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County officials hear transportation recommendations

By *JIM SECKLER/The Daily News*

KINGMAN - Mohave County officials met Wednesday to hear recommendations from an April town hall on the state's transportation needs.

The 94th Arizona Town Hall met in April in Tucson, raising issues including rising gas prices, environmental concerns, international trade and cost of freight. More than 88 percent of Arizonans drive to work compared to the rest of the country at more than 87 percent.

Arizona Town Hall President Tara Jackson said that prior town halls on land use and housing were interrelated with transportation issues. She also said the 2007 Arizona Town Hall on health care was not related to recent uncivil town halls across the nation. The next town hall will be held in April 2010 also in Tucson. The topic will be economic development, Jackson said.

Arizona Transit Association board member Dave Barber said the April town hall on transportation was the first in 15 years and more town halls are needed to address transportation issues. He projects with an improving economy, Mohave County's population growth will again increase bringing more need for transportation infrastructure.

He spoke of developers building large subdivisions in Maricopa and Pinal counties without planning for transportation infrastructure for the residents of those subdivisions, many who drive into Phoenix to work. Pinal County is now experiencing a large number of foreclosures.

He also pointed to the Katherine Heights subdivision, which was built outside of the Bullhead City limits and how the city came through in providing bus service and senior meals service to the subdivision's residents.

Barber also encouraged citizens to contact their state legislators to protect Highway User Revenue Funds for transportation needs only. In recent years, the state legislators have raided HURF money for the state Department of Public Safety. Legislators should find another source of funding for DPS, he said.

Barber also spoke of the need to invest in public transportation and the Arizona Department of Transportation may make up to \$300,000 available for a tri-city connector between the three cities. He also predicted that in 20 years, a computer chip will be installed in cars that will record the number of miles driven and there will be a tax on that number. Other new technology in road building includes soil stabilization or treating the soil beneath the asphalt, which would cut paving costs by up to 20 percent.

Mohave County Transportation Commission Chair Jim Roberts said Mohave County's main issues are the county's 1,800 miles of road of which only 450 miles are paved. He spoke of the need for car and van pooling, toll roads and educating the public about the transportation services in the county such as rail, bus or airplane. He also said technology like teleconferencing is needed but has to be seriously used.

Mohave County Manager Ron Walker then turned the microphone over to the dozen or so people who attended the meeting for questions.

Bullhead City Assistant City Manager Susan Betts said more resources are needed for high-speed rail or other public transportation in the county.

Another speaker asked about toll roads, while another asked how to keep the state legislators from raiding HURF money.

One transportation project is the Vanderslice Road project that will provide an alternate route to Highway 95. Another project that also would affect Bullhead City is the Hoover Dam bridge and widening Highway 93 near Hoover Dam. Trucks have been detoured on Highway 68 through Laughlin since the 2001 terrorist attacks.

At the April town hall, recommendations being considered were flex-time and four-day work weeks, carpooling, telecommuting, online shopping, distance learning and multipurpose trips. Shifting from cars to mass transit, including high-speed rail, also was raised.

One recommendation is to form a citizen transportation review commission made up of representatives of cities, counties, tribal lands, state, nonprofit, businesses and the public. The commission would develop or update a state transportation plan, educate the public on transportation improvements, identify the public's needs, identify funding for transportation projects and support and enact state legislation.

One suggestion is to update and possibly increase the fuel tax, allow Highway User Revenue Funds for public transit projects, implement an impact fee to pay for transportation infrastructure, encourage private investment in the state's transportation system and to seek federal funding and work with federal agencies for state road projects. The April town hall also discussed replacing fuel taxes with a Vehicle Miles Traveled tax.