

Green Summit talks transit, alternative fuels, sustainability

FORT COLLINS -- Making Northern Colorado a greener, more environmentally friendly and sustainable environment depends on political action and personal choices, about 200 attendees of the 2008 Green Summit were told Thursday by speakers on several discussion panels.

Getting more people out of their personal vehicles and into public transit -- which would help alleviate the region's growing traffic congestion, air quality degradation and expensive road maintenance issues -- is one part of the puzzle, according to panelists who discussed the future of regional transit.

"Transit is absolutely a critical component not only today but in the future," said Rich Shannon, transit panel discussion moderator. Shannon said any effort to moderate the region's transportation dilemma would have to include both spending for roads and public transit.

"Where are we headed over the next 20 years in transit?" he said. "We need a plan that can grab the hearts, the minds and the wallets of Colorado citizens and taxpayers."

Kristy Duffy, a Windsor town board member and former chair of the North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization, said simply building more and wider roads is not the answer. "We need other options for people to get around," she said. "You can't pave your way out of congestion. That's been proven in Los Angeles."

Duffy suggested the region focus more on creating a Regional Transit District rather than a Regional Transportation Authority as has been attempted twice in the last five years. "The more cars we can get off the road, the better off we are," she said.

Bill Kaufman, a former state legislator from Loveland and vice-chair of the Colorado Transportation Commission, said it's becoming crucial for the region to consider new ideas for moving people -- possibly including linking into Denver's RTD system. "We need to look at how we can move masses of people within our region and how we can move masses of people to Denver," he said.

Kaufman said more attention needs to be paid to getting railroads to move away from the Front Range and to use that right-of-way for light rail, which he admitted would be a very expensive proposition.

"I'm a Republican, but at some point we're going to have to raise taxes," he said. "There's no other way around it if we're going to put these facilities in place."

Gary Thomas, who serves as chair of both the Loveland and Fort Collins transportation advisory boards, said the state and region are facing "a perfect storm" of factors putting greater emphasis on transportation issues than ever before. Thomas cited gas prices approaching \$4 a gallon, degrading air quality, roadway congestion and increasing cost of construction as reasons why solutions must be found sooner rather than later.

Thomas said some good things are happening, with a growing emphasis by developers on "transit-oriented development," in which developments are sited near transit stations and everything is within walking distance, and the planned development of the Mason Corridor in Fort Collins for a bus-rapid transit system.

Tim Johnson, former chair of the local chapter of the Sierra Club and a longtime community environmentalist and activist, said it was fitting during Earth Week to be looking at new transportation possibilities, including connecting with Denver's RTD system on Interstate 25 and U.S. Highway 85 and "more robust" intercity transit connections such as the planned Loveland-to-Greeley service planned for this summer.

Responding to a question about what individuals can do to improve the transportation

situation, Thomas suggested that people try riding the bus or using public transit.

"Get out one time and see if transit can work for you," he said. "It might be a little inconvenient at first but just try it."

Kaufman said as a former legislator, he knows that public pressure can do amazing things.

"Do not underestimate what you can do with politicians," he said. "If folks rise up, it does make a difference. These are major, major changes that have to be made in our society and it's going to take a lot of pressure on our politicians."

Other panels at the Green Summit included discussions of renewable energy, alternative fuels and transportation methods, LEED certification for energy-friendly construction and the politics and economics of sustainability with regard to green programs.

Mona Newton of the Governor's Energy Office told summit attendees that Gov. Bill Ritter is committed to his "New Energy Economy" agenda that stresses the development of solar and wind power and alternative fuels, including biofuels and biomass. Newton said the state is offering a variety of grants and partnerships with local governments and businesses to help further that agenda and make the state a leader in renewable energy.

During the lunch presentation, Seven Generations Office Park in east Fort Collins was acknowledged as receiving the first platinum LEED certification in Northern Colorado for its 56,000-square-foot office complex on Eastbrook Drive off Timberline Road. LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, and the platinum award is the highest that can be achieved.

This year's Green Summit, hosted by the *Northern Colorado Business Report* and held at the Hilton Fort Collins, was sponsored by the cities of Fort Collins and Greeley, Porter Industries, Public Service Credit Union, Waste-Not Recycling, Platte River Power Authority, North Front Range Metropolitan Planning Organization, Passfort and Northern Colorado Paper.