

## Getting state there from here: Arizonans agree on one solution

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Published: October 23, 2009 at 7:38 pm



Reliable, reasonably priced transportation options are vital, especially in a state where the car is king, public transportation is severely limited, fuel prices are in continual flux, the number of elderly residents is rising rapidly and commodities must be imported by truck, train, pipeline or plane.

The April 2009 meeting of the 94th Arizona Town Hall, "From Here to There: Transportation Opportunities for Arizona," produced some recommendations to improve the transportation system. The group also broached the elephant in the room - how to pay for it all - considering budget cuts and serving Arizona's diverse population, including the growing ranks of the elderly.

From there, the organization went on the road to discover how people in communities across the state would address transportation issues.

Surprisingly, the message from all corners of the state was largely the same: Arizona needs a comprehensive plan that serves the entire state and includes state, federal, local and tribal transportation entities to implement it.

"There's a real hunger for that approach," says Tara Jackson, president of the Arizona Town Hall. "From Kingman to Douglas to Show Low and Phoenix, everyone recognizes the need for an integrated plan. They're surprised that there isn't one."

Arizona, like the rest of the United States, is hooked on cars. A background study released by the Town Hall reports: "While the U.S. population has more than doubled since 1925, the number of registered automobiles has climbed eight-fold."

Arizona cities have grown increasingly outward, while public transportation has failed to develop in a way that meets the needs of workers who commute as far as 60 miles each way to their jobs. In the meantime, what's known as a "megapolitan" region called the Sun Corridor is spreading. It is expected to eventually grow into one continuous urban area from Prescott, through the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas, and continue all the way to Nogales.

The Town Hall found that these conditions contribute to an increasing dependency on using private vehicles to commute to jobs. "Adding the drive-alone and carpool shares, 88.7 percent of Arizonans drive to work, compared with 87.7 percent nationally," the final report notes.

"Arizonans use transit and walk significantly less, but carpool, bicycle and work from home more."

Topics such as gasoline prices, alternative fuels, transportation modes, environmental issues and metropolitan, rural, tribal and tourism issues all figured into the Town Hall's examination. The group considered virtually every aspect of transportation infrastructure, and delved into how the public figures in the decision-making process.

Possibly the most important recommendation made by the participants was the need to adopt a comprehensive approach to transportation planning. The participants, as with other Town Halls, ranged from transportation experts and policy wonks to ordinary citizens and students.

One solution is creating a citizen transportation review commission, which would "coordinate and assist in the execution of a comprehensive, multi-modal state transportation plan." The commission would work with the Arizona Department of Transportation in implementing recommendations from the Town Hall and the department's long-range transportation plan, "Building a Quality Arizona."

"ADOT, the councils of governments and others need to have a citizen transportation review commission that includes everybody," Jackson says. "And it should be led by ADOT with help from the COGs (councils of governments)."

One challenge is that the responsibility for transportation infrastructure belongs to many jurisdictions, says Jonathan Upchurch, a transportation engineering consultant from northern Arizona.

"The public doesn't know or care who the road they travel on belongs to," he says. "This poses a jurisdictional and coordination challenge."

Upchurch recommends existing cooperative organizations, such as governmental councils like the Maricopa Association of Governments and its sister group in Pima County, be used to coordinate with ADOT and other local transportation entities. He also sees the need for more investment in the system.

The American Society of Civil Engineers issued a report on infrastructure. "Our grade is not good," Upchurch notes. Arizona received a miserable D- in roads, a slightly better D in public transit and a passing grade of C in bridge safety.

However, Upchurch stresses that the society also examines other types of infrastructure - water systems, utilities and the like - and the organization estimates that more than \$12 trillion will be needed nationwide to rebuild these vital underpinnings of modern civilization that have been crumbling under the burden of expanding populations and shrinking maintenance budgets.

"Every program needs more money, but if we didn't have a stable transportation system, our culture, our economy, our society, our way of life would be far different," he says. "If we don't rebuild and grow transportation infrastructure, it will affect our way of life."

In fact, we're already seeing the effects, Upchurch notes, in billions of dollars in wasted time, dealing with car crashes and the like.

Jennifer Toth, director of ADOT's Multimodal Planning Division and a Town Hall participant, notes that ADOT's Building a Quality Arizona is already tackling many of the Town Hall's recommendations.

"We started out from a regional perspective with community meetings in rural areas, and then we brought this information into the statewide system planning," she says. "Building a Quality Arizona was the first effort on a state level to engage in a long-term transportation strategy."

When finished, the organization will provide a blueprint the state can follow when planning for transportation needs during the next 40 years, she says.

In fact, she and Mike Normand, director of community and grant services for ADOT's Multimodal Planning Division, both stress that Building a Quality Arizona is part of a nationwide movement to plan communities using a more sustainable model.

"In recent years, there's been an unprecedented collaboration between the U.S. Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency to engage in comprehensive community planning," Toth says. "My biggest take-away from the Arizona Town Hall was this increased awareness of the connections between land use, economic development and the environment in transportation planning."

Normand agrees. "It's a whole range of different dynamics on how we plan, implement and use transportation," he says. "It's a different approach to design and implement multi-modal transportations."

Normand also says the recession has sparked a new sense of jurisdictional cooperation.

"We no longer have the luxury to do things on our own," he says. "The challenges are so big and resources are so scarce, we're starting to look at partnerships and sharing the scarce resources."

Jeff Meibeck, general manager of the Northern Arizona Intergovernmental Public Transportation Authority, agrees that the Town Hall's most significant and important finding is the need for an inclusive process. "The citizen-review process will ensure that we're not making decisions in a vacuum," he says.

Meibeck says Flagstaff already has proven the value of this process.

"In May 2008, voters were asked to continue our transit system," he says. "However, we asked for the vote after a two-year process to figure out what the voters wanted."

The measure garnered 68 to 78 percent approval ratings, Meibeck says, including strong approval from everybody ranging from car dealers to environmentalists, "because we took the time to listen."

Teresa Brice, executive director of the Phoenix office of Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), which assists community revitalization and community development groups, advocates that transportation planning also incorporate far more. "We have to look at transportation in the context of land use and jobs," she says. "We need to radically redefine how we develop; we've taken open space for granted."

The present development model in Arizona is unsustainable, Brice says.

"Arizona is guilty of the same mindset as Detroit," with its overdependence on just one economic engine, she says.

Brice says good urban planning also can help Arizona cities avoid the mistakes of older cities. "We can build our cities with people living above their jobs, next to retail," Brice says. "We can reduce childhood obesity and pollution and allow people to stay and age in place. It's all about place-making."