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Future of 202 in Ahwatukee to clear

By Allison Hurtado, Ahwatukee Foothills News | Posted: Tuesday, February 24, 2015 6:00 am

In a matter of weeks the future of the contentious South Mountain Freeway could be clearer for Valley residents.

The final portion of the Loop 202, the South Mountain Freeway, has been on the books since 1985, but a lack of funding and interest has kept the project from moving forward. People in favor of the freeway say it will bring much needed economic development to Laveen and improve traffic congestion on Interstate 10, but the freeway is seeing serious opposition from environmentalists, emergency planners, and Ahwatukee Foothills residents living close to the proposed path.

If the freeway is built as currently proposed, close to 200 homes will be destroyed in Ahwatukee Foothills, as well as a popular church, Mountain Park

Community Church. It will be built close to homes and above ground, which many residents fear will cause too much noise and pollution.

“If you look at the 202 there is every reason why it’s not a good freeway,” said Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio, who has been involved with the South Mountain Freeway since ’90s when he was asked to negotiate with the Gila River Indian Community. “The first thing is proximity to homes. It’s right there. The second is the proximity to the mountains and a preserve that we consider to be an icon in the city of Phoenix. There’s also noise reverberation going to be happening off the mountain. The final one is they’re going to be cutting through South Mountain Park.”

DiCiccio said he’s seen other freeways, like the Paradise Freeway, get cancelled for much less.

“It’s going to be \$1.9 billion dollars,” he said. “If they can’t work out a deal with the neighbors to the south I don’t see a reason for this freeway ... There is no logical sense for this freeway to be built. A small percentage of Ahwatukee will support it, but I don’t see the benefit.”

The Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) voted in February of 2012, asking community members if they would like to see the freeway built on GRIC land, in Phoenix or not at all. The tribe voted



Loop 202

PARC President Pat Lawlis, right, and Secretary Connie Squires stand on the western side of South Mountain, on Saturday, June 29, 2013, where the planned Loop 202 would cut through the ridges.

[David Jolkovski/Special to Tribune]

against building the freeway. Attempts to bring back the vote with only an on tribal land or off have been unsuccessful.

Sandy Bahr, of the Sierra Club's Grand Canyon chapter, said the group has been against this freeway from the very beginning, mainly because it feels it's unnecessary and poorly placed.

"We have a lot of freeways," she said. "What we don't have a lot of is alternatives to vehicles. That's something that's been lacking a long time ... there's still a lot more we can institute there. Building a new freeway is an old school way of dealing with transportation and it seems to be the answer the Phoenix area goes to."

Ahwatukee's most outspoken opposition is from a non-profit called Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children (PARC). The group includes HOAs, members of the Gila River Indian Community, environmentalists, emergency planners and residents. PARC submitted a 300-page document to the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) during the public comment period of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement full of reasons, from experts, it opposes the freeway. The group says ADOT's environmental study ignored the sacred nature of the mountain, effects of pollution from vehicle emissions, and necessary emergency planning.

ADOT has filed its Final Environmental Impact Statement for the South Mountain Freeway. It expects a Record Of Decision (ROD) to be released early this year.

A Facebook post from Rep. Ruben Gallego, who has been very involved with the freeway, advocating for it to be built, said he expects it to be out in March. PARC has said it plans to file a lawsuit stopping the freeway once the ROD is released.

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