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Panel continues to oppose freeway

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South Mountain freeway opponents who asked an Arizona Department of Transportation spokesman to discuss design of the proposed interstate instead grilled him about pollution and truck traffic.

They also held strong to their no-build stance.

Members of the Ahwatukee Foothills Village Planning Committee demanded Monday to know how much air and noise pollution would be generated by the 22-mile freeway, of which about eight miles would run through Ahwatukee Foothills before winding west to 55th Avenue.

The \$1.7 million freeway would mean the demolition of about 250 homes in the area if built at ground level and about double that number if it were built below ground.

What worried some activists most is that the freeway would be built near several schools, including Kyrene de los Lagos Elementary School at 34th Street and Pecos Road. Its playground and basketball courts abut the freeway's path.

"You can put a price on homes, but you can't put a price on kids' lungs," said Melanie Pai, founder of an anti-freeway group known as Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children.

Pai, a frequent freeway critic, mocked a presentation by ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick in which he showed slides of two water retention basins that were turned into parks along the eight-mile stretch of the Santan Freeway through Gilbert.

He referred to the parks several times as amenities.

"We have those (amenities) in our community, too," Pai said. "They're called schools."

She complained that freeway planners are overlooking "all the children who will be breathing garbage as they sit in the schools."

Pai also said she wanted to know "how much pain do we as a community have to endure before ADOT" would recommend against building the freeway through the community.

Burdick said more than 30 environmental issues are being studied as part of a draft environmental impact statement. He said it is impossible to pinpoint the one or two environmental thresholds at which a no-build decision would be made.

"We can make a recommendation (not to build) if we feel the impacts are so great," Burdick said.

The committee had invited Burdick to its monthly meeting under the pretense of discussing design features for the proposed freeway, which is about 15 percent designed.

"All you're doing is gathering more information," Burdick said. "In the end, if you're still against it, you're still against it."

In April, the committee passed a resolution opposing the freeway along Pecos Road.

But in August, with plans still proceeding for the path, the committee decided it was time to consider design issues in case a final decision is made to build along the corridor.

Laurel Arndt, a vocal member of the committee and of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team, said she didn't like the comparisons to the Gilbert stretch of the Loop 202 Santan Freeway in Gilbert or any other freeway.

"I'm not talking about adding green geckos or rubberized asphalt," she said of design features used on other Valley freeways. "I want to be on top of South Mountain and not see it, not hear it, not smell it."

Burdick said the message from the committee seemed to be: "We hear what you're selling, we're not buying."

Committee member Patrick Panetta said the problem is that details are still too sketchy to know what the 10-lane freeway would look like. He made an analogy to ADOT selling the community a car but "not telling us how big the engine is" or other features.

Burdick countered that the process amounts to a "chicken-or-egg" problem.

Blanche Prokes, another committee member and community manager of the Lakewood Community Association, said she is worried that the freeway would hurt the budgets of homeowners associations in the area after homes are demolished and there are fewer residents to pay dues.

"How do you make them whole financially?" she said, referring to the Lakewood and Foothills developments north of Pecos.

Burdick said he didn't know the answer but would take the question back to ADOT right-of-way staffers to research.

Committee member Kathryn Muller-Kowalski had her own pointed question: "At what point do we stop building million-dollar homes in the path of the freeway?"

The proposed freeway has been on the planning books for about 20 years, but it was an unfunded project during the 1990s. A half-cent sales tax approved in 2004 made the freeway become more of a reality.

State Sen. John Huppenthal, a Republican who represents District 20, attended the meeting to caution the committee and residents that they need to be prepared for any of three outcomes - not building the freeway, building the freeway along Pecos Road or building the freeway south on the Gila River reservation.

"To protect the community, we have to be ready for any of those options," he said.

Huppenthal, a former Chandler councilman who helped negotiate the Loop 202 Santan Freeway and the 101 freeway through Chandler, said residents need to work hard to protect their neighborhoods from negative impacts of freeways.

"You need to have a negotiating team for each neighborhood," he said.

Last month, Huppenthal formed a small group of residents to study the issue in hopes of "kick starting" the design process before the EIS is finished.

"It's just not good public policy to build freeways that damage communities," he said. "Somebody needs to grab the bull by the horns."

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