



Transit Officials View Reno Transportation System

By [John T. Anderson](#)

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ROGERS -- Fuel taxes, regional impact fees and sales tax revenue combine to power a Nevada regional transportation group studied by Northwest Arkansas officials.

The regional transportation commission that serves Reno, Nev., and Washoe County intrigues Northwest Arkansas because it could serve as a pattern for raising local money for transit and highway projects.

Legislation before Arkansas lawmakers would allow creation of local tax districts known as regional mobility authorities.

Jeff Hawkins, director of the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission, was one of four local officials to make the trip. He said the accomplishments of the Nevada group are impressive. Highway building, transit and planning are handled by the Nevada commission.

"It was time well-spent," Hawkins said. "If the legislation passes here, I would like to have (Nevada officials) come here and discuss the issues."

Hawkins, Madison County Judge Wes Fowler, Springdale Mayor Jerre Van Hoose and Phil Pumphrey, executive director of Ozark Regional Transit, made the trip. They spent last Thursday and Friday in the Reno area.

Pumphrey said Northwest Arkansas will buy into mobility authorities eventually.

"Because eventually people will say 'I don't want to waste my time in (traffic),' " Pumphrey said. The most telling aspect of the Nevada operation is sustained public support, he said.

The operation there began in 1979 and has grown in scope. In 1994, county commissioners voted to bump the gasoline tax from 4 cents to 9 cents per gallon. That tax now stands at 9.8 cents because it floats in relation to inflation. The Nevada group has an annual budget of \$168 million. Approximately 350,000 people are served.

"People (in Washoe County) have said, 'We like this idea. We want you to move forward,'" Pumphrey said. "That is where I would like to see us go ... then go back to voters and say, 'This is what we have done and this is where we are going.'"

A five-member board composed of two representatives from Reno, two from Washoe County and one from the Washoe County city of Sparks oversees the operation. Hawkins said the makeup of Washoe County should be considered before Arkansas seeks to build a similar coalition.

"It is much easier to achieve consensus with three local governments, rather than (many)," Hawkins said. "They have established that jurisdiction and trust with those three (entities) involved."

Another issue to be considered is location. If mobility authorities come to pass in Arkansas, sales taxes or fuel taxes would likely be targeted. But Oklahoma and Missouri already have lower fuel taxes than Arkansas and sales taxes are relatively high in Northwest Arkansas.

"I think where we are situated in the state makes (fuel tax revenue) a much less attractive revenue source," Hawkins said.

Hawkins also believes mobility authorities may have their place in Arkansas but he said residents may not be ready for self-taxation yet.

"Unfortunately," Hawkins said, "it is human nature that things have to get worse before they get better sometimes."