

New freeway could be good news for commuters

In 1983, the Maricopa Association of Governments drew up the lines for what would one day become the Valley freeways, a transportation arterial system that would serve an ever-growing population.

Now, nearly 27 years later, the line that would complete the Loop 202 is starting to materialize. More importantly, it's a connection that could provide transportation relief for many Maricopans.

Currently, the plan for the new portion of Loop 202, known as the South Mountain Freeway, is to essentially build it atop Pecos Road from the Interstate 10 west and then turn north near 51st Avenue connecting with the I-10.

However, this plan has drawn criticism from residents of Ahwatukee because it would take out a church and an entire neighborhood of homes as well as cut holes through three ridges in Phoenix's South Mountain Preserve.

To seek a possible remedy for the situation, there have recently been talks with the Gila River Indian Community about possible locating the freeway one mile to the south to avoid the city and the mountain, but MAG senior engineer Bob Hazlett said there are no lines drawn for that plan yet.

Standing in the way of a possible reroute are two resolutions to work out with the Indian Community before the freeway could cut across their land. "These are older resolutions, but they would need to be addressed before a rerouting could be done," Hazlett said. He added there has been no movement of the community yet to disband those resolutions.

Questions have also been raised if the rerouting would save money. Hazlett said it would really depend on how the reroute was handled. "If it was just moved south to avoid the city or the mountain, it would end up costing more," he said. "But if the entire route was moved, it could save some money."

The Maricopa Association of Governments voted in October to spend \$1.9 billion to build the eight-lane extension of the Loop 202, exerting funds obtained from a Proposition 400 half-cent sales tax increase measure passed in 2004.

The first step to building the freeway is an environmental study that Hazlett said the group hopes to have ready for public review by the summer of 2010. The study will detail the options for the freeway and look at the ways to mitigate any potential impact its construction may have on the community.

The draft report also will discuss the "no-build alternative" for the entire South Mountain Freeway to examine the effects the MAG proposal. The public will have 45 days to review the document. During that comment period, two public hearings will be held on the contents of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

From there, the public will have another 30-day opportunity to comment on the Final Environmental Impact Statement. The comments received during both 45-day and 30-day comment periods will be used by Arizona Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration in making a final decision regarding the project.

It is a process that Hazlett predicts will be completed by the end of 2010. Once completed, Hazlett said a design process for the roadway is predicted to take a minimum of two years and the soonest construction would begin in 2013, with a construction timeline of four to five years.

"Stay tuned; we are trying our best to get this thing going," Hazlett said.

Submitted photo

