

# Arizona Daily Star®

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## Town Hall hashes out transit solutions

By **Andrea Kelly**

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Arizona needs to find a new pot of gold before it can hope to make any major changes in its transportation system, according to a consensus of the Arizona Town Hall on Transportation in Tucson this week.

And although it isn't a new funding source, the group recommends dropping restrictions on how state transportation taxes are spent so they can be used on transit projects, instead of focused almost entirely on roads.

More than 100 invited participants from state and local governments, land development, transportation industries, public relations and corporate entities throughout the state met for three days here to discuss transportation needs and suggest ways to meet them.

They concluded Wednesday agreeing on a report to be presented throughout the state by the Arizona Town Hall staff. Over the three days, participants broke into smaller groups to brainstorm the different elements before putting them together into a final document.

The report says the state should move toward a transportation tax based on miles driven instead of the amount of fuel used. The group recommended the change because vehicles are becoming more fuel efficient, and because the Town Hall wants the state to expand incentives for people who use alternative-fuel vehicles, which would reduce gas-tax revenue.

The report also calls for more private transportation investment, projects done either entirely by private companies or as part of a joint investment with some public funding.

However, changes need to be made to state law to allow public-private partnerships, including privately managed toll roads. The group said these changes need to be made by 2010.

Another recommendation is to protect transportation funding from being used for other things in the state budget. In the past, a portion of transportation funding has been shifted to the Department of Public Safety to pay for the Highway Patrol instead of used by the Arizona Department of Transportation.

The Town Hall participants also offered options for meeting transportation needs without additional funding sources. Some of those suggestions are:

- Encourage telecommuting and alternative work schedules.
- Provide incentives for carpooling and encourage employees to live near work.
- Work with the private sector to offer van pools, shuttle services and passenger trains that can accommodate cars.
- Encourage governments to partner with private companies to use technology for reducing congestion.
- Change zoning laws to encourage high-density development and in-fill in urban and suburban areas.
- Use school buses and paratransit shuttles for other transportation needs when they otherwise sit idle.
- Allow public use at government alternative-fueling stations.

The final document is comprehensive and reflects the collaboration of a diverse group of people on one issue, said Cathy Carlat, a Peoria City Council member.

"There was a constant mention of the sense of urgency without panic," said Judi Miller, a law enforcement specialist in the Air Force and the owner of Illumina Skin Solutions in Anthem. The report will help the state "not miss the boat with futuristic planning," she said.

Hal Ashton, owner of Tucson-based companies Diversified Design and Construction and the Ashton Company Inc., said he hopes the recommendations will help people understand why the face of transportation is changing.

"There's a feeling that the general public doesn't understand the necessity to fund public transit," Ashton said. "Some good speakers explained to us that the world is changing. The price of oil is up and down, but overall it's going up, so alternative energy is vital, as well as light rail and commuter rail."

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