

South Mountain Freeway alignment decision put on hold

by *Cathryn Creno* - Mar. 4, 2009 01:54 PM
The Arizona Republic

A decision on the size and alignment of the proposed South Mountain Freeway near Ahwatukee and the [Gila River Indian Community](#) likely will not be made until 2011, a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Transportation said this week.

ADOT Community Relations Direction Timothy Tait attributed the delay to the Maricopa Association of Government's recent decision to create plans for a six-lane parkway instead of the proposed 10-lane freeway.

That in turn likely will delay his agency's completion of an environmental impact study the [federal government](#) requires before signing off on the plan.

The parkway has been proposed as freeway planners look for ways to balance a \$5.3 billion shortfall in Arizona's 20-year transportation plan.

The shortfall comes from falling sales tax revenue in Proposition 400 combined with rising construction costs.

The original freeway plan has called for the extension of Loop 202 to run along the Pecos Road alignment in the [Ahwatukee Foothills](#) , then cut through South Mountain and connect with the 202 in the West Valley.

Recently appointed Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio, who represents Ahwatukee, has said he would like to see a decision made on a Loop 202 alignment by the end of 2009.

Current plans calls for knocking down homes and a church that are in the freeway path.

"People there are in limbo," he said.

Also frustrated are members of a freeway opposition group called Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children, or PARC.

"I'm a former marathon runner but we have reached the point of ultra marathon," said PARC member Jim Jochim. "We've been beating this issue up for six years It's now an endurance competition."

Tait said ADOT, which is conducting the environmental study for the [Federal Highway Administration](#) , is about to finish a draft of it. The section that remains to be completed is one that deals with Gila River Indian Community's "traditional cultural properties" in South Mountain, he said.

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Under federal law, the freeway would be constructed in a way to preserve traditional cultural sites, he said.

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Alia Maisonet, public information officer for the Gila River Indian Community, said Gila River is reviewing a draft of the environmental report but has yet to comment on it.

Tait said ADOT had originally planned to hold public hearings on the environmental document this summer. That way, a decision on the freeway alignment could have been made in 2010.

"But now that's not going to happen," he said.

Instead, Tait said, MAG will release the parkway proposal in the fall, then ADOT will need to rework the environmental study based on the scaled down plans.

Public hearings likely would take place in the second part of 2010, he said.

Tait said ADOT also is frustrated with the slow progress being made on the link between the East and West Valleys.

"It's the missing link in the whole system," he said. "We would hate to think about what traffic will look like in 15 years if nothing is constructed."

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