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SERVING ALL SEVEN DISTRICTS OF THE GILA RIVER INDIAN COMMUNITY

Proposed South Mountain Freeway is the Topic of Public Outreach

By Mihio Manus, GRIN Managing Editor

SACATON-Members of GRIC's Transportation Technical Team (TTT) and Public Information Office (PIO) have recently undertaken a public outreach effort to provide the Community with an update regarding the South Mountain Transportation Corridor Study (SMTCS).

On Wed, Dec. 8, an outreach was presented at the Elder Concerns Meeting held at the D3 Service Center. Councilmen Anthony Villareal, D6, Myron Schurz, D3, and John Antone, D4 were in attendance. Also in attendance was GRIC Chief of Staff, Greg Mendoza.

"We're discussing a critical issue to the Community and trying to get the word out," said Alia Maisonet, GRIC Public Information Officer. Maisonet sought to receive input from the elders based on their opinions about the freeway.

"Loop 202 is a big issue," Maisonet said. "Whether or not GRIC formally proposes to bring the freeway onto Community land, the state and county will move forward with construction on the E1 alignment. [They're] pressing forward with completing the 202."

Senior Community Manager and member of the TTT, David White emphasized that the Community is currently going through a number of changes. "What we're going to share with you is more opportunity for change," he said.

Because growth is inevitable within the Community and also in the surrounding municipalities, the resulting expansion of Loop 202 is an issue the Community must deal with.

White said that GRIC as a whole is concerned with the impacts of growth and the

South Mountain Freeway Alignment is a proposal that will impact GRIC. The South Mountain freeway has become a major priority with the Maricopa Association of Governments and because GRIC is a part of MAG, it is necessary for the Community to voice their concerns.

Through Proposition 400, the budget to fund this project was proposed. Proposition 400 was passed by Maricopa voters on Nov. 2, 2004 and it extends a half-cent transportation sales tax for the next 20 years to fund freeway construction.

There are many issues to contemplate before the Community will consider moving forward with a GRIC alignment. Among these are environmental concerns, which focus on the social, economic, and environmental character of the area surrounding the GRIC alignment. The Community would

like to protect the cultural resources and culturally significant areas that could be affected by the proposed South Mountain freeway. Air quality, hazardous materials and noise are areas of significant impact that the Community would like to see addressed in any proposed alignment.

"We're engaged with ADOT and MAG to make everyone aware and to put everyone on the same page," White said.

Beyond these issues, the GRIC alignment has yet to be met with approval by Community members and those landowners whose land parcels it will impact directly. "Should we decide to consider this align-

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ment then land values come into play," White said. "We want feedback on what's being proposed."

ADOT's Proposed South Mountain Freeway cuts into South Mountain. As a member of the TTT and a councilman representing D6, Anthony Villareal Sr., told the elders that his district is concerned about this. "South Mountain is sacred and important to the Community. There is a shrine there and we want to preserve this," he said.

Villareal Sr., likened extending Loop 202 to having freeway being built in the backyard of those who live in D6.

"We get offers from congressmen and senators," he said. "They want this freeway on the reservation."

The D6 Councilman pointed out that originally there was a 'no build' option, which was presented along with the E1 Alternative, but that is no longer an option being proposed.

"Community members are for or against this. Landowners are for or against this and this is what we're up against," Villareal Sr. said. "The district still stands in our position. We're against it."

Nathaniel Percharo, a representative for a landowners group, spoke to the Elder Concern group telling them that what the

landowners want doesn't necessarily pertain to money. He said the group is looking toward the opinions of the Community to gauge what it is they want. "We inherited this land from our ancestors. What do we want for our ancestors?" he asked.

Percharo went on to say, "I'd hate for people to get the wrong idea that we're trying to line our pockets. We want what's best for the people."

As it stands, the Community is faced with a complex decision on how to resolve the Loop 202 extension, which impacts GRIC on multiple levels both politically and culturally. Those closest to the development, D6 residents, have made it clear that they oppose the freeway being built on Community land. However, if ADOT moves forward with the freeway as they propose, it will cut into South Mountain, which is a sacred mountain to the GRIC.

Based on the issues and possible dilemmas which exists within both proposals, GRIC's Public Information Office, Transportation Technical Team and Department of Transportation are moving forward with Community outreach to gauge where the Community stands on this issue and how it will affect the Community as a whole.