

Loop 202 is a good thing in Laveen

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Ask most people in Ahwatukee Foothills about the South Mountain Loop 202 and you get a variety of answers, from support to indifference to strong opposition.

Ask the same question in Laveen and the answers are mostly the same.

"I'm already planning for it," said Mike Moreines, a founder of Terrazona Properties and a major developer of shopping centers in the Laveen area.

"I think the entire community would benefit," said Steve Glueck, executive director of the South Mountain/Laveen Chamber of Commerce.

In 1984 the South Mountain Loop 202 was originally penciled to run from Interstate 10 in Ahwatukee Foothills, west where Pecos Road was later constructed, through a corner of South Mountain and the park, then north roughly along 51st Avenue to reconnect with Interstate 10.

While money woes put the project on the back burner, Ahwatukee Foothills grew with homes built up to the freeway's right of way and, in several cases, onto land that the Arizona Department of Transportation has designated for the freeway but which the state couldn't afford to buy.

But in the Laveen area, which includes a patchwork of county islands, development was planned around an eventual freeway.

"We've connected all of our streets to the freeway," said Phoenix Councilman Michael Nowakowski on Saturday during a Laveen Summit to talk about economic development.

And the councilman was not shy about encouraging Laveen residents to push for the freeway.

"What we need to do, as citizens of Laveen, just like Ahwatukee Foothills, to put pressure on those people that we want a freeway now," Nowakowski said to applause at the economic summit. "We're being held hostage by a few people."

But according to Eric Anderson, transportation director for the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), which coordinates Valley freeway planning, the current problem is money.

"We've had a significant drop in sales tax revenues. We really are in uncharted territory," he told the economic summit.

And while sales tax funding for Valley freeways is down for the first time ever, the cost of construction continues to grow.

The South Mountain Loop 202 was originally estimated to cost just under \$1 billion. But the most recent estimate has the freeway at \$2.4 billion.

To compensate for the red ink, MAG is looking for ways to cut costs, including studying the possibility of building a parkway with limited access from surface streets instead of a traditional freeway.

A draft environmental impact statement for the freeway, begun in 2001, is currently hung up over issues of cutting through South Mountain, which the Gila River Indian Community considers sacred.

But for people in Laveen the freeway would open access from the current patchwork of two- and four-lane surface streets, with just four bridges across the Salt River between 19th and 67th avenues.

"It's pretty impossible to get to I-10 or downtown during rush hour," said Eileen York as she shopped at an Ace Hardware store in Laveen. "I don't know anyone who wants to get to Chandler, we mostly need to get north and over the Salt River."

But Glueck said the freeway through Laveen is extremely important not just for chamber businesses, but for providing access east through Ahwatukee Foothills to Chandler and Mesa, as well as north to I-10 and the Loop 101 for residents.

"The potential for this part of the Valley, which is more central than southwest, is unlimited," Glueck said.

Meanwhile, developers like Moreines are banking on the freeway to bring customers and residents.

"It's coming and it's going to be really good," he said.