

U.S. Rep Harry Mitchell protests ADOT home-buy plans

by **Cathryn Creno** - Sept. 16, 2010 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

U.S. Rep Harry Mitchell has sent a letter to the head of the Arizona Department of Transportation objecting to the agency's purchase of homes along the path of the planned South Mountain Freeway in Ahwatukee Foothills.

The Tempe Democrat expressed concern that ADOT's purchases are contributing to depressed property values along the planned Loop 202 extension, which would connect Chandler to Laveen with an eight-lane freeway.

He also said that additional land purchases along the planned route may be unnecessary because the Gila River Indian Community is in talks with the state about a possible freeway alignment on reservation land south of Ahwatukee.

The home-purchasing program was disclosed by *The Republic* on Sept. 6.

"I believe this is the wrong time for ADOT to be purchasing homes in Ahwatukee for a proposed alignment that ultimately may never happen," Mitchell told ADOT director John Halikowski.

Halikowski and Dennis Smith, executive director for the Maricopa Association of Governments, responded to Mitchell in a joint letter, pointing out ADOT is doing

nothing new by purchasing houses in the planned freeway path. They said the agency was purchasing only houses that owners could no longer keep because of illnesses, job transfers or other hardships.

Only three homeowners have qualified for the program in the past two years, officials wrote.

Since the 1980s, when the Loop 202 route was first sketched out, ADOT has spent \$8.7 million in state funds to buy hardship-program homes in Ahwatukee Foothills and Laveen.

So far this year, ADOT has spent \$126,000 to buy one home in Ahwatukee and is in the process of buying one more, agency official have said.

ADOT bought one hardship house in 2009 for \$264,000 and 12 in 2008 for a total \$3.9 million.

"Despite the recent discussions with the Gila River Indian Community, ADOT and MAG have an obligation to continue moving ahead with the study and addressing the needs of the community as best as possible,"

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Halikowski and Smith wrote.

ADOT and Gila River officials met Aug. 31 to discuss the merits of two possible routes through the reservation that would save homes in Ahwatukee and Laveen, an Ahwatukee church and sections of the South Mountain Preserve from being taken out by the freeway.

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