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55th Avenue route pushed for freeway

Southwest Valley cities make push for 55th Avenue

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The Arizona Republic

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The Arizona Department of Transportation is expected to announce its choice for the western route of the proposed South Mountain Freeway on Thursday.

Political leaders from Phoenix to Tolleson have been busy cementing a coalition in support of the original alignment that city officials say they have banked on since the mid-1980s.

Although the Loop 101 alternative seems to have more support from ordinary citizens, political might has come down strongly in favor of connecting the freeway's western leg to Interstate 10 at 55th Avenue.

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ADOT could be in for a political fight if it goes with anything other than that original 55th Avenue plan.

The Loop 101 connection could cut through six-square-mile Tolleson and dent Avondale's sales-tax revenues. Tolleson leaders have made it clear that they will challenge in court any attempt to bisect their city.

"I'm sure that we have people who are landowners, business owners, who will jump in with us as well," Tolleson Mayor Adolfo Gamez said.

After more than two decades of delays and money shortfalls, ADOT is pushing ahead with plans to build the South Mountain Freeway, the final piece of Loop 202.

The freeway, which could cost up to \$2 billion, would loop around South Mountain Park from I-10 south of Ahwatukee Foothills to I-10 in the West Valley.

The original alignment first proposed in 1985 connected the western leg to I-10 around 55th

Avenue.

A federal study launched in 2001 required ADOT to examine several options for that western connection. The agency narrowed its choices to the original 55th Avenue route, 71st Avenue and Loop 101.

Although the final decision on the freeway's route won't come from the Federal Highway Administration until fall 2007, ADOT wants to settle the question now to alleviate the uncertainty that has held homeowners, governments and developers hostage.

The 71st Avenue option has little political support and is essentially off the table. The decision is between Loop 101 and 55th Avenue.

Prompted by Tolleson's plight, Phoenix, Avondale, Buckeye, Goodyear, Litchfield Park, Peoria and Gila Bend have passed resolutions supporting the 55th Avenue alignment.

Tolleson also contacted Reps. Raul Grijalva and Ed Pastor, who have passed their opposition to the Loop 101 option on to ADOT.

The board of the Western Maricopa Coalition, an alliance of West Valley governments and businesses, likely will support the 55th Avenue alignment when it votes on the issue today, President and Chief Executive Officer Jack Lunsford said.

Backers of the 55th Avenue plan say they are ready to press on with the project after too many years of delay.

"I wouldn't even say this horse is in the middle of the stream. I'd say this horse is near the other bank. It would be really difficult to change courses," Lunsford said. In April, a citizen advisory panel appointed by ADOT in 2002 voted in favor of the Loop 101 connection, saying its neat link-up with another freeway made sense. That argument resonates with many.

"The 101 to me is the most logical," said Cheryl Babcock of Laveen, who has followed the issue. Any other plan "is going to create one bottleneck from the 101 to wherever they put it."

However, political will is nearly uniformly behind the original plan.

Phoenix has invested heavily in the original alignment, leaving wide swaths of land vacant along the planned path.

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