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News

Report finds need for Tri-city bus system Lack of funding poses problem

By Diana Parker

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A committee of the Tri-City Council is close to presenting a feasibility study on a proposed regional bus service that would link Mohave County's three largest cities.

Gary Parsons, director of Havasu Area Transit, said the council has engaged the consulting firm, PB Americas Inc., to conduct the study and create an implementation plan, which could be ready in June.

The council is moving forward with planning even though the down economy has effectively put the brakes on developing a regional transit system, Parsons said.

"Obviously, right now is not a good time to get started," Parsons said. "We basically have our guns cocked so that when it is feasible to offer it, we'll be ready to go," he said.

The results of a demand study delivered to the council last week show a regional bus system would generate nearly 50,000 one-way trips a year between Kingman and Bullhead City, Parsons said. The study showed nearly 22,000 trips between Lake Havasu City and Kingman and more than 8,600 trips between Lake Havasu City and Bullhead City.

The system would also serve communities in between the three major cities, Parsons said.

The need and desire is there for a regional transit system, but Parsons indicated the participating cities would largely be on their own to fund a system. The most that could be expected is some matching grants to help get it started.

Even if money were available from the Arizona Department of Transportation, it would be limited to capital expenditures, Parsons said.

"Maybe we could get money to fund busses, but the communities would have to come up with the operating costs, the fuel," he said.

A transit system for Mohave County was included in a list of items that would have been funded by Proposition 203, a proposed 1-percent sales tax that failed to get enough valid signatures to appear on the November ballot.

Transit is largely absent from a list of projects ADOT recently submitted for possible economic stimulus package funding. The list includes \$8.5 million to build transit centers in six rural Arizona communities, including Lake Havasu City. That constitutes just 0.7 percent of ADOT's \$1.2 billion request.

In a report released Thursday, the Arizona Public Interest Research Group applauded ADOT's willingness to release its transportation wish list; only 19 states have done that.

ArizonaPIRG also criticized ADOT's focus on highways over transit, which the consumer advocacy group said creates 19 percent more jobs than highway construction and results in \$2 of economic growth for every \$1 invested.

"With this federal stimulus, we definitely want to do things to stimulate the economy," said Alex Nelson, of ArizonaPIRG.

Nelson said the state was poised to advance into the world of 21st Century transportation, and ADOT's list is akin to returning it to the era of the "horse and carriage."

"Recently voters (in parts of the state) have said, we want more transit and we're willing to pay for it," Nelson said "I just think this wish list is a step backwards for Arizona."

Nelson said there's also a push for more transit in rural areas of the state, where only 18 percent of demand is currently being met.

"Even in Mohave County folks are ready and want more options," he said.

In response, ADOT spokesman Bill Pederson said: "ADOT is supportive of public transit as a part of Arizona's transportation system ... The list is limited to projects ADOT would actually build. ADOT is not a transit operator."

Pederson said when formulating its list of potential funding projects ADOT had to stick to certain criteria.

"This is a list of projects we feel we can have everyone of them under contract in 180 days," Pederson said.

In the case of Lake Havasu City's transit center, ADOT would pass the funding through to the city, Pederson said.

You may contact the reporter at dparker@havasunews.com. To read Diana Parker's blog, go to the TNH Blog Spot at www.havasunews.com/blogpages/blog.html.

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