

By ROBERT PIERCE • Daily Leader The past two Comprehensive Transportation Plans have produced about 114,000 to 118,00 jobs and \$1.5 billion in increased wages.

Every dollar invested in the programs had a \$3 impact on statewide economy, millions in increased sales and income taxes, significant local job expansion plus retail and industrial growth.

When an industry or large business considers expanding or building in a new location, they frequently eliminate regions which do not have a four-lane highway. "They depend on good transportation infrastructure for their deliveries in and out," said Jack Taylor, executive director for the Southwest Passage Initiative for Regional and Interstate Transportation in a letter to the Kansas Senate Transportation Committee. "A new multi-year transportation plan would allow more four-lane highways to be built in rural areas so that we can compete with others for our economic future."

Taylor was updating the status of SPIRIT activities Monday evening at the Seward County Commission meeting. He explained he recently attended the Transportation and Infrastructure Convention in Washington, D.C., and said the main theme of the convention was high speed rail to move people and goods between metropolitan areas to cut down on congestion and carbon output.

"The other big item was funding large projects in metropolitan areas to make it easier for people to get around in their automobiles and cut down on congestion and making it safer," he said. "There was a lot of talk too about the future movement of freight by rail, but they all agreed that's going to take millions and millions of dollars to make that happen."

Taylor said one congressman estimated a five to six-year extension of a recently expired highway bill might be coming up with the Senate and gaining popularity with their leadership. He said the Secretary of Transportation spoke frequently about high speed rail and about designating a lot of money for projects in metropolitan areas.

"He stated safety was the No. 1 priority of the department, touting the successes of the 'Click It or Ticket,' and the '08 drunk driving initiatives," he said. "It came time for questions, and guess who stood up. I had heard about all I wanted to hear about high speed rail and large amounts of money for metropolitan areas with no concern for the central part of the United States, where most of it is rural."

Taylor discussed the high traffic volume of U.S.-54 with the secretary, who initially dismissed Taylor's thoughts, until the S.P.I.R.I.T. director caught up with him afterwards.

"I explained to him in a little more detail what I had originally asked," Taylor said. "I complemented him on trying to designate all this money for these other projects, but explained

to him again what we're going through."

Taylor then explained that Highway 54 is a high priority corridor designated on the U.S. highway system and was part of President Eisenhower's plan 55 years ago.

"Let's start working to complete what Ike started," he said. "Give us a little bit of help out here too. After I talked to him a little while, he either got tired of listening to me or he could see the light coming on."

Taylor said the secretary had been so deeply involved with metropolitan areas that he could not see the rural areas of the United States.

"He promised me he would really study the issue and get back to me," Taylor said. "That's only been three weeks ago. I haven't heard from him, but I'm waiting for a letter almost any day."

Taylor said at the state level, a new program has emerged from the Senate committee.

"Last week just before they left for the holiday, a \$8.2 billion multi-year plan for the next decade financed through new taxes, fees and bonding issues for the Department of Transportation," he said. "It'll include all modes of transportation including airlines."

Taylor said the Kansas legislature will begin debating the plan when it reconvenes on April 28.

"I think they'll come up with a plan," he said. "It may not be a 10-year plan. It may only be a six-year plan, but a lot of us have been working on a construction plan with priorities for several months."

Taylor will be in Topeka Wednesday to iron out more of the details.

"We're going to be pushing real hard for some additional mileage on Highway 54, hopefully, bringing it from Wichita all the way to Mullinville," he said. "That would be a huge benefit for all of Southwest Kansas. Our project that we're going to be pushing is from the east city limits of Liberal out east on Highway 54 hopefully across the Cimarron River bridge."

Taylor said construction is continuing on a 10-mile stretch of U.S. 54 near Cunningham.

"It'll be completed this year," he said. "With any luck at all, an additional 10 miles will be added to the end of that taking it to Kingman. Every 10-mile stretch we get completed on that thing helps."

Taylor said construction likewise is continuing in Oklahoma.

"Oklahoma still says they're going to have their portion of it completed to the state line out here in four more years," he said. "When they get that completed, people from Liberal are only going to have 20 miles of two-lane highway between here and Amarillo, Texas, encouraging our dollars to go to Texas rather than keeping them in Kansas. We need to be completing ours to

encourage people to go to Wichita, not to Amarillo.”