way to get (rail) cars pushed on through Wichita, which would be a real plus."

Participants said they would like to see intermodal facilities in South Central Kansas, plus more rail spurs to industrial parks. They asked for state help in eliminating rough grade crossings and asked that the state act as a facilitator between Class I railroads, short-line railroads and shippers to address service issues.

"We have worked very closely with the state of Kansas to make rail a success and to find ways to improve that economically," said Pat Cedeno, Central Region Chief Operating Officer for Watco Cos. Inc., a Pittsburg-based operator of short-line railroads. "We are committed as a company to do that again."

PASSENGER RAIL

Attendees said Kansas needs more passenger rail service to carry constituencies such as senior citizens, college students and business travelers. They also cited a need for services to help disembarking rail passengers reach their final destinations.

Participants discussed the potential for user fees and local subsidies to support passenger rail service.

Kansas is about to embark on a study with Amtrak and BNSF Railway on future passenger rail service in the state.

“Passenger train service moves people, keeps them mobile,” said Autumn Heithaus, Kansas Executive Director of the Northern Flyer Alliance in Wichita. “Not everybody can fly and not everybody can drive.”

TRANSIT



Participants said more public transit service is needed to get people where they need to go for medical care in Wichita, where many health providers are located on the outskirts of the city.

They cited inadequacies in area paratransit services for the elderly and persons with disabilities.

“Remember transit and the individual citizen, the person with a handicap who chooses to be a taxpayer and not a tax consumer, who chooses to ride on specialized transportation with their guide dog or wheelchair or personal aid, so they can get to work and back home, and financially provide for themselves and their families,” said Paul Faber, board chairman of the Kansas Public Transit Association in Topeka and executive vice president of operations of Heartspring, a school for severely handicapped children in Wichita.

Attendees also cited the needs of second- and third-shift workers who need bus service to get to their jobs.

In addition, participants discussed whether more transit service would help improve air quality in Wichita, by getting people out of cars.

AVIATION

Participants noted that upgrading airports to improve air ambulance service also opens up towns to more economic development opportunities.

A summary of airport funding goals, costs and revenue strategies was presented to the task force by Steve Phillips, president, and Martin Miller, past president of the Kansas Association of Airports.

The goals are:

Providing all-weather air ambulance access for within 30 miles of every Kansan. This would involve improving five airports a year for 10 years, for a total cost of \$4 million per year for 10 years.

Preservation of existing airport pavements. Cost: \$6 million a year.

Meet airport infrastructure needs to accommodate new businesses and employers, and thereby provide Kansans with the flexibility to respond to economic development opportunities. Cost: \$2 million a year.

Fund half of current airport grant requests over the next 10 years. Cost: \$7.5 million a year.

The total cost of the four goals would be \$19.5 million a year.

KDOT currently provides \$3 million a year in airport funding. The money is typically used for runway and taxiway preservation.

The Association of Airports suggested funding mechanisms such as a per-gallon aviation fuel tax or reduction or elimination of aviation fuel sales tax exemptions for commercial and charter jets.

“Because we’ve had no program in the past, other than the recent program to get that pavement index up, there has been no funding for modernization ever in the state of Kansas, from the state, for airports,” Phillips said. “The association would like to see some sort of amount put in toward reaching that goal.”

There also was discussion of KDOT considering the possibility of airport improvement grants that don’t require local matching grants.

But one participant said that if an airport is important enough to a community it will find the means to provide a local matching grant.



BIKE/PED: The bike/ped breakout session in Wichita drew the largest turnout of the eight cities that have hosted T-LINK local consultation meetings.

Similar to other regions, participants noted the health benefits of biking and the appeal of bike paths to young professionals, whose presence is considered crucial for economic development in a region.

Participants said higher gas prices are encouraging more people to bike, but there aren’t enough safe areas for them to do so.

Attendees also said they would like to see existing bike/ped pathways connected to each other.

Other needs cited included more bike/ped-friendly signs, such as “Share the Road” signs, and more education for motorists and bicyclists about their road responsibilities.

Also cited as a priority was maintenance of bike/ped facilities once they are built, a need that was not been cited at the local consultation meetings in other regions.

Participants advocated state funding of bike/ped infrastructure, with local matches. Potential public-private partnerships might provide money for local matches, attendees said.

“We see bike paths, sidewalks and any mode of transportation regarding bicycles and walking as extremely important,” said Mim Wilkey, with the Health & Wellness Coalition of Wichita and the Greater Wichita YMCA. “Here in Wichita we’ve been very successful with our public/private partnerships in supporting healthy ways of living. We would encourage you, in your plan, to look at those partnerships. We ask of you that when you go through this planning process and you develop your priorities, always take into consideration how this affects the pedestrians and the bicyclists.”

WHERE WILL THE MONEY COME FROM?

Similar to the meetings held in other regions, many funding ideas were discussed but there was little overall consensus on how to pay for a new transportation plan.

Wichita-Metro Funding Preferences for Transportation

1. Utilizing Gaming Fees for Transportation

2. Use More Developer Fees

3. Increase Motor Fuels Tax (per gallon)

4. Increase Vehicle Registration Fees

4. (tie) Increase State Sales Tax

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

As in Ulysses, Hays, Abilene, Topeka, Olathe, Hutchinson and Pittsburg, participants at the Wichita meeting were asked to fill out a form indicating their preferences on how to fund transportation improvements.

Priddle, the former Secretary of Commerce, urged those present to remember that transportation plans don’t merely cost money, but “provide investment. A tremendous number of jobs are created through highway programs, through construction. They’re not \$5 an hour jobs. They’re more than that. The economic turnover during a highway program is absolutely fantastic.”