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ADOT, local officials mull over alternate transportation choices

By: Sean Dieterich , The Independent

SHOW LOW - As part of a process to identify Arizona's long-term transportation needs, the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) held a meeting with local business leaders March 24 at Torreon.

ADOT is currently collecting data for a statewide transportation plan called "Building a Quality Arizona." ADOT is working with local governments and transportation agencies to develop this plan.

Laurel Parker, a representative from engineering firm DMJM Harris, moderated the meeting. When conducting local meetings, she said, ADOT was looking at state highways, regional transportation facilities, local transit service and adding local connectors. The plan will also include other elements related to transportation.

"This study tries to incorporate environmental issues and the economic and development issues," she said.

To determine issues, framework studies are conducted in four regions, as well as Maricopa and Pima counties. The findings are then combined into a larger state plan.

Parker asked the group for ideas on transportation needs and was told that alternative modes for both businesses and passengers should be expanded. On the business side, rail access for commercial and industrial transport was suggested.

Jeff McCormick of the Arizona Department of Commerce relayed how Republic Plastics in San Manuel had to cut their production when their rail access shut down. When it was reinstated, he said their production resumed. He suggested increased rail access for businesses would increase productivity in shipping.

Show Low Public Works Director Kenny Patterson said shipping by rail would be more efficient, especially if rails were closer to Show Low.

"They're not going to ship (products) all out by truck," he said. "They don't want to get to Holbrook to put it on a rail. They want it here."

Show Low Planning and Zoning Director Justen Tregaskes said while rail lines for businesses might be a good idea, a passenger rail line would probably not be too economical.

"I don't really see that as much as an option," he said.

Instead of a rail line, Tregaskes suggested an extended bus line because it's more "user-friendly" to passengers. Parker said she had heard bus lines between communities expressed as an option.

Both rails and bus lines were proposed as a way to counter increasing congestion on the roads. Tregaskes said the amount of vehicles on the road has only increased with the advent of the Internet, with trucks delivering goods ordered online.

"Our society has become much more interconnected," he said.

Show Low Business Development Coordinator Steve North said the city is growing not only with more people but with the amount of retail options. He said commercial development in Show Low is growing at a quick rate and that would lead to more shoppers on the roads.

"We're on the cusp of seeing some significant retail development in Show Low," he said.

Patterson said ADOT should look at introducing alternate modes of transportation to keep the highways and interstates from becoming too crowded.

"They've got to do something to get the traffic off of I-40 and I-10," he said.

But until then, Patterson added, ADOT and other agencies should keep up with road maintenance. He said if Arizona is expecting a population boom, the roads should be in good enough shape to accommodate the additional travelers.

"Some of those roads are hitting their useful lifespan and falling apart," he said.

McCormick also suggested that some roads be widened to account for more motorists, especially in the White Mountains.

"More passing lanes between here and Heber, here and Holbrook," he said.

Bill Peterson of ADOT then said projects to add more passing lanes between Heber/Overgaard and Show Low are in the works.

ADOT's meeting in Show Low was only the first of a set of meetings held in the Eastern Region of the framework study. Parker said ADOT will summarize the feedback obtained from the first round of public involvement in spring.

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