BY JANA BOMMERSBACH

Road Rage

The proposed South Mountain Freeway is annoying people everywhere, from homeowners and taxpayers to Native Americans and everyone who loves South Mountain Park.

If I were a betting woman, I'd bet we'd never actually build the South Mountain Freeway. Because if any stretch of road were ever doomed – from head-in-the-sand ignorance, stupidity, incompetence and arrogance – it is the 10-lane, 22 miles of freeway the state wants to build from the West Valley, through South Mountain Park, through Ahwatukee, to the East Valley.

They've already made so many mistakes – and I can think of dozens more they have yet to commit – that there's little hope for this freeway. This is a mess of bizarre and idiotic proportions, and it's a textbook example of why lack of urban planning is a very, very bad idea.

And while this freeway drama plays out, hundreds of families wonder if their homes will be lost and their lives uprooted; teachers wonder if their schools will exist in a year or two; churchgoers wonder if they'll have a place to worship in the near future; and an entire city wonders what it will have to do to save its largest park.

Meanwhile, Native neighbors wonder if they'll once again be trampled by a society that neither understands nor respects their culture or traditions.

No new roadway in the history of Arizona – and we've had some wild fights – was ever this much a mess. Think of the South Mountain Freeway as Arizona's bad karma coming back to bite it in the butt.

People who haven't been paying attention think the South Mountain Freeway is Ahwatukee's problem. But they're wrong. Ahwatukee is the "planned community" developed over the past 20 years on the south side of South Mountain Park. It was supposed to be a community where people lived and worked, and although they

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have all the shopping centers you'd want, they never got the employment base they needed, so now it's as much a bedroom community as any other suburb of Phoenix. Only this one is within the city limits, even if it isn't visible from any other part of Phoenix.

Ahwatukee is distinguishable by one very important factor: There's only one way in and one way out – the north-south I-10 that forms its eastern border. This is the federal freeway that runs from Los Angeles to Florida. It's the freeway we take south to get to Tucson. It's the major thoroughfare for all of our trucks and buses. This is even the road the coyotes use to bring in illegals from Mexico.

It's our one really big road, and it's also how the folks of Ahwatukee leave their community to get anywhere else.

Doesn't the word "mess" come instantly to mind?

To give them an option, the state wants to build an east-west freeway at the southern end of Ahwatukee, which is Pecos Road. This is the South Mountain Freeway (or Loop 202) that would eventually hook up with freeways going to the burgeoning East Valley, and connect to the section of I-10 coming in from Los Angeles and the fast-growing West Valley.

When you want the inside story on this mess, you need to go to Doug Cole. Doug and I go way back to the Fife Symington days, when he was press secretary to the governor. For a long time, he's been chairman of the Ahwatukee Village Planning Committee, one of the groups established by the City Council to advise it on development and growth in that area. They've advised for years that the South Mountain Freeway shouldn't be built on Pecos Road. But so far, it's gotten them nowhere.

"Any time you site a major freeway, it's painful," Cole says in great understatement. "But this one has just so many issues."

You've got the federal highway administration and the state transportation guys, along with the regional government (called the Maricopa Association of Governments) and the city of Phoenix, but on top of all that, you've also got the sovereign Gila River Indian Community that abuts the community of Ahwatukee. Pecos Road is the dividing line between the two.

"You have all those layers, all with their own agendas, and all of them are peculiar," Cole says.

But that's not the worst of it. That's just the structural problem.

The really big problem is what he calls the "geographical challenge."

"The state's right-of-way has houses and churches and schools in the way," he notes, although, nobody knows exactly how many would be bulldozed to build the freeway.

He says they know that at least 260 homes would go, "but that could double or triple depending on the alignment."

Nobody wants to lose their home – every one of which still qualifies as "new" – but that isn't even the worst of the geographical challenges. An even higher mountain to climb is – you guessed it – South Mountain itself, which just happens to be owned by the city of Phoenix and holds the distinction of being the largest urban park in the entire nation.

"We're talking about big mountain cuts," Cole says with all the shock and awe that such an idea incites.

If any single sentence dooms this freeway, it's that one, because South Mountain is sacred to a lot of people and places, including the city of Phoenix, which vigorously guards its parkland against intrusion. But to the Gila people, this mountain has religious and cultural significance.

"The mountain is sacred to the tribe," says Alia Maisonet, a Gila River spokeswoman. When told it's sacred to Phoenix, too, she says, "It's pretty evident we're on the same page" on this issue. Unfortunately, she makes it clear this is the *only* thing we seem to agree on at this point, but more on that later.

Phoenix Councilmember Greg Stanton has already declared the state will cut through South Mountain "over my dead body," and I know he isn't the only one who'd put his life on the line to stop such a sacrilege.

There is a way to avoid these "challenges" – a way to avoid all those houses, churches and schools, as well as the mountain cuts.

And that would be to have the South Mountain Freeway built farther south, on reservation land. "The Village Planning Committee has always hoped we could get an alignment with our neighbors," Cole says.

Unfortunately, the Gila River community has long been on record as flatly saying it will not allow a freeway on its land. But recently, *The Arizona Republic* made it sound like *finally*, perhaps the tribe was taking a second look. Its headline on November 17 read: "Tribe to weigh freeway plan," with the subhead, "Gila River community, ADOT to talk about South Mountain route on reservation."

Lots of folks throughout Phoenix picked up the paper that morning and breathed a sigh of relief. Oh boy, if the Indians would let the freeway be built on their land, life would be good and all the big problems would go away. I'm sure lots of folks in Ahwatukee savored their coffee that morning thinking the Indians had had a change of heart.

I'm sorry to tell you, there has been no change of heart. The story, unfortunately, overstated the issue.

"The Council passed a resolution to the transportation team to discuss issues community wide," Maisonet explains during a phone interview. "They had to name roads, and they mentioned the 202, but this doesn't open any doors to that freeway."

The purpose of the resolution, she stresses, was to open discussions on what the state of Arizona will do for the tribe as it seeks to widen I-10 south to Tucson. That was the focus of the resolution.

As far as the South Mountain Freeway goes, the tribe is still in the same place it's been since 2001, when residents in two reservation districts voted "no" on considering a state highway. "It was a public vote and the [tribal] council is bound by the vote," Maisonet explains. "The new resolution has nothing to do with that vote and in no way changes it."

One of the reasons the Indian homeowners don't want the South Mountain Freeway is it would destroy up to 100 of their own homes. "This is a residential area like Ahwatukee," she says.

Although it's always dangerous to bring up past sins and slights, this is one of those times when we need to understand how badly the Gila people have been treated by Arizona – it helps explain why they're not being "accommodating" now.

"It was embarrassing and it was wrong," Cole says of the first time the state of Arizona slighted the Gila people. That was some 40 years ago, when they first built I-10. A large section of that road comes through reservation land, and although nobody wants to talk specifics, the individual "allottees" who owned the land were cheated. Nor was the tribe given all the bennies promised.

"We're still suffering the hangover of that treatment," Cole says. Maisonet doesn't want to detail the situation, either, except to say, "Some issues were not attended to by ADOT,

and promises were made that weren't kept."

So it's easy to see why the tribe would look askance at a new freeway across its land. Yet, several years ago, the Gila tribe suggested to the state that it build a southern "loop" on Riggs Road, which is south of where they now want the freeway. Many thought that would be a great alternative to the South Mountain Freeway.

ADOT rebuffed the offer, and now it's calling on the tribe for two different freeways. Besides the South Mountain Freeway, it wants to widen I-10, including the area running through the reservation. I'm betting the tribe is not going to get shortchanged this time.

Matt Burdick, community relations director for ADOT, says the agency is talking with the tribe about all its concerns with widening I-10, from public safety to new-and-improved freeway exits to a new frontage road along the freeway to speed controls.

He says he's certainly heard the complaints about how the Gila people were treated in the past, and says, "We have to deal with those concerns and perceptions," but points out that payments to the tribe for freeway land went through the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

"They made three big mistakes," says Doug Murphy, a government reporter at the *Ahwatukee Foothills News*. "They didn't build it when it was first on the books back in 1988 – it was on all the freeway maps and there were few homes in Ahwatukee then. Secondly, the city of Phoenix either never believed it would be built or didn't want it, because they allowed all those homes to be built within the right-of-way. And No. 3, they didn't understand the importance of South Mountain – they're proposing cuts five times as big as those through Dreamy Draw [in the North mountains]."

He doesn't buy the state's plea that the freeway is a must because of growth needs. "If you called a meeting today, maybe a dozen people would really want to see the freeway built," he contends. "You don't see a huge groundswell of popular support for the South Mountain Freeway. It's a solution looking for a problem."

As for the frosting on this repulsive cake, let's talk about the cost. This will shock every financial conservative in the state and will make a lot of liberals shudder, too.

The state could have built the South

Mountain Freeway for a song years ago when it first put it on the freeway map. In the 1980s, only a couple thousand people called Ahwatukee home. By 1990, one-third of all the building permits in the city of Phoenix were issued for this one development. By 1992, that was up to 37 percent. By 2000, nearly 76,000 people lived there.

There are plenty of stories about how developers and realtors forgot to mention that a freeway route lay under the foundation of homes they were selling to young couples. Of course, who would think the city of Phoenix would be stupid enough to issue all those permits – or to change all the zoning to allow the houses in the first place – when they knew they wanted a freeway?

But if you think that's idiotic, how about learning that within the past five years, the city tore up the freeway right-of-way along Pecos Road to put in 68-inch waterlines – lines that would have to be moved for the freeway. Come on!

State officials say they didn't have the money to buy the land when it was cheap, so now they'll pay through the nose.

Eric Anderson of the Maricopa Association of Governments told me the South Mountain Freeway is expected to cost twice as much as any other freeway we've built. The 101 and 202 loops so far have cost an average of $40 million to $42 million per mile. "South Mountain will be about $80 million per mile," he says. And that's at today's prices, which are going nowhere but up. "In the past 24 months, construction costs have risen 25 to 30 percent," he says.

"Concrete [the base of a freeway] is up 50 percent; asphalt is up 80 percent."

I asked him if they'd ever thought of just scrapping the South Mountain Freeway.

"We thought about not building it a lot," Anderson says. "But I-10 is totally congested and we need a big bypass around the city. There are lots of connections to the East Valley and we need connections to the Southwest Valley, which is just starting to grow."

OK, class. Let's review. The most expensive freeway in the history of Arizona is being planned through a sacred mountain park on land holding brand-new houses and schools in a neighborhood that doesn't want it. If I were a betting woman, I'd bet this is a freeway whose time has come and gone.

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