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Eight-lane freeway back on track for 202 extension

by **Cathryn Creno** - Aug. 3, 2009 09:20 AM
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The latest plan for the extension of Loop 202, which would connect Chandler with west Phoenix, calls for an eight-lane freeway through the Ahwatukee Foothills and the South Mountain preserve.

The new proposal by the Maricopa Association of Governments for the South Mountain Freeway, which would extend 22 miles from Interstate 10 at Pecos Road to I-10 and 59th Avenue, would cost \$1.9 billion, said MAG transportation director Eric Anderson. Construction could begin as soon as 2017, he said.

The figure is about \$570 million less than earlier projections, he said.

Anderson said members of the MAG Regional Council and the MAG Transportation Policy Committee, comprised of Valley officials and citizens appointed by the Arizona State Legislature, have copies of the draft and will meet for a discussion in October.

Earlier this year, MAG planners had proposed building a 45-mile-per-hour parkway for the section of the proposed South Mountain Freeway through the Ahwatukee Foothills section of Phoenix and part of the South Mountain preserve. Prior to that, a 10-lane freeway had been planned.

Many Ahwatukee residents oppose any sort of extension of the 202 through their community and South Mountain, saying the traffic will bring noise and pollution and possibly harm wildlife in the park.

"Trust me, if they are proposing eight lanes it eventually be 10," said Ahwatukee resident and longtime freeway opponent Jim Jochim, "And they are still planning to blast through South Mountain."

The freeway also has become a campaign issue in a four-way race for the Phoenix City Council's District 6 seat.

But state and county officials say the extension of the 202 is needed to divert traffic from overburdened roads further north and to create an additional link between the southeast and southwest Valleys.

The new proposal calls for the freeway to have three 65 mph freeway lanes and one high-occupancy-vehicle lane in each direction, Anderson said.

Exits would be at 23rd Avenue, 17th Avenue, Desert Foothills Parkway, 24th Street and 40th Street, he said.

Plans also call for the construction of a path for bicycles, pedestrians and equestrians between 17th and 51st avenues in the South Mountain preserve.

"The path will provide better access to South Mountain than they have today," Anderson said.

Funds for the project are to come from three sources: A half-cent regional sales tax and state and federal highway funds, he said.

If the MAG committees approve the new plan, it will be forwarded to the Arizona Department of Transportation, which will study the environmental impact for the U.S. Department of Transportation Federal Highway Administration.

Timothy Tait, ADOT community relations director, said his agency will evaluate whether the proposed path of the freeway would harm any endangered species or sites that are considered sacred to Native American committees.

If such sites exist, he said, the freeway path most likely would be changed to accommodate them. He said it is unlikely that that plans for the extension would be cancelled entirely.