Major freeway decision due today f

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A Maricopa Association of Governments committee is expected to approve a plan today to extend Loop 202 for 22 miles through Ahwatukee and South Mountain Park, connecting Chandler to Laveen with an eight-lane freeway.

The MAG Transportation Policy Committee meets at 4 p.m. in the MAG Saguaro Room, 302 N. First Ave., in Phoenix.

The planned South Mountain Freeway would cost $1.9 billion – about $570 million less than an earlier 10-lane freeway proposed by transportation officials. It would start at Interstate 10 at Pecos Road and end at I-10 and 59th Avenue.

After today's vote, the MAG Regional Council is expected to give final approval to the plan Oct. 28.

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

"Even though we are in this big city of Phoenix, it's like our own little town in Ahwatukee," said Brian Smith, who has volunteered time on the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team, a board that advises ADOT on community freeway impact.

"It's hard to have that sense of community in a place like Phoenix. A freeway coming in could destroy that."

Smith also said MAG's plan would create "significant, irreparable" damage to South Mountain Park.

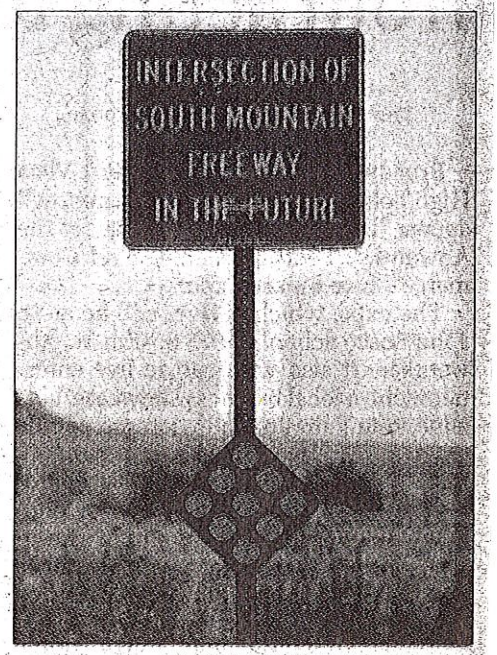
Chad Blostone, a longtime freeway opponent who now heads an eight-member committee to fight the freeway put together by Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio, said he does not believe the freeway would help alleviate traffic congestion in Ahwatukee or on Interstate 10. He thinks most drivers are heading north to work in the mornings, not west.

"The freeway plan is not about citizens," he said. "It's about trucks that need to bypass downtown Phoenix and get to warehouses in west Phoenix."

Not so, say freeway supporters like those in Laveen who are counting on the 202 to bring economic development to their side of town.

"Delaying the freeway any longer is holding up progress," said Phoenix City Councilman Michael Nowakowski, who represents District 7 in west Phoenix.

"In Laveen, we need development. We need a hospital. We want more retail. Developers have told us that we need the freeway to come through for this to come in."



DAVID KADLUBOWSKI/THE REPUBLIC

A city of Phoenix sign marks the proposed South Mountain Freeway extension at 24th Street and Pecos Road.

He appealed to freeway opponents to consider the traffic needs of metro Phoenix, not just their own part of town.

"We need to look for the betterment of the whole city of Phoenix with the Loop 202," Nowakowski said. "We don't want to become another LA with traffic jam after traffic jam."

Some Ahwatukee residents are starting to say it's time to stop the debate and make a decision.

Most homeowners and real-estate salespeople with listings near the freeway path acknowledge that the bad economy is hurting the housing market. But they say the freeway debate is making things even worse.

Susan Miller is a real-estate saleswoman who has a listing in a neighborhood right next to one that would be taking out by the freeway. A few years ago, the 1,600-square-foot house near Desert Vista High School would have be snapped up quickly. But it has lingered on the market for more than 100 days, even at a reduced price of $199,000, Miller said.

"It's been awful – one complication after another," she said.

"Two years ago, these homes appraised

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South Mountain Freeway proposal

Year proposed: 1985.

Proposed size: Eight lanes, including three lanes in each direction plus two carpool lanes.

Proposed length: 22 miles, starting at Interstate 10.

Proposed exits: At Desert Foothills Parkway, 24th and 40th streets and 23rd and 17th avenues.

Projected cost: $1.9 billion.

Projected start of construction: 2017.

Online: View the draft of the Maricopa Association of Government's latest proposal at www.mag.maricopa.gov/detail.cms?item=10445

Source: Arizona Department of Transportation, Maricopa Association of Governments.

at $950,000," said Bridget Shaffer, who lives in another subdivision near the freeway path called Foothills Reserve. "I had my home appraised a year ago at $575,000. I had it appraised four months ago at $350,000.

"When I first moved here a year ago, we could not have cars in the street, basketball hoops out front, garbage cans sitting out and bushes and trees and hedges had to be trimmed. Now, anything goes."

"Let's get the people of Ahwatukee out of their ambiguous situation," MAG Transportation Director Eric Anderson said.

Anderson and other MAG officials met last week with DiCiccio and other officials and agreed to a proposal by the councilman to talk with members of the Gila River Indian Community about routing the 202 south of Ahwatukee on tribal land.

But Anderson said people who live in Ahwatukee should not hold their breath.

"We want to accommodate the councilman's desire," Anderson said.

"But we also talked with a representative from the Gila River Indian Community and they confirmed that they have a (tribal council) resolution in place against the freeway on tribal land. The tribe has accepted that the freeway will be on Pecos and they want to move forward and talk about traffic interchanges."

Timeline

1983: The Maricopa Association of Governments, or MAG, begins planning a freeway network for metro Phoenix. It includes a South Mountain Transportation Corridor around South Mountain between Interstate 10 and Chandler Boulevard and I-10 and 51st Avenue.

1985: Maricopa County voters approve a half-cent sales tax to fund construction of the MAG Regional Freeway System. It includes plans for a 22-mile freeway connecting I-10 in Chandler with I-10 in west Phoenix.

1988: Preliminary plans for the South Mountain Freeway are sketched out. A decision is made to put the freeway along Pecos Road in Ahwatukee.

1994: Because of a state funding shortfall, the South Mountain Freeway is put on hold. Officials begin discussions about a privately funded toll road in the South Mountain Transportation Corridor.

1996: A consortium of private companies proposes to build the South Mountain Freeway as a toll road. The consortium later changes its mind, saying the project is not financially feasible.

1999: The Arizona Department of Transportation announces plans to accelerate completion of the regional freeway system, including the South Mountain Freeway.

2001: ADOT begins a formal study of the South Mountain Freeway area.

2004: Voters approve extending the half-cent sales tax to continue regional freeway funding. The plan includes the South Mountain Freeway.

2007: At public-information meetings to receive input from the community about the planned freeways, there is heated debate about the Pecos Road alignment for the South Mountain.

2008: A proposal for a 10-lane South Mountain Freeway linking Chandler to west Phoenix through Ahwatukee and around South Mountain is formally discussed.

2009: MAG planners reduce the size of the planned freeway to eight lanes to reduce costs. Planners reject a proposed parkway through Ahwatukee with a speed limit of 45 mph, saying it would create traffic snarls.

Sources: Arizona Department of Transportation, Republic research.