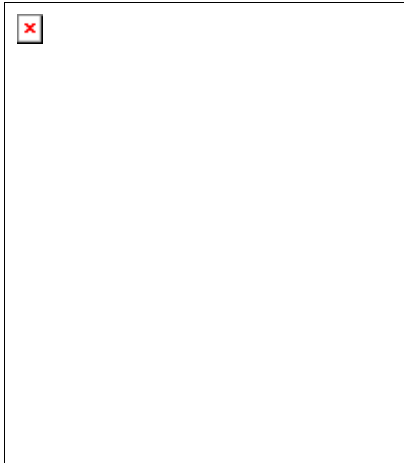




Momentum grows for alternative Loop 202 route

By [Doug Murphy](#)

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Both Gov. Jan Brewer and House Majority Leader John McComish have sent letters supporting efforts to explore moving the South Mountain Loop 202 Freeway away from Pecos Road.

"You have the two most powerful people in state government saying they want to make this work," said Councilman Sal DiCiccio. "This is a momentum builder that I've never seen before."

In her letter to Gila River Indian Community Gov. William Rhodes, Brewer pledges, "The full engagement of the Arizona Department of Transportation in working with you to consider the opportunities that may exist..."

And McComish, who wrote to ADOT director John Halikowski, said that "The potential delay in completing the Loop 202, in my opinion, is more than offset by avoiding the destruction of a portion of South Mountain Park and serious disruption to Ahwatukee homes and

neighborhoods."

"I think it's a win-win," said Jim Jochim, an opponent of the freeway on Pecos Road and a member of Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children, which plans to bring litigation if the freeway is approved on Pecos Road, near local schools.

Until recently, Pecos Road was considered the only possible route for the \$1.9 billion freeway, connecting Interstate 10 in Ahwatukee Foothills, traveling west and cutting through several ridges in South Mountain Park, then turning north to reconnect with I-10 in the West Valley, near 59th Avenue.

But at a private meeting Dec. 7 officials from the tribe, congressional offices, ADOT, the city of Phoenix and the Maricopa Association of Governments ended with tribal representatives open to the idea of a proposal to move the freeway south.

And while costs of moving the freeway south are unclear, since no study has been done on the tribal land, it is assumed that not cutting into the South Mountain ridges would save \$250 million.

"This is a great Christmas present for everyone, including the taxpayers," DiCiccio said.

An assumption over the past decade was that the Gila River Indian Community wouldn't consider an alternative route for the Loop 202, which was penciled in along Pecos Road in 1985.

And the tribal council has twice passed resolutions opposing a freeway on Indian land.

But, until recently, no one had ever attempted to present a proposal for the tribe to consider.

DiCiccio created a citizens' group several months ago to lobby for a comprehensive proposal he has been working on, which could include:

- A land swap of federal wilderness in the Estrella Mountains, which the Gila River Indian Community considers sacred.
- Address the large amounts of truck traffic that used 51st Avenue, a county road, to travel through the Indian community of Komatke, which local residents consider a hazard for children.
- A land exchange where the tribe would get some privately-owned parcels within the tribe's reservation.

While players in the unfolding drama were optimistic, the Indian community is divided on the pros and cons of allowing a freeway on tribal land and it is unclear if a ballot initiative asking tribal members to allow a freeway would pass.

The next step would be for the Gila River Indian Community to formally ask ADOT to make a proposal, which could happen in the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, ADOT officials were continuing to finish a draft Environmental Impact Statement, which shows Pecos Road as the only alternative route for the stern leg of the freeway. That report was expected to be approved by federal officials and released to the public this summer. It's unclear how much of the EIS will need to be rewritten, or how long it will take, if the tribe does entertain a proposal.

"As long as there is dialogue and open communication, that's good," Jochim said.