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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## **PSC EXPLORES COMMUTER SERVICE**

LINCOLN – Citing the benefits of planning ahead in the event gas prices continue to increase, the Nebraska Public Service Commission held a public workshop to explore a commuter service linking Omaha and Lincoln and intervening points.

Commissioner Anne Boyle of Omaha, who chaired the workshop, said, “Today, gas prices are pushing toward \$3.00 per gallon. With the uncertainty in the Middle East, we must think about the consequences if they go up to \$4.00 or \$5.00 per gallon.” She added, “The math is easy. A 120 mile round trip from Omaha to Lincoln in a car that gets 25 miles per gallon would cost the driver about \$25.00 per day, plus operations plus parking. That’s over \$125.00 per week.”

Boyle indicated that waiting to examine the issue until there is a crisis is not wise. “Acting in crisis oftentimes creates chaos, mismanagement and additional costs. We would be flatfooted with no plan in place,” she said.

Commissioners met with Omaha Metro Area Transit Director, Curt Simon; Wahoo Chamber of Commerce Executive Director, Doug Watts; and Commission staff. In preparation for the workshop, Commission staff also met with officials from Fremont, Blair, Wahoo and Elkhorn.

Curt Simon said MAT has received a number of requests for commuter service and intra-city service bus usage has increased by approximately 13% with recent increases in gas prices. Although he did not advocate any particular form of commuter service, Simon said vanpooling is one possibility. He further stated that there are some programs that are eligible for 80 percent federal funding. He said recent hikes in gasoline prices are spiking interest. “We’re starting to get a few calls again now that gas prices are jumping up.”

Watts, who noted that half of Wahoo’s population is commuting to either Omaha or Lincoln, said cheap gasoline and problems with dropoff locations are the chief impediments to a commuter service. “At 7:30 in the morning and at 4:30 in the afternoon, there is a steady stream of cars between Wahoo and Omaha or Lincoln,” he said.

Boyle acknowledged that the price of gasoline is the factor that most people consider in determining whether it is practical to drive their own vehicles when commuting to a distant site. That fails to take into consideration other factors, she and other commissioners noted, such as the depreciation on the vehicle, insurance, and parking costs.

Commissioner Frank Landis of Lincoln cited the public’s fascination with convenience. “People today are just married to their car,” he said. Observing that a common drop off point would require either a walk or another ride to a final destination, Landis said, “The walk in June is one thing and a walk in January is another thing.” Landis continued, “If gas prices become beyond reach, the public will realize that if a \$10.00 a day commuter fare can be achieved, it

makes much more sense to leave the car at home.” Landis also suggested looking into how private operators could provide commuter services rather than government entities. Landis said, “I think it’s a good thing that we’re having a discussion when gas is \$2.60 and not \$5.60 (per gallon).”

Boyle added, “That’s been the whole premise of our efforts – anticipating the future.”

In addition to persons participating in the workshop, the Commission received written comments from the City of Fremont as well as two privately owned transit carriers. Boyle said the Commission will continue to examine commuter services and engage public discussion on the issue.

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