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County transit system examined at forum

Greene County neighbors could contract services.

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A state law already on the books could pave the way for a countywide transit system in Greene County -- if voters approve, a state highway official said Monday.

There are mechanisms available, as well, that could let Greene County buses serve neighboring counties.

Those were among some of the ideas that emerged during Monday's Regional Transportation Forum, sponsored by Springfield-based Ozarks Transportation Organization.

About 100 city, county, state and business leaders attended the three-hour forum.

Steven Billings, administrator of transit for the Missouri Department of Transportation, detailed eight transit systems currently allowed by Missouri law.

He noted City Utilities faces some serious legal obstacles if it wanted to move its bus system to a regional transit system. But state law already allows first-class counties such as Greene County to develop a transit authority with a sales tax dedicated to support it.

"You would need a vote to establish it and a vote to tax it, countywide," Billings said.

Smaller counties that wanted to be part of the system could contract for transportation services with the Greene County Transit Authority, he said.

Greene County commissioner Harold Bengsch said he was open to the idea, if it was a collaborative effort among the groups that would benefit from the service.

He also wanted to see more information about how Kansas City set up its three public transit systems before considering a path for Greene County.

Kirk Juranas, MoDOT District 8 traffic engineer, talked about the highway department's top five priorities.

They included maintaining roads and bridges, building interstate truck-only lanes, rebuilding I-44 and I-70, tackling major projects and continuing MoDOT's cost-share program with local communities.

Those priorities will be a challenge because of dwindling highway dollars, he said.

Juranas said the state has identified \$31.3 billion in needed highway and bridge projects, but has only \$12.6 billion to do them.

That leaves a gap of \$18.7 billion. On an annual basis, MoDOT will have \$632 million to work

with.

"That puts us in maintenance-only mode," he said.

MoDOT gets 17 cents tax on each gallon of gasoline sold in Missouri.

If car makers make a bigger push toward electric-powered vehicles, Juranas said, that could significantly affect MoDOT's funding stream.

In the future, motorists might pay a fee based on their miles traveled instead of a fuel tax, Juranas said, noting cars soon may be equipped with GPS devices that track a motorist's mileage.

There currently is no such law in Missouri, however.

"The legislature would have to address that," he said.
