

Tribe against South Mountain Freeway on land - for now

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Last month, officials from the [Gila River Indian Community](#) confirmed they are willing to talk to state officials about constructing the planned South Mountain Freeway on tribal land.

For residents of the [Ahwatukee Foothills](#) and others who oppose plans to build the extension of the Loop 202 through neighborhoods and part of South Mountain Park, building the freeway on [Gila River](#) land would be a welcome solution. But many issues remain to be settled before a deal can be signed.

Tribal public information officer Alia Maisonet recently responded to questions about the freeway planning process from Arizona Republic reporters Cathryn Creno, Sean Holstege and Scott Wong.

Question: Does the Gila River Tribal Council intend to issue a letter to the Arizona Department of Transportation and the [Maricopa Association of Governments](#) requesting a proposal for the freeway on

tribal land? If so, when would that letter be sent?

Answer: The (Gila River) Transportation Technical Team is taking the lead on this portion of the Loop 202 issue. It is currently doing due diligence and sounding out community members. It anticipates making such a request from MAG/ADOT some time in early 2010.

A key point: While we do plan to make such a request, that should not be interpreted as the community consenting to an on-reservation alignment.

While we're open to exploratory conversations and to considering proposals, the community's current official position remains the same:

- We absolutely oppose any desecration of [South Mountain](#), as would be the case, for example, with the current off-reservation alignment.
- We currently oppose an on-reservation alignment. However, the community recognizes that there is a high likelihood that the Loop 202 will be built and it is in our best interests - and our neighbors' best interests - to explore all options to mitigate any negative impacts on the communities

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involved.

Q: What would the approval process for the freeway be? How quickly could the tribe put a proposal to a popular vote?

A: Any transportation-related proposals would be submitted to the Transportation Technical Team for review. After TTT review, the proposal would go through the community's committee process and then finally come before the (Gila River Indian) Community Council.

Because this is such a highly sensitive internal political matter for the community, the council may consider putting this matter to a vote via referendum. The council could also reaffirm the current position of the community.

Currently, there is no timeline for considering whether to allow an on-reservation alignment. That timeline, if it is to happen, will come once we complete the information-process we're in currently. **Q:** What are the minimum requirements ADOT (Arizona Department of Transportation) would have to trade to make the deal palatable for the community?

A: The community is determined to remain open-minded as this process moves

forward. As such, without a proposal to consider - one that outlines what the freeway alignment would be and what land would be needed - it's impossible to discuss negotiation terms. Though, as we said above, desecrating South Mountain would not be acceptable. Nor would a proposal that is not mutually beneficial to all concerned.

What is the present council's position on the 2005 resolution against the freeway?

At this point, the community's position stands.

Q: Does the tribe consider a Loop 202 extension on their land a benefit because it takes local truck traffic off 51st Avenue and out of St. Johns or a negative because it destroys native land?

A: Like any community dealing with a complicated issue, people have differing points of view on this issue. It simply depends who you ask. Some members see it as a benefit; others see it as a negative.

Q: What are the internal tribal politics? Where does leadership stand? How does the general community stand?

A: Politics are the same on and off the reservation; the leaders of Gila River have to

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strike a delicate balance, between the constituents they must answer to and their duty to make the best possible decisions for the community as whole.

There are a variety of opinions on how best to proceed and there will continue to be fluctuations in that mindset, at least until we have a concrete proposal on the table to discuss.

Q: Why was a freeway discussion like last month's meeting with the federal and state officials not possible 10 years ago?

A: Discussions did occur years ago and discussions have continued to occur - though perhaps not with the same degree of fanfare and under such formal circumstances. One historic point worth noting: Years ago, the community's proposals for a Queen Creek freeway alignment and for a toll road were both rejected.

Q: Describe Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio's role in the freeway negotiations.

A: With all due respect, the councilman's role has been minimal thus far. His encouragement to have everyone work together has been appreciated, of course.

Q: The Arizona Republic has found records showing DiCiccio in 2006 was a consultant to ADOT. Did this involve discussion of the Loop 202? What else did this involve?

A: I was unaware of his relationship with the department.

Q: Has the tribe had any meetings, understandings, deals reached with any federal agency regarding a land-swap that would help move the freeway to tribal land?

A: I am unaware of any such meetings or discussions.

Q: What has to happen to acquire the BLM land in the Estrella Mountains?

A: I don't know.

Q: What is the significance of that land to the Gila River Indian Community?

A: The Estrellas are of cultural significance to the community and are still considered ancestral lands.

Q: Where in general could a southern alternative freeway route go? How much of the land is owned by the committee and how much by private land owners, or allottees?

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A: The answers to these questions will be entirely contingent on the proposals put forth by MAG (Maricopa Association of Governments) and by ADOT. Once they have a proposed alignment, I'll be in a better position to give you an answer. say is, that's still up in the air.

Q: Will I drive on Loop 202 through GRIC land?

A. Again, the Community remains open to considering proposals from MAG and the state. Once those proposals reach us, they will be evaluated by our TTT and other tribal government entities. From there, they will rise or fall based on their merits. If they make sense for the Community, our members, our neighbors and the state, then such a freeway would be possible. If the proposals don't make sense, then the answer to the above will be no. It's that simple.

Q: What are the potential environmental pitfalls of moving the freeway onto GRIC?

A: No matter where they're built - on tribal land, state trust land or private land - freeways impact the surrounding environment. If we reach the construction phase on this stretch of freeway, the community would need to be assured that

every effort has been made to mitigate such impacts.

Is a land swap in the Estrellas a pre-condition for approving a freeway proposal? Does the GRIC have to secure Estrella land before the freeway can be built?

I am unaware that any negotiating terms have been developed. As I said above, we're working hard to be open-minded here. Any proposal will be evaluated on its merits, without preconceptions.

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