

Residents put transit at top of ADOT meeting

By Denise Holley

People who came to a community workshop on transportation Wednesday in Nogales didn't want to talk about cars and highways. Instead, the 10 residents zeroed in on what Santa Cruz County doesn't have — a public-transit system.

The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) has invited the public to meetings around the state to help shape its long-range transportation plans for the year 2050, said spokeswoman Linda Ritter.

At two workshops at the Holiday Inn, ADOT offered three scenarios for participants: A, personal vehicle mobility; B, transit mobility; and C, focused growth. The evening group took "A" off the table at the start.

"Why can't we have an established transit system for Santa Cruz County with specific times?" asked Lourdes Mendez of Rio Rico. She chairs the Community Networking Team, a group of service providers in the county.

This touched off a lively discussion about the old school buses that line up on Terrace Avenue to take passengers north to shopping areas.

Those north-south routes don't take people to the hospital, the mission or the food bank and there's no set schedule, said Barbara Ann "Bobbie" Lundstrom, a member of the state transportation board.

Many people with disabilities can't board those school buses, but get rides in vans designated for them and elders, noted another participant.

What about those 15-passenger shuttles that run to Tucson or Phoenix? How safe are they? Why can't they depart on a schedule?

A couple of years ago, Nogales could have applied for a federal grant to start a transit system, said Christopher Fleming, a former member of the city planning and zoning commission. But the application was not submitted.

"We really need a countywide system, so people can take the bus from Rio Rico to Nogales," said Marshall Magruder of Tubac.

Nancy Fleming, a retired teacher in Nogales, thought the buses should go farther north.

"People in Green Valley are always looking for labor," she said. "Young people are willing to go to Green Valley for \$10 an hour."

Other factors determine the need for transportation, said James Zumpf, an ADOT planning supervisor. "We have to start looking at land use."

Magruder noted that the county Comprehensive Plan calls for urban growth in the south, suburbs in the middle and a rural environment in the north.

“You can affect land use by putting in transit,” suggested Christopher Fleming.

Nancy Fleming asked why residents couldn’t lobby for passenger rail service from Nogales to Tucson and Phoenix.

“Transportation is the outcome of demographics,” she said.

Take these ideas to your city council, suggested Laurel Parker of AECOM, a consultant for ADOT.
“I think we have the makings of a (transportation) commission in this room.”

About 10 residents attended the afternoon dialogue, Ritter said. “We heard similar statements about the different needs in the county.”

All these ideas will go into a statewide plan by next spring, Parker said. “We’ll be back.”

ADOT will post the results of its community workshops on the Web site www.bqaz.gov.