

## Freeway talks with Gila River buoy Foothills residents

by **Cathryn Creno** - Dec. 16, 2009 03:09 PM  
The Arizona Republic

Ahwatukee residents who oppose the extension of Loop 202 through the Foothills are cautiously optimistic about the opening of freeway talks between the state and the Gila River Indian Community.

"It's a great first step. This is what many of us have been hoping for for a long time," said Chad Blostone a longtime member of the Arizona Department of Transportation South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team on the planned freeway and a member of the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee.

Tribal officials confirmed earlier this week that Gila River Governor William Rhodes is in the process of drafting a letter to Arizona highway officials.

The letter is expected to request a proposal to put the South Mountain Freeway, now planned along a 22-mile route through Ahwatukee and the South Mountain Preserve, on tribal land instead.

The Maricopa Association of Governments

voted in October to spend \$1.9 billion to connect Chandler and Laveen with the eight-lane extension of the Loop 202. Although the environmental impact of the freeway must be first be studied, state officials expect construction to be underway by 2013.

But the planned alignment is hotly opposed by many Ahwatukee residents, who are unhappy it will take out a church and an entire neighborhood of homes and cut holes through three ridges in Phoenix's South Mountain Preserve.

Blostone, a pilot for US Airways who frequently flies above the planned freeway path, said it's easy to see from the air that the eight-lane \$1.9 billion freeway would be easier to build -- and do no damage to neighborhoods, mountain ridges or farmlands -- if it were built a just a mile or so south of Ahwatukee on Gila River land.

"When you look at it from above, you see the route they have planned is just not logical," he said.

The current plan is to "go through neighborhoods and cut into mountains when there is flat land available on the Gila River community . . . raw desert," Blostone said.

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"It seems like it would be much less expensive to build the freeway there."

Early numbers from the MAG showed that it would be more expensive to build the freeway south of the current proposed route.

But more recently, officials have said building around South Mountain instead of blasting through it could save the state about \$200 million in construction costs.

Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio represents Ahwatukee and has long complained that state and regional transportation officials were making a decision on the Loop 202 route without consulting the tribe.

He said he is pleased that key leaders involved in freeway decision making attended a closed-door meeting at which they could talk openly about the 202 earlier this month. Before that, DiCiccio said, there was a complete breakdown of communications between the tribe and state highway planners.

"Now the game changes completely," he said.

Gila River spokeswoman Alia Maisonet said

that tribe has no official preferred route for the 202.

But DiCiccio, who has attended numerous meetings with state, federal and tribal officials on the subject, said the most-discussed alternative is a route one-half to one mile south of Pecos Road.

That would keep the alignment out of Ahwatukee, which stands to lose a church and about 100 homes, as well as out of the South Mountain Preserve, which would lose sections of three ridgelines, under present plans.

"This is a path that would not destroy the mountain, which is something everyone wants to avoid," DiCiccio said.

Still, the option of putting the freeway near but not in Ahwatukee is not a panacea in the eyes of all freeway opponents. Some still want the 202 built at least several miles away from the Foothills. And others think an extension of the 202 is not needed at all.

Pat Lawless, an Ahwatukee resident and president of an anti-freeway group called PARC, Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children, is among those who are against any extension of the Loop 202.

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PARC is concerned about noise and air pollution from freeway traffic and she said the group's board is concerned that a freeway a half-mile south of Ahwatukee will make the community less livable.

"How much pollution we would get from a freeway on the Gila River Indian Community is an unanswered question," Lawless said.

"The closer it is built to Ahwatukee, the bigger concern it is."

**Republic staff writer Sean Holstege contributed to this report. Read more about a recent freeway meeting among state, tribal and federal officials at [Ahwatukee.azcentral.com](http://Ahwatukee.azcentral.com).**

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