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Arizona needs radical transit overhaul, leaders say

by **Gary Nelson** - Sept. 9, 2009 02:42 PM
The Arizona Republic

Arizona's economy and quality of life will suffer if the state fails to radically change its planning and funding for transportation, a group of community and political leaders said Wednesday in Mesa.

While only about 25 people attended, the morning session at Mesa Community College represented the thinking of a much broader group that met last spring in Tucson to brainstorm a way out of present and future gridlock.

More such meetings are planned around the state, including two in the Valley. They're all under the auspices of Arizona [Town Hall](#), a private group that has helped frame public policy discussions for nearly 50 years.

"Arizona's participation in the global economy is going to suffer unless we make major improvements to our transportation infrastructure," said Jack Sellers, a Chandler city councilman who spent much of his working life as facilities manager for the General Motors Desert Proving Ground in Mesa, which recently relocated to Yuma.

"We need choices," Sellers said. "With our population doubling over the next several years, we simply can't build freeways fast enough to solve all our transportation problems."

Mike Normand, representing the Arizona Department of Transportation, said that agency recognizes the need to diversify Arizona's transit [systems](#). "We're moving beyond just designing and building roads," he said.

But Sellers and others said ADOT can't plan a statewide, multimodal transit system all by itself. Rather, he said, Arizona needs "an ongoing statewide oversight group to plan for our future transportation needs." It would include [governments](#) from across the state, including Indian tribes, as well as private-sector representatives.

"I personally think this is critical," he said.

No amount of planning, however, will mean anything if there's no money to pay for what's planned. The group in Mesa agreed with findings from the Town Hall meeting in Tucson last April that the way Arizona pays for transit is woefully outdated and inadequate.

Among the recommendations:

- Increase the state tax on gasoline and diesel fuel, currently 18 cents a gallon - a rate that has not changed since 1991.
- Eventually change from fuel taxes to some sort of levy based on vehicle miles traveled.

- Explore toll roads.
- Prohibit the Legislature from "sweeping" dedicated transportation money into the general fund.
- Pursue federal money more aggressively.

Even beyond better planning and funding, however, the Town Hall participants said Arizona must get a grip on land-use and other policy decisions that can aggravate transportation problems.

Mesa City Councilman Dave Richins works for the Sonoran Institute, a nonprofit that advocates better land-use planning in the American West, as that group's Sun Corridor policy director. The Sun Corridor is the name given the emerging megapolitan area that is expected someday to stretch from Prescott to Nogales.

"I have a great respect for private property rights," Richins said. "But also I have to look at the broader picture."

That could include, according to one Town Hall recommendation, overt efforts to discourage people from buying homes in fringe areas just because they can get cheaper [mortgages](#) there. Another possible step: Requiring new developments to have adequate transportation links, just as developers are expected to prove they have enough water to sustain their projects for at least a century.

Roc Arnett, president of the East Valley [Partnership](#), said Arizona needs to think big for the future.

He said Arizona has benefited from past "legacy projects" such as the Salt River Project and Central Arizona Project, which ensured [water supplies](#).

He suggested the next such project should be a massive effort to move people and goods north-south through the Sun Corridor. That would require new routes through the far east and west sides of the Phoenix area, expansion of Interstates 10 and 17, and a commuter rail line.

Federal help, he said, will be needed to help cover the untold billions of dollars in costs.

But he said Arizona can't afford to wait.

"It takes 25 years to build a freeway," he said. "The big picture takes a long time to put in place and we've got to plan for it."