

Mountain-cutting plans add to Loop 202 fight

55 comments by **Cathryn Creno** - Nov. 27, 2009 12:00 AM
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Three of South Mountain's most pristine and remote ridgelines would be leveled under plans to extend Loop 202 for another 22 miles, connecting Chandler to Laveen.

So far, much of the heated fight over the planned 22-mile [South Mountain Freeway](#) has been between residents of Ahwatukee Foothills, who fear it will bring noise, added traffic and pollution into their community, and residents of the West Valley, who want better access to the Valley [freeway system](#).

But the Arizona Department of Transportation's plans to demolish 32 acres of the southernmost part of the South Mountain Preserve promise to be just as incendiary.

"The cuts will be like having a big, ugly gap in your teeth," said Laurel Arndt, a member of the [Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee](#) and ADOT's South Mountain Citizen Advisory Team on Loop 202.

"There's an unawareness of that because most people have not been out there," she

said.

Arndt's mountain-biking club frequently travels out to the ridges. She called the 100- to 200-foot deep cuts planned by engineers "a tragedy."

Funding for the \$1.9 billion eight-lane freeway project was approved by the [Maricopa Association of Governments](#) in October.

Officials from the Gila River Indian Community have invited ADOT, MAG, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other federal, state and local officials to meet in December to discuss moving the freeway path to [tribal land](#).

None of the agencies that plan to attend the meeting has released any specific ideas for new freeway alignments.

But Gila River has plenty of flat desert and agricultural land that would allow a freeway to connect the east and west Valleys without having to cut into the [mountain preserve](#).

Despite the possibility that plans could be revised, ADOT is moving ahead with its study of the plan approved by MAG last month.

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The agency is in the last stages of completing a report for the federal government on the environmental impact of the Loop 202 extension. If the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration approves the plan, construction will begin in 2013.

Public discussion of the so-called environmental impact statement probably will take place sometime next year, said ADOT communications director Timothy Tait.

Tait said ADOT engineers expect to have no problems with federal guidelines that regulate freeway noise, pollution or other environmental disruptions.

But among those who say the freeway should be stopped are some members of the nearby Gila River Indian Community, who view the mountain as sacred, and environmental advocates, who say the freeway would disrupt the desert and its wildlife.

"People aren't going to see how bad it's going to be until it's too late," said Sandy Bahr, who directs the Grand Canyon chapter of the Sierra Club.

"There will be a massive wound there. Maybe they aren't cutting through the heart of the

park, but it is still a freeway. Roads are the worst thing for wildlife."

The ridge closest to Ahwatukee is so remote it cannot be reached by car. But it can be seen by mountain bikers like Arndt who travel beyond the end of Pecos Road, which stops at around 27th Avenue.

Getting to the two ridges closest to Laveen by car requires a drive down an unincorporated Maricopa County road near 51st Avenue and the Gila River Indian Reservation.

None of the three ridges has developed trails for hikers or mountain bikers.

On Nov. 16, ADOT officials took staff from The Arizona Republic on a three-hour bus trip to see the ridges.

Although there are some spots on the ridges that are considered sacred to the Gila River Community, the freeway would be built around those areas, Tait said.

Engineers pointed out that the cuts into the mountain will be made in a way to preserve the natural rock wall of the mountain - drivers won't be traveling through concrete tunnels.

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ADOT reports note that of South Mountain Park's 16,500 acres, less than 1 percent - 32 acres - of the most remote section of the preserve will be touched by the freeway.

ADOT has not released numbers that show exactly how much it will cost to blast openings in the ridges, but a 2008 report by the agency estimated demolition costs for the entire Loop 202 extension at \$16.3 million.

Tait said ADOT's aim is to preserve as much of the ridges' natural appearance as possible.

"There is not a freeway in the state that has not required some cuts" into ridges or rock formations, Tait added. "We will make an effort to preserve the area's natural appearance."

That doesn't ease the worries of John Jurik, who lives in Foothills Reserve, a planned community on Ahwatukee's western edge.

"I will be able to see that ugly scar every day from my house," he said. "I just don't like the idea of a park with a highway running through it."

Of course, not everyone opposes the idea of having the freeway run through the

preserve.

Ahwatukee resident Susi Fathauer thinks putting a freeway through the South Mountain Park will create a beautiful drive between the east and west Valleys.

She envisions it looking something like the U.S. 60 near Globe.

"There are many passes cut through mountains all over our state," she said.

"I don't think there is anything wrong with the way they look. I enjoy driving through the mountains and seeing the beauty of God's creations."

The \$1.9 billion freeway budget also includes funds for construction of a path for bicycles, pedestrians and equestrians near the freeway between 17th Avenue in Ahwatukee and 51st Avenue in Laveen.

It would be the first developed trail in both areas.

Still, Arndt said she is not impressed by the plan. The Maricopa County Parks Department already has a plan in place to build a trail in the area, she said.

And Tait said ADOT is not certain will be able

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to construct the trail even though MAG has funded it. Engineers have to first make sure that people using it would not be endangered by traffic or falling rocks, he said.

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