By EARL WATT • Daily Leader The Kansas Department of Transportation was in Liberal Thursday to discuss potential projects in the future and to get feedback from the community.

One of the comments from the KDOT staff was a line that was familiar with Southwest Kansas residents.

“We don’t make the decisions,” one of the engineers explained.

While U.S. Highway 54 has been scheduled to be a four-lane road since the Eisenhower Administration, more than 90 percent of the road remains two lanes between Wichita and Liberal. Four lanes extend west to Kingman, and some right of way and construction is under way to Pratt.

But that still leaves 120 miles of two-lane road, making Southwest Kansas the only quadrant in Kansas not to have a major four-lane highway.

Those who make highway funding decisions can be found in Topeka in the Kansas Legislature. They determine which projects will or will not get funded.

And Carl Holmes, who has fought for highways since he was elected to the House of Representatives said the issue comes down to one issue — the number of votes available in the Legislature.

Johnson and Sedgwick counties dominate the Legislature since most of the population in Kansas resides in those two locations. With a majority of numbers, much of the highway spending is centered in these areas.

And according to Holmes, the new census will lead to reapportionment in Kansas, which will likely mean fewer representatives for Western Kansas.

“We are required by the Constitution to reapportion every 10 years,” Holmes said. “The Big First district will get bigger. We will probably lose a half to one state senator from Western Kansas, plus one to three state house members from Western Kansas. Right now, there are more legislatures in the Kansas House from Johnson County than the entire western half of the state. Likewise, there are more in Sedgwick County than the western half of state.”

With fewer votes in western Kansas, fighting for funding becomes more and more difficult.

“I have major concerns with the transportation bill passed out of the state senate committee,” Holmes said. “It states that no more than 45 percent could be spent in one transportation district. You give 45 percent to Johnson and Douglas counties, and 45 percent to Sedgwick County, that means the rest of the state has 10 percent for highways.”

With the votes to back the legislation, the east could gobble up the highway funds, leaving

projects like Highway 54 to wait perhaps another half century.

“For the rest of us rural people, they guarantee us $6 million per county over the next 10 years,” Holmes said.

To put that in perspective, $6 million can provide abut 20 mills of millwork and overlay on an existing road. Those interested in four lanes could not purchase three miles of road with $6 million.

To get favorable legislation takes votes, something that comes up short for Western Kansans.

With apportionment looming, Liberal has seen growth over the past 10 years as has Dodge City. Due to a beef plant explosion in Garden City in the past decade, Garden City may have slightly dropped in numbers.

But Meade, Clark, Morton and Stanton counties will decrease.

“You average those out and we haven’t grown,” Holmes said. “When you look at south central, from Comanche County to the turnpike, and clear across northern Kansas, we have had high out-migration. There is a big loss area from Clark County to Kingman and from the state line to Manhattan and coming down four or five counties. Rural areas will see large decreases.”

That population shift will have more of an effect than just highway funding.

“Everyone talked great about bioscience authority,” Holmes said. “We took a portion of the income tax, that would go into the bioscience authority. Almost all the money is spent in Manhattan east to Johnson. I don’t know of any dollars coming to western Kansas, but we have labs contributing to it. We pay in on it through income tax increases that took place, but the money is all being channeled to the Manhattan, Lawrence, KC area. It’s not getting back to rural areas.”

The view of the western half of the state from the more populated east is not necessarily to invest in community infrastructure and population development.

“Our current wildlife and parks secretary (former governor Mike Hayden) would like to see us go back to buffalo commons out here,” Holmes said. “I’ve heard that from eastern legislators.”

To defend the western Kansas economy in the state legislature takes votes, and it also takes influential leaders, according to Holmes.

But of all the leadership roles in the House and Senate, only Hugoton’s Steve Morris holds a leadership position.

“We try to influence best we can, but what will happen is as senior legislators leave from western Kansans, they will be replaced with eastern Kansas legislators. We are losing influence that way, too.”