



Published: 04.19.2009

## Arizona Town Hall opens tonight

**By Andrea Kelly**

*ARIZONA DAILY STAR*

A mass meeting with private businesses, government officials and environmental interests from throughout the state is coming to Tucson this week to talk about the future of transportation in Arizona.

The Arizona Town Hall on transportation begins tonight with presentations, but the nitty-gritty meetings about transportation planning and funding begin Monday morning. These include the current and future roles of transportation in our daily lives, how outsiders see transportation in Arizona, transit considerations, and the difference between rural and urban transportation needs.

More than 120 people are scheduled to gather in small sessions Monday and Tuesday to discuss questions about the future of transportation in the state. A draft report will be presented to the group for its comment Wednesday. The event, to be held at the Doubletree Hotel across from Reid Park, is not open to the public; it is by invitation only.

Between the discussion sessions, speakers including Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, former U.S. Transportation Secretary and former Arizona Department of Transportation director Mary Peters and several people involved in the Canamex corridor of trade involving Canada, Mexico and the U.S. are scheduled to address the group.

"Transportation infrastructure and finance is something that's very important to all of our cities and towns," said Tom Belshe, deputy director of the League of Arizona Cities and Towns, who is attending the town hall.

"What I expect the group to accomplish is to have a dialogue about it to see where challenges are, to see where there's some common ground. Transportation infrastructure is really, really difficult to finance and do in a way everyone can agree on," he said.

He's particularly interested in participating in the discussions about transportation funding, especially given the state budget and the concern from some communities that local transportation funding will be diverted to other areas in the state budget, Belshe said.

This is the first Arizona Town Hall that Belshe will attend, though it's the 94th held. Other recent topics have included housing, education, land use and planning, and health care. Each three-day meeting session results in a report with recommendations on the topic.

Transportation planning discussions will be important to Tom Collazo, associate state director of The Nature Conservancy.

The Nature Conservancy has been working with the Arizona Department of Transportation on analyzing the "natural infrastructure" areas in the state, or those that are critical wildlife habitats, or areas that animals use to travel between protected lands, said Collazo, who is attending the town hall.

"How can transportation planning and design protect the natural infrastructure, wildlife habitats, movement areas, critical waterways?" Collazo asked.

He also hopes the group talks about urban footprints and planning for growth in a way to minimize impact on the natural areas, he said.

"What policies should Arizona promote and adopt to reduce our carbon emissions? Climate change is a concern to all of us," he said.

The panel discussions will also include questions on how people make transportation decisions in their daily lives, how to meet the state's transportation needs without new funding sources, what transit can do for the

state, and how urban versus rural transportation needs are met.

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