

New South Mountain freeway proposals a hit in Ahwatukee

by **Cathryn Creno** - Jul. 30, 2010 07:48 AM
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Officials who back the idea of moving the planned route of Loop 202 between Chandler and Laveen to Gila River Indian Community land applauded news this week that a team of experts found two potential freeway routes on the reservation.

"It's very good to see that ADOT's efforts to work with the Gila River Indian Community is bearing fruit," U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Tempe, said.

Last December, Mitchell met with state and tribal leaders, the Arizona Department of Transportation and tribe officials to take a look at the possibility of building the so-called South Mountain Freeway on flat, empty land south of Ahwatukee Foothills.

Current plans call for the eight-lane, \$1.9 billion freeway to take out 120 homes and a church along Pecos Road in Ahwatukee, 64 homes in western Phoenix and cut three ridges in the South Mountain Preserve.

"I look forward to hearing more about the proposals and encourage everybody involved to keep working toward a more sensible route than Pecos Road," Mitchell said.

The only thing ADOT said about the potential freeway routes through Gila River land is the routes are on the northern part of the reservation.

More information will not be available until GRIC's Technical Transportation Team and tribal officials review the potential routes, ADOT spokesman Tim Tait said.

"I give a lot of credit to GRIC and ADOT for getting this far, but I think there is still a long way to go," said Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio, whose district includes Ahwatukee and, like Mitchell, has worked behind the scenes to get the state and tribe to talk to each other about the planned freeway.

The Gila River Tribal Council passed a resolution against building the 202 on tribal land in 2005. It likely would have to be rescinded before formal plans for the freeway would be designed, Tait said.

"Any news involving the study of alternative options to Pecos Road is good news for Ahwatukee," said Ahwatukee resident Chad Blostone, a member of ADOT's South Mountain Community Advisory Committee and the Ahwatukee Village Planning Committee.

"That said, I caution community members against getting too excited. The conceptual study is the easy part," he said, adding that persuading the Maricopa Association of Governments and ADOT "to make a good-faith effort and, more specifically, a fair offer to the Gila Community will be the difficult, time-consuming part of the process."

Freeway opponent Laurel Arndt, a former member of ADOT's South Mountain Community Advisory Team, said a glitch might be GRIC private-property owners.

Although the tribe owns much of the land in the community, some land immediately south of Pecos Road is privately owned, which could complicate negotiations, she said.

State officials said they hope to get federal approval for plans for South Mountain in 2011. Construction could begin as early as 2013.

Ahwatukee residents were cautiously optimistic.

"Personally, I think it's fantastic news, assuming that the alignment is a bare minimum of a quarter mile south of Pecos (Road)," said David Caplan, who lives a few blocks from the planned freeway route. "But so as long as it's far enough away from Pecos that nothing gets torn down, and that the noise and air pollution is at a minimum, I can live with it."

Resident Susi Fathauer supports the South Mountain Freeway and does not object to it being constructed in Ahwatukee. She said she is glad the freeway planning process is moving forward. "We need the South Mountain Freeway construction to get started as soon as possible," she said. "Traffic is only getting worse."