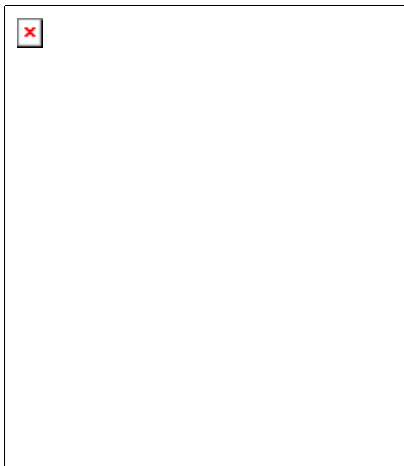




## Loop 202 recess over

By [Doug Murphy Ahwatukee Foothills News](#)

2010-01-26 10:02:02



Planning for the South Mountain Loop 202 shifts from park to drive Thursday night with the first meeting of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team in 14 months.

The meeting will focus on changes to the Maricopa Association of Government's (MAG) master transportation plan and how that, plus budget cuts, have reshaped the freeway's design.

"MAG is the only speaker, so it will really focus on what has happened over the year we've been in recess," said Tim Tait, a spokesman for the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT).

The meeting will be from 6 to 8 p.m. at South Mountain Community College, 7050 S. 24th St., in the Student Union.

The advisory team is made up of residents from Ahwatukee Foothills, Laveen and Estrella areas of Phoenix, to advise ADOT on the route

and design of the freeway.

The Loop 202 would start at Interstate 10 in Ahwatukee Foothills, move west along Pecos Road, through several ridges on South Mountain Park, then north to reconnect to I-10 around 55th Avenue.

The push to move forward with the Pecos Road alignment comes as members of the Gila River Indian Community debate the merits of allowing ADOT to look at a possible route south of Pecos Road.

It's also caused some freeway opponents to question why the process is moving forward.

"After spinning their wheels for 15 years, now it's a top priority?" asked Pat Lawlis, president of Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children, which opposed the freeway.

"I realize that ADOT is doing what MAG told them to do, which is barrel full-speed ahead, but I think it's a waste of time and money," Lawlis said.

She pointed out that if the Gila River Indian Community eventually does approve a path for the freeway that doesn't demolish Ahwatukee Foothills homes or cut through ridges in South Mountain, much of the planning will have to be tossed and new studies begun.

But according to Tait, ADOT plans to move ahead on a draft environmental impact statement for the project.

"We are moving forward with the intent of holding public hearings this year," he said.

Tait conceded the Gila River Indian Community has not sent a letter allowing ADOT engineers to look at possible routes south of Pecos Road, but if that does happen, "we will adjust the process accordingly."

The freeway has been under a cloud almost from the beginning. First conceived 40 years ago, the Loop

202 has been on the maps since 1985, but budget problems soon relegated it to the back burner. In January 2002 the planning process was restarted to take into account changes since the plan was originally drawn.

But while plans for the freeway were on hold, development in Ahwatukee Foothills extended to the edge of the proposed freeway, and in some cases into the freeway's proposed path. When planning to design it began in earnest in 2002, opposition soon mounted to the proposed demolition of more than 250 homes to make way for a freeway that many said wasn't needed.

Since then opponents have come out against cutting through the South Mountain ridges, which the Gila River Indian Community consider sacred, questions about air pollution and the proximity of so many Ahwatukee Foothills schools have gone mostly unanswered. Broader questions about the merits of the Loop 202 to solve any transportation needs also have been raised.

With the economy in the tank and sales tax revenues drying up over the past two years, money also has become a major issue.

The freeway was originally thought to cost \$1 billion, but by 2008 was up to \$2.4 billion for 10 lanes.

MAG, which is in charge of Valley transportation planning, is facing a \$6.6 billion deficit as sales tax revenues earmarked for Valley freeways plummet and the cost of freeway construction rises.

Last year MAG dumped several freeway projects but not the Loop 202.

"We're in our ninth year of study, and it's time to make a decision," said Eric Anderson, transportation director for MAG, and who will be at Thursday's meeting. "We're anxious to get the environmental impact statement completed and get on with it."

Under MAG's new plan, the freeway would slim down to eight lanes and because ADOT already owns almost all the land needed, the number of Ahwatukee Foothills homes that would have to be removed is cut from 250 to 100.