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ADOT: What legacy do you want to leave your children?

By: Mara Reyes , The Independent

SHOW LOW - In the midst of the state's financial difficulties, the Arizona Department of Transportation still has to plan for the future.

Through its "Building a Quality Arizona" framework study, ADOT officials are hoping to get public feedback on what the state needs, not just in roads, but in rail and other forms of transportation.

"We want to know what people feel the state needs," Bill Pederson, ADOT's public information officer, told The Independent in a Tuesday interview.

This study is different "than anything ever done," he said. "While most studies project and plan for the next 20 years, this study is for 30, 40 years down the line."

However, the study's long-term focus presents a challenge.

"It's hard to get the public engaged in something that's 30 to 40 years away. They have to think of the legacy they're leaving their children, grandchildren," said Andy Jacobs of Policy Development Group, a Phoenix-based public affairs/government relations firm working with ADOT.

In an effort to "engage" the public, the department has been hosting a series of workshops that began last year. The agency is now holding a second round of workshops. A workshop focusing on the Mogollon Rim area will be held in Show Low on Nov. 13. ADOT officials invite citizens to join them at JB's Restaurant at 5:30 p.m.

Citizens can expect hands-on participation. "We'll ask them to do some work, spread out on the tables and draw new routes if they want," Pederson said.

The agency will gather ideas from the community, develop criteria and then will return to present the scenarios to the public and ask for feedback. Finally, the scenarios will be merged into one overall recommendation.

Financial woes

This study, a collaborative effort involving all levels of government and the public, also differs from traditional studies in that "it's unconstrained by finances," Pederson noted.

The agency wants to look at actual needs, "not just what we think we can afford."

This might seem unusual with the current economic climate, which is also taking its toll on ADOT. The agency gets some of its funding through a fixed .18-cent flat gasoline tax which has not been raised since it was first implemented in 1991.

"The Legislature hasn't seen fit to raise taxes. I think when they go into office, they sign an oath in blood, 'I won't raise taxes'," Pederson joked.

The TIME initiative, which would have raised the gasoline tax by 1 percent, did not make it on the ballot.

Another funding source comes from vehicle licenses, which have seen a "significant reduction" in the last eight to nine years, he said.

Some politicians are pushing to eliminate gasoline as an energy source, which would theoretically wipe out the gasoline tax.

"They're pushing for alternative fuels, people are driving less, cars are more fuel efficient," Pederson said, adding that both presidential candidates are also proposing a 30 percent reduction in gasoline use over the next few years.

Fuel costs have risen dramatically and transportation contributes to 35-45 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions, according to ADOT, so these changes are great for taxpayers' pocketbooks and the environment, but it also translates to less funding for the agency.

"The funding methods are not working anymore. We really need to take a hard look at financing methods," Pederson said.

In the meantime, he added, construction costs have risen 50 to 60 percent over the last five years and ADOT is expected to continue building roads and maintaining infrastructure at the same level.

"People will continue to move to Arizona," he said, noting that all growth projections have thus far been underestimated.

More people equal more developments, more roads and more traffic.

"New roads are really, really expensive," Pederson said.

As an example, he cites a proposed new route through Payson that would alleviate congestion at state routes 260 and 87, especially on weekends, but the new road would cost hundreds of billions of dollars.

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Pederson brings out another problem related to growth and development.

"People need to understand that development decisions are totally separate from infrastructure decisions. Counties and councils make site plan decisions. ADOT has nothing to do with that," he said.

He points to Anthem as an example. "They built the development and paid for one traffic interchange. Now ADOT is spending all this money to widen I-10. ADOT was left holding the bag," Pederson said.

The Governor's Smart Growth Initiative seeks to tie those decisions together, he said. However, it's proving to be "very controversial" as people are afraid it would infringe on property rights. Even if growth stopped, ADOT still needs to maintain existing infrastructure, which is all it might be able to do in a few years.

"We're projecting that by 2015, if everything stays the same, in the rural areas (outside of Pima and Maricopa counties), we'll only have enough to maintain what have - no new bridges or roads," Pederson said.

Maricopa County has a half-cent sales tax which will help fund projects in that urban areas. Rural counties could implement such a sales tax, but those areas don't have the necessary level of commerce to raise enough funds.

"It would help, but it wouldn't be anywhere close to what we need," Pederson said.

The good news

The good news is that the existing infrastructure in Arizona is in "pretty good shape." After the bridge collapse in Minnesota, more emphasis was placed on inspecting bridges and highways.

"We came out somewhere at the top," Pederson said.

He attributed it to Arizona's mild climate and the fairly recent age of bridges.

But, he said, the situation could be different in 2030 or 2050. That's why this study is maintaining a long-range focus. The objectives are to come up with ideas to enhance connectivity among regions and identify needs and potential improvements to state highways (new and existing), regional facilities, transit, rail and major local streets.

Also, "through this framework study we're trying to elevate the awareness of people," Pederson said.

For more information on the study, visit www.bqaz.gov.

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