

## **Loop 202: DiCiccio seeking freeway alternative**

[By Doug Murphy](#)

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It may be too little too late, or it could be the perfect win-win-win, either way, Councilman Sal DiCiccio thinks that Arizona should make a good faith offer to the Gila River Indian Community to consider allowing the South Mountain Loop 202 on tribal land before construction begins along Pecos Road.

So far, the tribe has twice passed resolutions opposing a freeway on tribal land. But DiCiccio is optimistic that if a real proposal is put on the table, they will consider it.

DiCiccio has formed a committee of local residents to lobby for a “concrete” proposal to present to the GRIC for building the now scaled-back eight-lane freeway south of Pecos and around South Mountain instead of through it.

“At the end of the day, if the Gilas say no, at least we’ll have offered them something concrete,” DiCiccio said.

He said the problem with Arizona and the tribe has been one of culture. Arizona thinks along the lines of acres needed for a freeway and dollars per acre.

But DiCiccio said that land is a precious commodity to the tribe and not something to sell or give away lightly.

“If land is an extension of their body, you need to give them back more than you take,” DiCiccio said.

Doug Nintzel, a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT), said that his agency has honored the tribe’s two resolutions opposing the freeway, but has been open to alternative routes on their land.

“We have continued to communicate with GRIC officials and have emphasized that we’d be willing to talk should that stance change,” Nitzel said.

DiCiccio’s proposal, which is still in the infant stages, include:

- Working to resolve the issue of heavy truck traffic on 51st Avenue that cuts through the Komatke community and has been a sore point with GRIC for years.
- Land swaps with the tribe, which could include Bureau of Land Management acreage in the Estrella Mountains on the west side of the reservation, in return for acreage for the proposed freeway, as well as other parcels the tribe needs.

“The Gilas have been maligned, but nobody has made a good faith proposal,” said DiCiccio, who hopes to broker a deal that costs less than the current \$1.9 billion price tag, and ends up solving the needs of Ahwatukee Foothills residents, as well as Gila River Indian Community members.

But after years of planning and meetings, ADOT has almost finished a draft environmental impact statement that shows the freeway following Pecos Road, through a corner of South Mountain Park and then north to Interstate 10 near 55th Street.

The Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), which oversees the Valley's transportation projects, is set to vote this month on the revamped Loop 202 plan as a priority project in the Valley's transportation system.

Getting ADOT and MAG to change directions and consider an alternate route, even if a deal could be put together involving the federal, state and county governments, could be difficult.

"Their actions show a predetermination," to follow the original 1985 plan despite growth and development in the area, said Chad Blostone, a member of DiCiccio's group and a member of the Foothills Homeowners Association. "They've never had a desire to seek alternatives."

But Rick Savagian, another member of DiCiccio's team, said that master plans can, and often do, change during the planning process.

"It's (ADOT's and MAG's) duty to explore every opportunity," he said Tuesday.

While MAG and ADOT now consider the freeway a top priority for funding and construction, the history is an up and down roller coaster of strong and weak support.

### ***Freeway history***

Designed in the mid-1980s as a way to move people and products around the Valley, the South Mountain Loop 202 was quickly put on the back-burner when construction funds ran low. The city of Phoenix proposed a parkway around the mountain, but that was rejected by ADOT. Then some entrepreneurs attempted to generate support for a toll road, but that also fizzled.

ADOT brought the project back to life in 2001, forming a Citizens Advisory Team to make suggestions on updating the old 1985 plan and take into account the rapid growth in Ahwatukee Foothills and on the west side in Laveen. But when the team recommended one route, based on two years of study, then ADOT director Victor Mendez chose the original 1985 route and one out of every three advisory team members quit in protest.

Meanwhile, the cost of the freeway grew, from an original \$900 million to \$1.1 billion to \$2.4 billion.

At the same time, funding for freeway construction, based upon a half-cent sales tax passed by voters, is down for the first time ever, thanks to the economic recession. But projects slated for funding from the sales tax continue to grow, creating a \$5 billion gap that grows each month.

Now MAG has changed positions, saying that an eight-lane, \$1.9 billion freeway, which would fit into the original 1985 footprint, would do the job, saving an estimated \$500 million.

Once MAG has decided the new parameters for the freeway, ADOT is expected to finish a draft Environmental Impact Statement, which will then be released to the public for comments before the final EIS is finished and a decision on construction is made.