

Tribal route preferable to harming preserve

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The Arizona Republic

Few people disagree on the need to build the [South Mountain](#) Freeway. But few people would say that the proposed route through Ahwatukee Foothills is ideal. It would require blasting through a beloved mountain preserve, bulldozing homes and impacting a large swath of suburban development.

Now, the [Gila River Indian Community](#) is willing to consider allowing the alignment on tribal land.

It's a welcome alternative that has been mentioned for years but has never before been really on the table. A lot of discussion lies ahead, and the deal is far from a sure thing.

The tribe's preference, reiterated at a recent meeting with The Republic's Editorial Board, is not to have the freeway built at all.

But the Arizona Department of Transportation's planned alignment would require leveling three ridgelines at the western end of South Mountain, which is sacred to the Gila River Community. Tribal Gov. William Rhodes said that if the road is going ahead, building it on [tribal land](#) is preferable to destroying part of the mountain.

The South Mountain Freeway is critical both locally and regionally.

Residents of Ahwatukee live in what is popularly known as the world's biggest cul-de-sac. Right now, the only major way out is traffic-choked Interstate 10 to the east. The

South Mountain Freeway would give them an outlet on the west.

Connecting Chandler and Laveen, the new freeway would also give eastbound [cars and trucks](#) a way to bypass downtown Phoenix, reducing congestion and pollution. The ripple effects of the improved traffic flow would extend far into the Valley.

The Gila River Community would benefit from improved access to its [Wild Horse](#) Pass development. A lucrative commercial corridor could develop along the way.

The experience of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community gives an idea of the potential payoff. When Scottsdale balked, [ADOT](#) leased the Loop 101 alignment on tribal land. Individual landowners did well, and the tribe has more and more developments along the freeway.

Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio is pressing for the Gila River route as a "win-win," and he is playing an important role in moving it forward. We would be more comfortable if DiCiccio didn't stand to profit handsomely from his commercial deals on tribal land.

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DiCiccio points out that he wasn't in office when he made the investments or worked as a consultant. And he says he won't vote on the freeway. Ethics experts differ on whether DiCiccio has allowed his personal and public roles to blur together too much. He must take extra steps to avoid conflicts of interests and give the public full disclosure.

Some Ahwatukee residents are raking ADOT over the coals for not making a concrete proposal for a route on tribal land previously. But the tribe voted no on the freeway. Twice. Presenting a plan under those circumstances would have been an affront.

Now, the Gila River Community has invited a proposal. Tribal members, used to a peaceful rural lifestyle, will have to weigh the benefits for themselves. We're glad they're willing to look.

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