

GILA RIVER TRIBE: SACRED SITES ON SOUTH MOUNTAIN TOP ISSUE IN 202 DEBATE

Posted: Friday, January 21, 2011 8:00 am | Updated 3:01 pm, Fri Jan 21, 2011.

By Ari Cohn, Ahwatukee Foothills News

Foremost on the mind of Gila River Indian Community members are the sacred sites and shrines on South Mountain that would be destroyed if plans to blast a freeway through the mountain proceed, says Alia Maisonet, the tribe's spokeswoman.

"The No. 1 concern by far is the desecration of that mountain," Maisonet said. "There are a number of areas of cultural significance that would be compromised."

However, there are other considerations to be weighed as the tribe conducts a series of community meetings expected to wrap up next month on whether to allow an extension of the Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway onto tribal lands.

Only recently have some of the Indian community's leaders begun to relent on a long-time opposition to the idea of moving the planned route off of Pecos Road - the border between Phoenix and the reservation - and onto tribal lands to the south. Last year, the tribe asked the Arizona Department of Transportation to submit possible designs for public consideration.

The planned \$1.9 billion, 22-mile extension has been in the works since the mid-1980s. The original proposal calls for putting it along Pecos Road west of Interstate 10 and cutting through three ridges on the west side of South Mountain before it moves north to reconnect with I-10 near 59th Avenue. The Pecos Road alignment also calls for the demolition of more than 100 Ahwatukee Foothills homes and Mountain Park Community Church.

The plan is the subject of an environmental impact study that is under way. Many living on the Phoenix side of the boundary have lobbied to move the route to the south, or to abandon it altogether.

Robert Hazlett, a senior engineer with the Maricopa Association of Governments, which is partnering with ADOT on the project, said that if it comes to punching the freeway through the mountain, the plans would try and avoid sacred places.

"The alignment does its best to avoid culturally sensitive sites in the area," he said.

However, if the Indian community agrees to the alternative, it would eliminate the need to blast, he said.

Maisonet said the tribe does not disclose the exact locations of sacred sites because it could make them more vulnerable to desecration.

"There are a number of cultural sites throughout the entire mountain," she said.

The alternative route, referred to as the GRIC alignment, would move the freeway up to a half-mile south onto lands owned by individual tribe members as well as some communal land, she said.

"A lot of it has been earmarked for agricultural use," Maisonet said.

Some tribe members have objected to giving up ancestral land for the freeway, she said. There are some tribe members, as well, who live in scattered homes near the west end of South Mountain who might be affected if the freeway is rerouted, she said.

Maisonet said some tribe members are concerned about the environmental impacts. This week, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved the tribe's air quality management plan, lauding the tribe as "a model for tribes nationwide."

"Gila River has done a fantastic job of developing an air quality plan that is unrivalled nationally in both breadth and depth," said Jared Blumenfeld, the EPA's administrator for the Pacific Southwest. "Gila River is the first tribe to accept such a high level of substantial responsibility for air quality on their reservation."

Maisonet said the freeway is sure to have some environmental consequences.

"The impacts to the community are going to be enormous, environmentally speaking," she said.

Hazlett said both freeway alternatives would have exits connecting to existing Ahwatukee streets, but if the freeway is moved to the south, it would require extending some of those streets onto tribal lands, as well. If the tribe agrees to the proposal, plans for the GRIC alignment would be included in the ongoing environmental impact study, he said.

Freeway construction would be paid for through regional transportation funds previously approved by Arizona voters, Hazlett said. The tribe likely would ask something in exchange for using its land, although talks have not progressed to that stage, he said.

"None of those discussions have been started," Hazlett said. "There would have to be something worked out there."

The cost of each alternative is expected to be roughly the same, since the GRIC alignment would be about a half-mile longer, he said.

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