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Gila River opens crack in door to Loop 202

Tribune Editorial

We want to get excited about this week's news that the Gila River Indian Community finally appears ready to at least talk about a westward extension of Loop 202 across tribal land.

But reading between the lines in reports such as those from the Ahwatukee Foothills News [<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/148485>], state and Valley leaders have a long way to go to convince Gila River officials to accept the freeway instead of forcing the destruction of up to 200 homes in southern Ahwatukee and the blasting of western portions of South Mountain.

State officials have planned for more than two decades to build a southern Valley freeway that would bypass central Phoenix for vehicles traveling Interstate 10 between California and Tucson and points farther east. This addition to Loop 202 would be a direct boon for East Valley residents who have personal or commercial business in any of those places, and navigating through Phoenix traffic is a drag on their time and money.

But failures of state and local officials to protect the freeway corridor allowed development to creep into its path, including higher-priced homes in Ahwatukee. This has contributed to the jump in the projected construction price tag from \$1 billion to \$2.4 billion and created more political opposition if the freeway can't be moved farther south onto relatively vacant land of the Gila River community.

Twice, the Gila River tribal council has voted to flatly reject any consideration of accepting the freeway. The message: Don't dump this massive problem on their shoulders, as has occurred so many times in the past to Native Americans.

The Ahwatukee Foothills News reported that advocates such as Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., and Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio emerged from a private Dec. 7 meeting with tribal officials with new hope that Gila River is now moving past this inflexibility. However, transportation officials said they aren't going to delay an environmental impact statement on the currently proposed route. They even contemplated a west-to-east construction plan to provide more time to negotiate with the tribe.

We previously have urged Gila River officials to look beyond past history and any personal animosity that might exist toward the state or Phoenix and to focus on the economic benefits likely to follow a new freeway across their community. Sitting down and talking about the possibility is a start. Quickly inviting freeway planners to study a potential alternative route would be even better.



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