

## **Area transportation needs face financial hurdle**

**BY LESLIE WIMMER**

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Funding will be the major hurdle for North Texas to begin a regionwide transportation overhaul.

Officials from area businesses, governments and community organizations gathered at the Fort Worth Sheraton on Dec. 11 to listen to speakers discuss economic development, transportation plans and funding challenges during the “Tracks to the Future: Rail and Economic Development in North Texas” event.

About 300 people attended the day-long event which was hosted by a number of area organizations. Speakers included State Sen. Wendy Davis; members of Fort Worth’s City Council; Mayor Mike Moncrief; representatives from the Fort Worth Transportation Authority; Dallas Area Rapid Transit; the Denton County Transportation Authority; the Texas Department of Transportation; the cities of San Antonio, Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Oklahoma City and Portland; and other area business and government leaders.

Vision North Texas Project Manager Karen Walz told the event’s crowd that the Dallas-Fort Worth region is expected to hit a population of 12 million by 2050.

“Think about what that means if we just keep doing what we’ve been doing and taking care of growth the way we have been,” she said.

Brian Leslie, managing director of transit-oriented development with the Dallas firm Prescott Realty Group, told attendees that transit-oriented developments, such as Mockingbird Station in Dallas, are destined to crop up along major public transit rail lines.

The developments often include a mixture of retail, dining, entertainment and living space, which Leslie said is popular with two age groups: Young adults and empty nesters. He added that without safe parking, transportation choices, retail options and varying price points, the developments will fail.

“If you don’t have the right parking in the right spot, your development will be unsuccessful,” he said. “It also has to be safe, well lit, accessible. If it’s not perceived to be safe, you’ll lose a lot of your buyers and tenants.”

But, in order for developments to grow, transportation systems to be in place first, and North Texas is facing an enormous funding challenge in building those systems, officials at the event said.

Vic Suhm, executive director of the Tarrant Regional Transportation Coalition, said North Texas needs to invest \$130 billion in its transportation system regionwide during the next 20 years to meet demand and population expectations.

“If we continue using the resources that are available today on an ongoing basis, we’ll be able to make about \$71 billion of that investment,” Suhm said. “We’ll be \$59 billion short. That’s about \$3 billion a year we’re short of investment capital we need to maintain and operate and expand our system to serve the growing population.”

Tom Shelton, a senior program manager with the North Central Texas Council of Governments, also spoke to attendees about Dallas-Fort Worth’s growing population.

The Dallas-Fort Worth region is the 12th largest metropolitan economy in the world, Shelton said, and the fourth largest metropolitan area in the United States.

While Dallas Area Rapid Transit has nearly 50 miles of light rail under construction now, Fort Worth and other areas of the Metroplex will need to kick start transit plans to create a regionwide transportation system, he said.

“Dallas-Fort Worth’s long commute patterns are conducive to commuter rail systems,” he said, adding that funding will be the region’s biggest challenge in creating systems.

Area transportation officials also discussed forward movement on plans and funding for a Fort Worth streetcar system, State Highway 161 Southwest Parkway, and the DFW Connector project.

The event’s keynote speaker, former Charlotte, N.C., Mayor Pat McCrory, told attendees about what he called the “unbelievable” economic development opportunities created when Charlotte reconstructed and built a citywide transit system including buses, street cars and light rail.

Fort Worth is “behind in transit,” McCrory said at the event. “It’s not for lack of effort, but you’re behind.”

McCrory added that without a transit system the city will see development slow and will begin lose business and residents to cities with transportation options. He also outlined the importance of creating partnerships with business and community members, and of tying transit into other aspects of city planning including education and land use plans.p