



Delays raise concerns about Loop 202's necessity

By Robert Oppermann

2010-03-16 11:21:43



Editor's Note: This is the second in an occasional series outlining some of the issues surrounding construction of the South Mountain Loop 202, from Interstate 10 in Ahwatukee Foothills, west through South Mountain Park and then north to reconnect with I-10. Click here to see the first installment, ["Air pollution a concern for critics of Loop 202."](#)

Mike Lograsso says that, if he must, he can pack up his belongings and move faster than the average Ahwatukee Foothills resident.

He and his wife, along with their dogs, occupy a modest house on Redwood Lane, an entry-level development of about 70 homes just north of Pecos Road. It is one of the few neighborhoods in Ahwatukee Foothills that stand in the direct path of the proposed South Mountain Freeway and, as a result, homeowners like Lograsso are faced with the possibility that the state will one day purchase their property and force them to relocate.

When that day will come, however, is anyone's guess.

"The state has informed us of nothing," Lograsso said. "We're all sitting here saying, 'Give us a yes or no answer, anything but a maybe.'"

Construction of the eight-lane freeway, which would either demolish these homes or place them behind a concrete sound barrier, could begin as soon as 2013, so private buyers for the properties are scarce and reluctant, and residents here are wary of spending more money on their homes than is required for general maintenance for fear they won't recoup their investments.

"We're forced into this limbo stage where we're not sure we're going to get out of the house what we put into it," Lograsso said. "And until we have a definitive answer it's almost impossible to sell our home."

Across the street, Debra and Mike Thake say they have held off installing a swimming pool in their backyard. After owning their home for 10 years, they, too, are wondering if they'll be properly compensated for renovations and improvements if the state ultimately decides to buy them out. Like most residents living here, the Thakes were made aware that a government right of way could one day displace them. While the freeway proposal predates the development, the exact location and imprint of the freeway weren't always made clear.

"I bought this house to raise my kids, and I wasn't worried about it back then," Debra Thake said. "Now I am."

"If they got it now we would lose," Mike Thake added, expressing his concern that what the state deems fair market value may be priced well below what he and other owners here expect to be paid.

Since its conception in 1985, the South Mountain Freeway – or the Loop 202 as it is otherwise known – has been suspended, redesigned and publicly disputed numerous times. Its long and complex developmental history has some critics questioning its necessity, especially during an economic

recession.

"They've been trying to package this freeway for years," said Laurel Arndt, a faculty associate at Arizona State University's School of Geographic Sciences and Urban Planning and a former member of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team. "It would be very embarrassing for them to say 'You know what? Everyone else is right, and we're wrong.' That will never happen."

But members of the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) and the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), the two agencies responsible for the freeway's design and construction, cite the growing problem of traffic congestion along existing east-to-west corridors – such as Interstate 10 – as reason enough to press on.

"A lot of folks say that our models are outdated," said Bob Hazlett, senior engineer with MAG. "But the numbers are still there, and the congestion is still there. So the real need for the freeway is still there."

A 2003 study conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau projects the population of Maricopa County to increase by approximately 50 percent – from 4.15 million to 6.24 million – over the next two decades, according to data posted on ADOT's Web site. Such an increase in drivers will place and added strain on an already overwhelmed traffic system, Hazlett says.

But this projection, aside from being outdated, tells only a portion of the whole story, said Arndt, who insists that a recent shift in the federal government's transit philosophy toward moving people rather than cars should be practiced in the Valley.

"For them to continue to shove these numbers from five years ago down our throats is really disingenuous," Arndt said. "The critical thing is to forecast with other modalities of transportation in mind. All I suggest is that you give people options and choices, and right now in Arizona we have no choices. We have a car."

Proponents of the freeway acknowledge that mass transit is an ideal solution to traffic congestion in the Valley, but that many commuters will be disinclined to exchange their cars for a seat on the bus.

"The South Mountain Freeway is not going to solve all of the regional transportation problems," ADOT spokesman Tim Tait said. "But it is largely viewed as the missing link in the loop system between east and west that is so desperately needed."

The problem also may be environmental. Efficient public transportation systems are more difficult to implement in sprawling cities such as Phoenix, according to Hazlett.

"The only way that public transportation really works is if you have sufficient enough densities to make it happen," he said. "We're not New York City. We live in the West where people like to spread out."

Still, Hazlett insists that MAG is developing mass transit in the Valley where it is needed and economically prudent.

"We're making a number of public transportation improvements," he said. "But despite those improvements, we still need South Mountain Freeway."

While ADOT continues to address a freeway budget deficit of \$6.6 billion, Tait has said there is enough funding available to begin construction of the South Mountain Freeway should a route be decided upon and approved. The department is working with the Nebraska-based private engineering firm HDR to develop a draft environmental impact statement to be released next year.

In the meantime, homeowners on Redwood Lane, like Robert Martinez, anxiously await a formal decision from the state while doing just enough work on their homes to keep them from falling into disrepair.

"I'm basically maintaining it; I'm not letting it go," Martinez said. "I bought this house with the intention of staying here."

Ahwatukee Foothills resident Robert Oppermann is interning this semester for the Ahwatukee Foothills News. He is a senior at Michigan State University and can be reached at opperm17@msu.edu.

© Copyright 2010 Freedom Communications. All Rights Reserved.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Site Map](#)