Roadblocks await freeway builders

Cultural sites, utilities present future difficulties

By Doug Murphy
Staff Writer

No one said building a freeway would be easy.

Underground utilities, railroad tracks, culturally sensitive sites and a big price tag were just some of the items discussed at last week's meeting of the South Mountain Loop 202 Citizens Advisory team.

The team is advising the Arizona Department of Transportation on possible routes for the freeway, from Ahwatukee Foothills and Interstate 10 in the east, through South Mountain Park to reconnect with I-10 between 51st Avenue and the Loop 101 interchange.

South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team meeting
When: Jan. 27 5:30-9 p.m.
Where: Komatke Center, Learning Center Meeting Hall, 51st Avenue and St. Johns Road, just north of Pecos Road

Rough construction cost estimates for the Loop 202 were unveiled for the first time last week and they vary from $995 million to $1.3 billion depending on the route selected.

But those numbers don't include the cost of buying homes and land in the right of way or for relocating utilities in the path of the freeway, which will

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easily add millions more to the price tag.

Thanks to Maricopa County voters, money won't be a problem.

In 2004 county voters approved extending a half-cent sales tax for 20 years that will result in $9 billion for new freeway construction in the Valley, including $1.3 billion for the Loop 202. Proposition 400 also included $4 billion in contingency funds to take into account rising costs and unexpected expenses.

But money may not help when it comes to culturally sensitive areas the freeway might plow through.

"We have cultural sites that are 500 to 700 years old all through this area," said Wayne Nelson, a Gila River Indian Community council member and member of the citizens advisory team.

And while the Arizona Department of Transportation must try to either go around or mitigate the impact of the freeway on a site, there is no hard and fast rule that a freeway can't be built over a site if there are no alternatives.

But enough sites of enough importance could jeopardize the project.

"If the impact of building the freeway exceeds the benefits then the no-build option would be considered," said Amy Edwards, the project leader from Phoenix-based HDR, an engineering firm that was hired by ADOT to select a route for the freeway.

Some of the sites are important to the Gila River Indian Community, or the 22 other tribes in Arizona, and weren't discussed in any detail to protect them from curiosity seekers.

But other sites include irrigation canals, the Southern Pacific Railroad bed near the Salt River, prehistoric archeological sites and historic homes and farms.

And, said Edwards, "As we go forward things may be discovered that haven't been discovered yet."

One design consideration that won't come as a surprise is utility lines in the path of the freeway.

Utilities are abundant and fairly well documented, including railroad tracks, power lines, fiber-optic cables, two 90-inch sewer lines, 48-inch water lines, natural gas lines and a petroleum pipeline, all of which would have to be moved regardless of which route is selected.

Edwards explained that in the western half of the project, most utility lines cross the three proposed freeway routes at right angles, resulting in a minor disruption.

But in the Ahwatukee Foothills portion of the project, many utilities run next to Pecos Road which would mean miles of relocation, adding to the costs.

The Citizens Advisory Team meets again Thursday night to discuss air quality issues associated with the freeway and to fine tune evaluation criteria that it will use Feb. 2 to select one of the five possible routes in the West Valley.

ADOT has been under pressure from local governments, builders and homeowners to select one western route so development can take place along the other routes without fear that it would be condemned later.

Once a western route has been selected, the Citizens Advisory Team will take a break until May and then begin looking at the Ahwatukee Foothills portion of the project.

Matt Burdick, a spokesman for ADOT, told the team last week that ADOT director Victor Mendez has met with Gila River Indian Community Governor William Rhodes. But he also said that no specific progress has been made on ADOT getting permission to study possible routes south of Pecos Road on Indian land.

For more information visit www.southmountainfreeway.com.

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