



News

Meeting maps out options for transit-starved rural areas

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SIERRA VISTA — A collection of about 20 local business, education and government leaders met Thursday morning to discuss Arizona's transportation issues, and possible solutions, and how they affect Cochise County.

The discussion was prompted and organized by the most recent Arizona Town Hall, a private, nonprofit think tank that invites Arizona's business and community leaders to come together to tackle emerging issues facing the state.

The most recent previous town hall convened in April and focused on transportation issues facing Arizona communities as the state continues to grow.

According to the report published as a result of that town hall, "as Arizona has seen fast population growth in many of its communities, transportation has often been an afterthought, and sufficient modes of transportation have not been implemented to keep pace with the creation of new housing developments and business centers."

Several local leaders attended the event, such as Sharon Mitchell, transportation manager for the Southeastern Arizona Governments Organization.

Lack of public transportation in rural areas is due in large part to a lack of funds, Mitchell said.

"There is a night and day difference between transportation in the metropolitan areas and the rural areas, as you all know," she said. "(Rural areas) want the money" for transit development, "but we don't have the population, so we won't get it."

This financial gap led those in attendance to consider other methods of collecting money for transportation.

"Almost half of transportation on interstates are trucks, and nothing happens to those trucks when they come through Arizona," said Carl Robie, water conservation coordinator for Cochise County.

Such traffic typically ends up in California, with none of the benefits of that transportation staying in Arizona, Robie said.

The possibility of taxing these trucks as a means to fund state transportation costs was raised at the town hall in April, he said.

Arizona itself is a “donor state” when it comes to federal transportation taxes, said Tara Jackson, Arizona Town Hall president.

“We pay more in federal taxes for transportation, by far, than we get back,” Jackson said.

For that reason and other finance-related concerns, the town hall decided to adopt as part of one of its 10 recommendations to address transportation issues that gasoline taxes be used to fund transit.

While searching for new ways to fund future transportation projects was a large part of the discussion, what was to be done with said funds if and when they are procured was another important topic.

“I think public transit planning is paramount for us to focus on, because as the cost of personal mobility increases, more people are going to be utilizing that as a mode of transportation,” said Randy Heiss, executive director of the Southeastern Arizona Governments Organization. “That is something that is going to be much more difficult in rural areas because of the distance between population centers, and so on.”

Bob Shepard, executive director of the Sierra Vista Economic Development Foundation, said it would be a boon to the local economy to use any transportation funds to help foster the relationship between Sierra Vista and consumers from Mexico.

“If you go to the shopping centers on weekends, it’s almost 50 percent Mexican license plates,” Shepard said.

“I think it would be wise for our community to continue enhancing Highway 92 and our connection to Douglas.”

Jackson recorded the major consensuses during the course of the meeting, which she will take into account when the Arizona Town Council begins to implement its suggestions to solve existing and emerging transportation issues.

The full report, compiling the suggestions and findings of the 94th Arizona Town Hall, can be obtained at the group’s Web site, aztownhall.org.

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