

By LAUREN VINCENT • Daily Leader Nearly 50 area Chamber of Commerce members, Department of Transportation personnel, and concerned citizens gathered Thursday morning at the Liberal Chamber of Commerce to discuss House Bill 2650, previously the T-WORKS bill.

A short video was presented at the beginning of the meeting explaining that budget cuts are in turn forcing a cut in road maintenance across the state. In 2010, Kansas is spending less on construction than it did in the 1970s. In the video, Deb Miller, KDOT Secretary, emphasized the need for a revenue increase. “No other state in our nation can rival the improvements we’ve made to our infrastructure in the last 20 years, that’s why it frustrates me to see this investment lost,” said Miller. “We need a revenue increase to preserve the investment that Kansans have made in their infrastructure and to spur economic development across the state.”

The video also noted a recent statewide poll has shown that 72 percent of Kansans are opposed to reducing highway maintenance to fill the state’s budget gap. The decrease in maintenance also decreases road safety and a vast number of jobs.

Kansas T-LINK has been looking into a variety of transit needs for the entire state over a period of 10 years and has estimated a needed budget of \$11.5 billion. To merely maintain roads at their current state a figure of \$6.4 billion was suggested. The existing revenue, projected out over 10 years, totals \$5.5 billion, leaving Kansas \$850 million short.

“So when you look forward, at the bill, and what it proposes is new revenue beginning in 2013 adding up to about \$1.7 billion,” said Kyle Schneweis, KDOT’s Chief of Governmental Affairs. “One of the problems, or one of the challenges is, there is still a hole there at the beginning of about \$250 million and so one of the ideas in the bill is how can we not only look forward to new revenue in the future but fill this \$250 million dollar gap in the beginning. And that’s where the bonding comes in. There’s about \$1.7 billion dollars in bonding in the bill.”

HB 2650 suggests increases in car registration, truck registration, state sales tax deposits and \$1.7 billion in bonds issued.

“So we would use that to cover the first three years before the new revenue started,” Schneweis continued. “Now one of the questions is: ‘Should we be using debt to finance preservation work?’ And I think we’ve been real careful to be sure that the work we use that bonding money for would be the heavy preservation projects that last 30, 40, 50 years; that will long outlive the payments.”

Executive director of Economic Lifelines Pat Hurley was also at the meeting to share his support for the bill. He started by explaining the background of Economic Lifelines.

“The purpose of Lifeline is to provide the local community input and support so that your legislators understand and hear from you how important transportation improvement and infrastructure are to the development and growth of your area in all parts of the state and that’s the purpose that we serve,” Hurley said.

“All 105 county officials have taken the time to endorse formal resolutions, in addition 106 city officials are doing exactly the same thing,” Hurley continued. “And they don’t do that in a vacuum, they do that by involving all of the community, and certainly the business community, they have identified what they believe their critical needs are in infrastructure in order for them to grow, stabilize or in some cases even to survive. Those are all documented as formal resolutions written by local officials. So that’s the involvement. That’s the expression of support and need that we have going into this discussion of the legislature.”

With the current budget only about 50 percent of bare minimum upkeep will be able to be funded. The resolutions gathered from county and city officials do not mention upkeep among their critical needs. Maintenance certainly is a critical need however officials expect the basic upkeep to be a given. The point is KDOT will not be able to maintain roads in the condition they are now, much less begin on improvements, unless something is done about the current budget situation.

“We think there is a better alternative, that is to invest in what is the model, taken from the last 20 years, of what will in fact jumpstart the economy, create hundreds of thousands of jobs and create revenue coming back into the general fund,” Hurley said. “And, that would be to enact the HB 2650.”

To conclude the presentation Hurley gave a quick summary of his intentions.

“What we are trying to do is make a case to the legislature that in fact there is a solution and that is a new transportation program that will do more to help get out of this deficit situation than anything else they can possibly consider.”