

# Economic alliance hosts transportation summit

By KATLYNN LANHAM | Posted: Sunday, September 18, 2011 2:00 am

**LAKE JACKSON** — Maintaining or building transportation infrastructure isn't a priority for most people until traffic starts to affect them, but solutions to the problems are years in the making, area transportation officials said.

Lack of funding, lack of support and a growing need for proper transportation infrastructure — including roads, bridges, airports, waterways and railroads — were topics Wednesday at the Brazoria County Transportation Infrastructure Summit hosted by the Economic Development Alliance for Brazoria County.

## NEED IS COMING

“We see a tsunami of freight coming into the state of Texas,” said Mike Wilson, Port Freeport director of trade development. There is projected to be a 226 percent increase in trucks leaving the Freeport and Houston ports by 2025, he said.

A 227 percent increase in rail freight is projected by that year, Wilson said.

“Even with growth, if projections hold true, we can't build ports, rails or roads fast enough to keep up,” Wilson said.

The funding and support for projects to support that increase in load is needed now, Wilson said. Port Freeport is working toward the needed improvements to accommodate the increase in port use.

“Transportation is important,” Wilson said. “This is our future.”

Joe Adams, vice president of public affairs for Union Pacific Railroad, and David Fleenor, assistant vice president of automotive marketing at Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Co., echoed Wilson's comments about growth coming to the area.

All signs point to more and more freight entering the country through Brazoria County, they said.

Another element of transportation is the Texas Gulf Coast Regional Airport. Sometimes overlooked, it's a well-used airport with planned improvements.

“People are coming to Brazoria County to do business through the airport,” said Jeff Bilyeu, Texas Gulf Coast Regional Airport manager.

Still, aviation has its own set of difficulties as regulations and unpredictable federal funds can make it difficult to plan improvements, he said.

## SHORT ON FUNDS

Texas had a tough budgeting process this biennium, said state Sen. Tommy Williams, R-The Woodlands. Williams chairs the Senate Transportation and Homeland Security Committee and was keynote speaker at the Transportation Infrastructure Summit.

Despite the struggles, the Legislature approved a budget for the Texas Department of Transportation that will include several road infrastructure projects and continued maintenance work.

“The real takeaway from last session is we got through this last session, but that’s all folks,” Williams said. “There is literally no money for road construction.”

When the Legislature meets again in two years, there will be no money for infrastructure improvements. There will be enough money from the state gas tax only to maintain the roads, he said.

Texas’ money issues are many, but the budget for transportation infrastructure has a unique problem.

“There are more cars on the road than ever, and the state is collecting less money in fuel tax,” Williams said.

While more fuel-efficient cars are an overall good thing, that means less money goes into the transportation department from the gas tax, he said. The tax hasn’t increased in 20 years and Williams doesn’t suggest legislators raise it. Instead, he favors a car registration tax that comes back to the district it came from, meaning larger districts — like the greater Houston area — see more of their money come back.

## **CONVINCING THE PUBLIC**

“The general public doesn’t understand what a problem we’re facing,” Williams said. In a March survey, 79 percent of those surveyed said roads are in great or good condition, he said.

Residents don’t see a problem and their legislative representatives reflect that attitude, he said. But it’s best officials start planning a solution before a problem becomes obvious, Williams said.

“Planning has become a whole lot more cumbersome than it has in the past,” said Mike Alford, interim district engineer for the Texas Department of Transportation.

To illustrate the point, several speakers talked about Highway 36. There has been talk about expanding the highway to four lanes for many years — by some calculations more than 40 — but there hasn’t been much progress.

County Judge E.J. “Joe” King talked about officials looking at expanding the road in the 1960s.

“My son will take my keys from me before I ever get to drive on 36,” he said to a room full of laughter.

Yet it's still on the plans as a four-lane highway for hurricane evacuations.

"We need participation from the public," Alford said. Too often the only people who come to a public hearing about an infrastructure project are those against it, he said.

Officials then are forced to work around the minority's issues while delaying what the majority wants, Alford said.

"This is a proper role of state government to provide infrastructure both for highways and waterways," Williams said.

Speakers asked people at the meeting to pass on their message to area residents.

"We're the ones that need to come together and make the effort," state Rep. Dennis Bonnen, R-Angleton, said in response to a question about educating the public.

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