

Transportation Commission Chair David Lohman opened the discussion by saying “This whole idea of using the ACTs as part of our transportation efforts in the state is kind of an experiment in government. The (Transportation) Commission took on the challenge of trying to take an agency that has statewide responsibilities and state and federal standards to meet, and make it work in a way that would reflect regional priorities. That’s really the genesis of the Area Commission. My perception is that it seems to be working pretty well, but part of our purpose here is to get your impressions as to how well it’s working.”

SEACT representatives were very pleased to host the OTC in Grant County and had positive things to say to the Commission about how ODOT and SEACT are working together to improve the lives of eastern Oregon residents.

“When I first got onto the SEACT I thought ‘what the heck is this all about, is this just another phony government thing that’s going on where I have to spend time going to a meeting?,” said Grant County Commissioner and SEACT Co-Chair Boyd Britton. “I’ve dramatically changed. I enjoy going to the meetings. I’ve learned a lot and the communities have learned to work together.”

“Twenty years ago before this ACT concept we weren’t working together,” said engineering consultant Doug Ferguson. “This (the SEACT) has really brought us together. Things are changing and I think it’s a direct result of these ACTs and committees.”

Malheur County Judge Dan Joyce also thanked the Commission and others for SEACT support. “I think we have a really good working relationship with ODOT,” he said. “Thanks to Matt Garrett, Monte Grove, Tom Davis, Tom Strandberg and the staff, it’s great.”

“Our ODOT folks in the region do a fantastic job,” said Britton. “It’s a ‘what can we do to help’ attitude.”

SEACT members also talked about specific programs and projects they felt were helping their communities and benefiting travelers.

“The grants are so important,” said John Day City Manager Peggy Gray. “Without their help we wouldn’t be getting the improvements that we’ve gotten. The bicycle and pedestrian program is very important to us, too.” She went on to thank ODOT and expressed that “the work between the cities and counties has been a tremendous asset for the City of John Day.”

“Highway safety is something I’m personally very, very passionate about,” said Burn Mayor Craig LaFollette. “I travel a lot of our Oregon highways on a motorcycle. I took the Team Oregon class and it’s phenomenal. I thought I knew everything about riding a motorcycle until I took that class. Talk about a class that saves lives, that really is it.”

LaFollette also expressed his gratitude for highway construction work completed this summer in Burns that vastly improved safety at the U.S. 20 / Monroe Street intersection. “We just finished our Monroe Street Project in Burns that you are all familiar with and it’s wonderful,” He said. “I thank the state for changing that corner, it’s much easier and safer now.”

Along with kind words about the good working relationships, SEACT members also expressed their concerns for the future in a world of shrinking budgets and growing needs. Questions asked about road tolling, the gas tax and alternative fuel vehicle user fees prompted updates from the Commissioners and Director Garrett.

Commissioner Tammy Baney also asked the SEACT members how things could be improved. "Let us know if there are barriers or policies that need to be changed."

Some on the panel commented on the costs of various environmental studies and evaluation documents that are sometime required before roadwork.

"I'm certainly not advocating for sidestepping those issues, but I do see some things that are really frivolous when you look at them closely," Ferguson said, stressing the need to keep as many dollars as possible "going to concrete and asphalt."

Commissioner Mark Frohnmayer also asked the three county group how they were working with other jurisdictions that weren't part of the SEACT. "Are those relationships working well and has this process (of having ACTs) helped foster that?" he asked.

"Yes," Ferguson said. "The ACT concept has gone a long way to foster that. We work together and figure out ways to get it done."

Britton also chimed in regarding the good working relationships between other local ACTs, cities, counties, Tribes, and ODOT.

"With all due respect, Director Garrett, we try not to involve Salem," said Britton. "We just do it. We had the flood here a while back and everybody worked seamlessly. We just made it happen."

Despite the uncertain financial future for transportation, Britton was upbeat. "We have hellacious problems ahead of us," he said. "But, it's an opportunity to do magnificent, out of the box, big things that we've never done before."

ODOT



(SEACT members at long table - left to right) Dan Joyce (Malheur Co.); Boyd Britton (Grant Co.); Tom Davis (ODOT); Peggy Gray (City of John Day – Grant Co.); Roberta Donovan (City of Nyssa - Malheur Co.); Doug Ferguson (Grant Co.); Monte Grove (ODOT); Ken Freese (Malheur Co.); Karen Kendal (SEACT staff support). OTC members at table (left to right): Commissioner Mark Frohnmayer; Commissioner Tammy Baney; Commission Chair David Lohman.