



Rural Transportation

A Publication of RPO America, a Program Affiliate of NADO, and the NADO Research Foundation's Center for Transportation Advancement and Regional Development

March 11, 2009

New Mexico's Regional Councils Tackle Sustainable Transportation

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In August 2008, the New Mexico Association of Regional Councils (NewMARC) worked with the New Mexico Department of Transportation, New Mexico First and other partners to host a statewide Town Hall meeting to discuss pressing transportation issues. Called "Sustainable Transportation: Paying Our Way From Here to There," the event attracted more than 150 residents from 35 communities and 20 counties. Participants included policymakers, community leaders, business owners and citizens especially interested in state transportation issues.

The goal of the Town Hall was to increase public awareness of New Mexico's transportation needs and develop tangible solutions to the system's funding deficit. At the time of the gathering, federal, state and local investments covered less than 40 percent of actual transportation needs. Population growth, decreased federal spending and rising raw material costs further aggravate the funding gap. As financial resources have become depleted, 13 percent of state highways and 15 percent of bridges remained in poor condition.

"Many planners, bureaucrats, consultants and engineers are acutely aware of the crisis in transportation funding—a crisis whose beginnings pre-dated the collapse of the I-35 W bridge in Minnesota in August 2007 and the drying up of the Highway Trust Fund," says Patty Lundstrom, a state representative who is also executive director of the Northwest New Mexico Council of Governments. "But legislators were elected by the citizens of the state and are responsive to their concerns and priorities. So a concerted effort is needed to get the word out to a broader public on this crisis, and to get them involved in the dialogue. That's why we needed the Town Hall."

Prior to the event, each participant reviewed a background report that outlined the transportation budget shortfall and possible solutions to the problem. During the gathering, presentations covered issues at the federal and state levels to provide attendees with a better understanding of New Mexico's situation. Participants also met in small groups each day to discuss funding issues, draw conclusions and create recommendations for state and local leaders.

Collectively, Town Hall participants achieved consensus on eleven of fourteen proposed recommendations. The approved recommendations included having the governor and state legislature develop a comprehensive plan for implementing transportation priorities; educating the public on the costs and benefits of sustainable transportation; creating state and local government partnerships for future developments; enabling public/private partnerships; spending transportation-related revenues on transportation needs; redirecting taxes from transportation projects to the state road fund; redirecting the current three percent motor vehicle excise tax from the general to the state road fund; establishing a state transit fund financed by a one percent increase in the motor vehicle excise tax; indexing taxes to account

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[Manage Your Subscription](#) for inflation; establishing a permanent transportation fund and continuing to study funding options. Three additional recommendations were discussed but did not achieve consensus, including allowing a one-time allocation of up to \$1 billion from the permanent fund to cover transportation costs, legislating 10-year bonds and creating a general planning office.

Since the Town Hall, 20 attendees are presently serving on an implementation team, whose purpose is to advance the 11 recommendations with state and local leaders. The team's primary focus is supporting relevant legislation within the New Mexico House and Senate. The implementation team also partnered with New Mexico First to co-host a breakfast for legislators during "Transportation Day at the Legislature." Held in late January 2009, the team's private sector representatives led a series of presentations regarding the importance of transportation infrastructure to New Mexico's economy and quality of life. In addition, the state's rural transportation planning organizations (RPOs), which are housed within the seven councils of governments (COGs), have facilitated presentations to local Chambers of Commerce to further private sector support for legislative initiatives.

In all, the Town Hall increased public awareness of the urgency surrounding New Mexico's transportation funding deficit. The state's COGs played a key role in helping create this awareness. COG staff sought the partnerships necessary to host the event and served on the planning team. COG representatives supported the implementation process by attending interim committee meetings initiated by Lundstrom to draft and discuss transportation bills. Written for potential introduction in the current legislative session, many of these bills find direct ties to the Town Hall recommendations.

"Transportation just hasn't risen up as a high-profile priority in most legislative sessions, and because of its unique funding streams, it isn't a major player within the budget of the State's General Fund," Lundstrom notes. But with luck, the bills currently being drafted and introduced will help change New Mexico's transportation funding structure. Thanks to the vision of NewMARC and its partners, New Mexico now has a number of viable solutions to address the funding issues and, with public support, to develop a sustainable transportation system.

For more information, read the final report of the Town Hall results at <http://66.132.139.69/uploads/nmtownhall.pdf>.

This material is based in part upon work supported by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) under Agreement No. DTFH61-06-H-00029. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of FHWA.



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