

News

Trains, bikes and buses on local list

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SIERRA VISTA — It would be nice to take a light-rail train to Tucson, then rent an electric car to get around the city, said Joan Murphy, one of the participants at a community meeting on the future of regional transportation.

About two dozen residents from across the Cochise and Santa Cruz region saw more public transit, light-rail, walking, biking and other alternative transportation as an important part of future transportation.

The Arizona Department of Transportation is gathering comments for a long-range transportation plan.

According to projections, Arizona's population is expected to more than double, reaching 15 million people in 2050, said Laurel Parker of AECOM, an engineering consulting firm working on the plan.

Population growth and increased traffic are expected to cause severe traffic congestion across the state, including the local highway systems, according to the projections.

Traveling from Safford to Sierra Vista now takes about two hours. In 2050, they predict the same trip could take more than six hours without transportation improvements.

Aaron Iverson, of URS engineering consultant firm, presented three scenarios for participants to comment on.

In Scenario A, "we'll continue to drive and get around like we do today," Iverson said. Personal vehicles would remain the major mode of transportation and highway widenings would be needed, including widening Highway 90 from Sierra Vista to the Interstate 10, and I-10 from Benson to Tucson to six lanes.

Scenario B assumes a "fundamental shift" in the way people travel, Iverson said. There would be more investment in transit projects like freight rail, regional bus service, local transit and intercity rail services.

Scenario C presented a mix of the other scenarios, he said. Highway widenings would still be a major component, as would smart growth, creating opportunities for more walking and biking within communities and enhanced bus services.

Ignacio Blanco, transit supervisor for the city of Sierra Vista, presented reactions from the group he discussed the scenarios with.

Their group liked the ideas in Scenario B and were concerned about highway widenings as a solution, using the Southern California and Phoenix freeway systems as an examples.

“By the time they’re done, they are already congested again,” Blanco said.

Investing more in public transportation will require teaching younger generations not too afraid of it, but it’s something Blanco believes can be done.

Murphy said she was reassured that Scenario A didn’t seem to be the preferred model at the meeting.

A mix of elements from the second and third scenarios were more what their group had in mind, including a north-south rail connection between Sierra Vista, Tucson and Phoenix.

Rose Mandell favored the third scenario’s emphasis on growth that will allow people to live within walking distance of grocery stores and doctor’s offices.

She sees freight rail as a necessity to maintain roads.

“We can’t keep trucking.”

Bowie resident Nancy Jean Welker said diversifying transportation options is a smart way for statewide transportation to grow.

“So you don’t overload any one part,” she said.

Jacqueline O’Connor said she plans to think more about the scenarios before submitting her comments, but she found the scenarios to be thought-provoking. She sees “smaller, more efficient vehicles” as a component of future transportation.

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Maps of the three scenarios for the Cochise and Santa Cruz focus area are available at the Building a Quality Arizona Web site, www.bqaz.gov. Click on the Regional Focus “Eastern Arizona” link and select “Project Outreach” to locate the maps. Comments can be submitted by Dec. 4 on the Web site, mailed to 2540 N. Tucson Blvd., AZ 85716, faxed to (520) 327-4687, or e-mailed to angie@gordleydesign.com.

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