

GRIC approves study of freeway impact

[By Doug Murphy](#)

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The Gila River Indian Community has changed its position and will now allow state freeway planners to study what impact construction of the South Mountain Loop 202 on Pecos Road would have on tribal land.

But the tribe is still opposed to allowing the freeway to be constructed on the Gila River Indian Community.

“The granting of the right to entry in no way implies that Gila River Indian Community has altered our position on the alignment of Pecos Road,” said David White, a member of the community’s transportation technical team.

Tribal council has twice voted to oppose construction of the Loop 202 south of Pecos Road on its land.

Tribal approval for Arizona Department of Transportation staff and consultants to study the impact of the freeway on Gila River Indian Community land lasts until Nov. 1, 2008.

“I think it’s a very important first step, on their part, and I am grateful that they took it,” said Rep. John McComish, who opposed construction of the freeway on Pecos Road.

John Rodriguez also opposes the freeway on Pecos Road and welcomed GRIC’s actions.

“I’m very optimistic. I think it may be an opportunity for the nation to revisit the placement of the freeway on tribal land,” said Rodriguez, who is a member of the South Mountain Citizen Advisory Team that is advising ADOT on Loop 202 updates.

GRIC has opposed covering tribal land with the 10-lane, \$1.7 billion freeway. At the same time, the tribe is concerned about current ADOT plans to cut through two ridges in South Mountain, which they consider culturally significant.

“Culturally speaking, that land is sacred to us,” said Alia Maisonet, a spokeswoman for the tribe.

In 1985 the freeway was first proposed to connect Interstate 10 in Ahwatukee Foothills with I-10 near 51st Street, but money shortfalls put the project on hold.

In 2001 ADOT began a new study to update the decades-old plan, but growth and development had changed the original landscape. Many suggested that instead of demolishing 255 homes in Ahwatukee Foothills to make way for the freeway, that construction should take place on the Gila River Indian Community, which is mostly open farmland.

ADOT has completed a draft environmental impact statement showing construction on Pecos Road. The draft study is now under review by the Federal Highway Administration.

ADOT had hoped to release the draft environmental impact statement for public comment sometime early next year, with the final plan approved by the end of 2008.

It is not clear if permission for ADOT to study the freeway’s impact on the Gila River Indian Community will change the proposed timeline.

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