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ADOT: 'Two good options' for South Mountain Freeway

by **Cathryn Creno** - Jul. 26, 2010 02:52 PM
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Arizona Department of Transportation and Gila River Indian Community experts are nearly finished with a study of alternative routes for the South Mountain Freeway through tribal land.

The committee of experts is expected to present a report to tribal officials by the end of summer.

ADOT spokesman Tim Tait said Monday that representatives from his agency and Gila River's Transportation Technical Team have found "two good options" for freeway routes in the northern section of the the Gila River Indian Reservation, just south of Ahwatukee.

"That's fantastic. It's a great first step," said Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio, who represents Ahwatukee and has been one of the main opponents of building a freeway through the Foothills.

Current plans call for the freeway - a 22-mile extension of Loop 202 that will connect Laveen to Chandler - to take out a church and more than 100 homes in Ahwatukee and cut through three ridges in the South Mountain Preserve.

In January, Gila River Gov. William Rhodes invited ADOT engineers to study possible construction of the Loop 202 bypass on flat, empty reservation land just south of the current planned alignment.

The tribe has long opposed construction of the 202 on its land but Rhodes said he believes an Ahwatukee alignment also would be detrimental to the area, particularly because it would destroy part of South Mountain.

Both Alia Maisonet, tribal public information officer, and Tait, said that since then, a small group of engineers and other experts have quietly been studying possible alignments on the reservation.

"Part of the work has been to review areas that are sites of cultural sensitivity" that freeway builders would need to work around, Tait said.

DiCiccio and Tait both cautioned that the report will be just the first of many steps that tribe must take before it would agree to allow the 202 to be constructed on its land.

For one thing, Tait said, the GRIC tribal council likely would need to rescind a 2005 resolution against the freeway "in order to move beyond the conceptual phase into serious discussion or serious planning" or the community would have to rescind the measure by referendum.