



Reno Trip Could Aid NWA Transportation Improvements

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ROGERS -- A handful of Northwest Arkansas officials will travel to Reno, Nev., on March 3 to learn about a transportation commission there that handles public transit, highway building and planning.

What is learned there could be applicable to Arkansas in the near future if lawmakers approve proposed legislation that would allow creation of similar transportation districts.

"The Nevada model probably comes closest to matching our needs," said Jeff Hawkins, director of the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission. "You are going to see changes in the manner and method that transportation needs are met. It's just gotta happen."

Hawkins, Madison County Judge Wes Fowler, Washington County Judge Jerry Hunton, Springdale Mayor Jerre Van Hoose and Phil Pumphrey, executive director of Ozark Regional Transit, plan to make the two-day Reno trip.

The regional transportation commission that serves Washoe County, Nev., was established in 1979. A 9.8 cent per gallon gasoline tax that rises with inflation provides the funding linchpin. But impact fees and sales taxes also feed the transportation group that serves about 350,000 people.

The entity enjoys a relationship with the state that may seem odd to Northwest Arkansas visitors. For instance, the group recently took on a \$35 million intersection project that had been state-run, according to Gregory Krause, executive director for the commission.

"We are doing the work that the state would have traditionally done," Krause said Thursday in a telephone interview. "It is a case where the partnership is becoming more extensive."

Several Northwest Arkansas officials have complained in recent months that this area of the state does not receive the attention it deserves.

Last year, the Nevada commission rehabilitated or reconstructed more than 28 miles of roads and provided 40 traffic analyses for public and private entities. Krause said the commission charges private entities for such work.

Krause's group is a creation that combines state and county government. Nevada state law provided the vehicle by which transportation planning, highway building and transit could be combined under one roof. County commissioners largely control funding of the entity and can vote to increase the gasoline tax. For example, in 1994 commissioners voted to bump the gasoline tax from 4 cents to 9 cents.

By comparison, in Northwest Arkansas the state handles highway building, two separate transit companies provide transit services and the Northwest Arkansas Regional Planning Commission provides planning services for the region.

Jerry Hunton said his goal on the trip is to learn more about transit funding and how Reno bridged the gap between growth and transportation funding.

"You get outside their gaming area and they've got the same problems we've got," Hunton said.

Northwest Arkansas growth will demand some sort of local funding district soon, according to Pumphrey. Cities already are funding 50 percent of state highway projects in many cases.

"Local government probably won't be able to fund much more," Pumphrey said.

He would like to see Ozark Regional Transit operate 36 fixed routes in Northwest Arkansas. Currently, there is one fixed route, in Fayetteville. Such routes are daily and routine, as opposed to the more common paratransit routes that are in response to a request for specific point-to-point transit. Money is needed, according to Pumphrey, to bump up ridership and service. He currently operates on a \$2.2 million budget.

Legislation filed this week may fit into the plan. Senate Bill 427, filed by Sen. Tracy Steele, D-North Little Rock, would allow the creation of regional mobility authorities in Arkansas. Those authorities would have the power to issue bonds, acquire property, levy taxes and impose fees for highway building.

Whether voters are willing to tax themselves more to get better local highways is still a question.

"I've always said something like that is going to take broad support," Hawkins said.

Pumphrey has made it clear he believes the Ozark Regional Transit Board is well-positioned to morph into a mobility authority board for Northwest Arkansas.

"This board already deals with road issues through their positions with cities and counties," Pumphrey said. "And I think Ozark Regional Transit has proven it is fiscally conservative ... It is a good fit."

It would also make the board the most powerful entity in Northwest Arkansas, Pumphrey said.

"It would have the most impact on people's daily lives," he said.

A well-explained plan that details what can be done at what cost is the key to public support, according to Pumphrey. Highways, transit improvements, sidewalks and bicycle routes, as well as other related issues, all could be addressed with mobility authority funds, Pumphrey said.