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Guest Commentary: Everyone has important stake in Arizona's transportation future

By Victor Mendez

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For most of us transportation is a personal decision. We drive or we bike or we walk. We get behind the wheel or we prefer to let somebody else ferry us to our destination.

Transportation's impact on our daily lives is pervasive. It dictates a community's ability to sustain itself economically. A good, multimodal system of roads, transit and rail ensures prosperity and adds to a community's quality of life.

Everyone who has traveled through the rural reaches of Arizona can point to pressure points in our network of state roads. It's the hard reality of living and working in one of the fastest growing states in the nation, one that becomes more urbanized each year. Our communities will recover from these economic times and our needs have not gone away.

Interstate 17 heading to Flagstaff and the high country can turn into a parking lot at a moment's notice. Explosive growth in the Prescott area has clogged roadways in and out of the region, and growth estimates show no signs of slack: 1 million people by 2050 is a figure difficult to grasp.

Is the solution to widen I-17 to six lanes, turn State Route 89 north of Wickenburg to Prescott into a parkway or freeway and have it loop around Prescott, or is it to construct a commuter rail line from Tucson to Phoenix to Prescott to move great numbers of people at high speed and to serve as an alternative to I-17?

To facilitate east-west traffic flows, is widening I-40 to six lanes in the cards? Or bypasses around Flagstaff on both the east and west sides? Should US 89 between Flagstaff and Lake Powell be widened to accommodate those houseboats that nobody likes to be behind?

Transit plays an essential role in any efficient transportation system. Native Americans need a way to get from reservation lands to services in Flagstaff. Circulator systems between Sedona, Prescott and the Verde Valley would have the added benefit of weaning people from high fuel prices and help the environment by the reduction of green house gases.

These are just a few of the possible scenarios under consideration to improve the state's transportation infrastructure from 2030 to 2050.

That is why the Arizona Department of Transportation wants your input. We want to hear what you have to say about our transportation future - the one that will affect your children, your grandchildren and future generations. It is the next step in a collaborative process that began in January with Gov. Janet Napolitano's executive order to ADOT to examine the status of the state's roadway system and to come up with solutions, mindful of Smart Growth principles and mechanisms to reduce green house gases.

In November, ADOT is hosting a series of important workshops. To facilitate this, rural Arizona has been divided into four regions. In the Northern region, which takes in Coconino, Yavapai and portions of Navajo and Apache counties, we want to present different plans, the result of a year-long collaborative process involving local jurisdictions, Native American communities, stakeholders and interested citizens. For a list of workshop

dates, times and locations in the Northern region, please visit the Building a Quality Arizona Web site, www.bqaz.gov.

Your valued input will help us evaluate and reshape the plans under consideration in the coming months, taking into account their integration with smart land use policies, sustainable development, environmental enhancement, economic benefits, safety and cost-effectiveness.

No price tags are pinned to any of the different ideas, on purpose. This is a visioning exercise, a determination of our transportation needs far into the future - until 2050. In time, a separate cost analysis will be performed to come up with ideas on how to pay for some of these projects. Obviously, there will have to be new sources of revenue. If there are not, ADOT faces the grim prospect of becoming an agency that can only maintain its transportation system, a situation that would undermine Arizona's efforts to be competitive in the global economy and to enhance our quality of life.

If 2050 seems like a long way into the future, it is. While the time line is long, it is essential that we as a planning agency look to the future, determine our needs and consider viable solutions to improve our system.

There is no argument whether Arizona will continue to grow. Our population is about 6 million today and projections place it as high as 15 million in 2050.

Congestion is a sign of the times. In 2005, the average speed on all of our roads was almost 46 miles per hour. Modeling shows that by 2050, the average speed will drop by more than 50 percent, to a projected 21 mph. Virtually every road in Arizona, if nothing is done, would be congested.

That's unacceptable, and that's why to do nothing about our vast roadway system is not an option.

Help us shape the future. Please join us at the workshop nearest to your community and contribute your ideas. This is a defining moment for us, for you and for future generations. Your participation will be the key to forging a successful transportation plan for your community that meets the needs of today and tomorrow.

Arizona's ability to maintain its competitiveness, enhance its quality of life and leave a smarter transportation system for the future depends upon this collaborative process. You are a vital part of this effort, and we look forward to your participation.

Victor Mendez is the director of the [Arizona Department of Transportation](#).

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