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Planners and officials should focus increasingly on public transportation options such as pedestrian routes, buses, light rail and passenger trains as use of these forms of travel has increased across the state since 2006, according to a new report.

The report, "Driving Trends and Transportation Funding in the West" published by the Southwest Energy Efficiency Project (SWEET), says that Arizona transportation policy should better reflect these trends by allocating some of the 70 percent of the road and highway building budget towards pedestrian, bicycle and public transportation projects. The report is based on data collected between 2006 and 2013.

"We would like to see other organizations and the state DOT take a look at their transportation funding and kind of look at shifting more funding to alternatives to driving," said Mike Salisbury, co-author of the August 2015 [report](#).

Arizona's transportation plan, like most other states, is based on the projection that overall per capita vehicle miles traveled is increasing. This is no longer the case, and the state's transportation plan should reflect that, said Will Toor, co-author of the report.

Toor points to the Colorado Department of Transportation, which for the first time ever has adopted a plan that does not project increased vehicle miles traveled per capita. He said this should be the model for all states.

"We would be very interested in ADOT doing something similar, really make sure their projections going forward are more realistic given what we've seen happen over the last decade," Toor said.

The Arizona Public Interest Research Group worked with SWEET on compiling its report and put together a similar report with similar recommendations in August. PIRG Executive Director Diane Brown said current, accurate data need to be used when municipalities create new, updated transportation plans.

"Too often we have seen transportation planners use outdated assumptions that the number of miles driven will continue to increase, when in fact the data suggest otherwise," Brown said.

CONSIDERING POPULATION GROWTH, ECONOMIC FACTORS

Eric Anderson, director of transportation for Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), doesn't draw the same conclusions from the data. He said planners are not ignoring trends in their transportation plans because there is more than one interpretation for the same data.

"You can't just look at the data on the surface and draw conclusions that at this point just aren't supported by what we see happening out in the system today," he said.

MAG's plan projects vehicle miles traveled as increasing for two reasons, he said. First, the population of Maricopa

County is projected to grow.

“Even if you had a constant number of vehicle miles traveled per capita, just the fact that we’re going to grow in population, we’re going to have increasing vehicle miles traveled on our system overall,” he said.

The second reason is the number of vehicle miles traveled is often in flux due to gas prices and economic factors. Anderson notes that Maricopa County still hasn’t returned to where it was economically in 2007 before the economic downturn. He cautions against planning on trends that may not represent a permanent shift, such as data from between 2006 and 2013 showing increased public transit use and decreased miles driven.

“We some shift in that, but I think long term, the jury’s out,” he said.

Assistant Minority Leaders Sen. Steve Farley, a member of the Senate Transportation Committee, disagrees with that analysis.

“I don’t necessarily agree that you can explain it away that way,” he said.

He said older methods of transportation planning should be discarded in today’s world and the state has to adapt to the changing needs of wants of the population. “I think we need to be studying all this stuff, and being nimble enough to leave our old preconceptions behind and be aware of how things are changing as they change,” Farley said.

According to the report, from 2006 and 2013, Arizonans reduced their driving by 1,000 miles per year. The Phoenix metro area saw a 32 percent increase in use of public transportation while Tucson saw a 26 percent increase. The decreased driving time is due to several factors, not just the 2008 recession, report co-author Salisbury said.

Those factors include the attitudes of millennials who are less attached to the idea of owning a car and more inclined to use public transit, aging baby-boomers who are no longer driving, an overall increase in telecommuting and an overall decrease of car ownership in Arizona.

Brown, of PIRG, said Maricopa and Pima counties are beginning to consider the importance of public transportation when crafting their transportation plans.

“In Maricopa County, through stakeholder processes and engagement with members of the public, planners and decision makers in Pima and Maricopa have started a shift toward more public transportation options,” she said.

MAG’s priorities include improving public transportation and providing more choices for people, Anderson said, but he also believes that as car fuel efficiency improves, people will drive more. During the past eight months, MAG has seen an increase in personal vehicle travel, so its transportation plan must reflect that, Anderson added.

“It’s not one or the other, I think we need to do everything,” Anderson said.

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