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Hear Me Out: Should Arizona consider extension of Loop 202?

Reported by: ABC15.com staff

Last Update: 1/21 7:53 pm



Traffic

PHOENIX -- The nation faces tough questions in tough times, and there are people on both sides of every issue.

Arizona is no different. But who's saying what about the issues important to Arizonans?

ABC15.com has launched a weekly segment called "Hear Me Out," and each Sunday we're debuting an Arizona issue - along with two opposing sides on the topic.

Don't worry, you always have the opportunity to make comments at the bottom of the page. Yeah, your opinion matters too.

This week we're tackling the possible extension of the Phoenix freeway system to build the [Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway](#).

The freeway would connect Interstate 10 in the Southeast Valley with Interstate 10 in the West Valley - without taking drivers through downtown Phoenix.

[SEE THE PROPOSED FREEWAY MAP FROM ADOT](#)

Some say the South Mountain Freeway is an expensive extension and other regional transportation improvements should be considered first.

Others argue the Loop 202 extension is a necessary one that will lighten the load on Interstate 10 and make the drive easier for travelers moving between the East and West Valley.

So, should Arizona consider an extension of the Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway?
[Yes, the extension is necessary](#) [No, other options should be considered](#)

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Eric Anderson

By Eric Anderson
Transportation Director, Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG)

Recently an important meeting was held to discuss the South Mountain Freeway.

The meeting was held at the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) with the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) and included representatives from several agencies that have a direct interest in the corridor. We are encouraged that the GRIC is considering allowing the Arizona Department of Transportation the opportunity to conduct further studies.

The group discussed the importance of continuing with the engineering and environmental study of the proposed freeway, which currently follows an alignment along Pecos Road, going through a portion of the South Mountain Park and connecting to Interstate 10 along 59th Avenue.

It is important to complete this study, known as the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which is charged with finding, identifying and

assessing the impacts of the proposed freeway.

The EIS could be released for public review in 2010. This does not preclude further action in a supplemental EIS, if a future option is approved by residents of the Gila River Indian Community.

The South Mountain Freeway has been a critical part of the MAG Regional Freeway Program since it was first included in 1985.

The South Mountain Freeway is the last piece to complete the Loop 202 / Loop 101 system that provides high quality regional mobility. We have made great strides in building a regional freeway system.

Since 1985, the alignment was affirmed in the 1988 Environmental Assessment and once again as part of the Proposition 400 program that was approved by the voters in November 2004.

Over the years, extensive analysis and study has gone into the development of our freeway system, which is needed to support the four million people living in the metropolitan area today as well as the additional millions of new population expected over the next few decades.

This analysis continues to indicate that the South Mountain Freeway will carry, on average, more than 150,000 vehicles per day. Most of these vehicles are regional travelers moving between the East Valley and the West Valley.

Without the South Mountain Loop, traffic congestion on I-10, which is now the only freeway link from the Southeast Valley to the Southwest Valley, will continue to be a major bottleneck for both regional travelers and those traveling through the region.

Even with planned improvements to I-10, this critical route of national significance will continue to experience major congestion and delays.

The South Mountain Freeway is not being planned as a bypass route for traffic traveling through the Valley. A bypass for the metropolitan area is already in place with signs directing traffic to use I-8 and SR-85 to get around the Phoenix area.

Major investments have been made to SR-85 to improve this 30-mile stretch of highway to make it more suitable for this bypass traffic by building the highway as a four-lane facility.

The EIS process, now in its ninth year, has been careful to consider all of the impacts as required by the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA).

For the past 10 years, the neighborhoods along Pecos Road have been in limbo about whether the freeway would be built and, if so, when.

It is critical for all parties to resolve the uncertainties about the South Freeway and move toward the conclusion of the Environmental Impact Assessment process as expeditiously as possible.

Do you agree with this opinion? Click "add a comment" below to soundoff.

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Pat Lawlis

By Pat Lawlis
President, Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children (PARC)

The Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) would have us believe that the Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway (SMF) is currently the most important highway that can be built in the Valley of the Sun.

In our view, this priority is way out of line. It shows that MAG is not connected to current realities and that MAG is unable to do sound strategic planning.

MAG has recently been forced to admit that they have never seriously considered putting the SMF anywhere except the Pecos alignment.

Now they are being "asked" by Gov. Brewer, officials of the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC), and others to provide a serious proposal for putting the SMF across GRIC land.

Not only has this put a crimp in MAG's decision to barrel ahead on planning for the Pecos alignment of the SMF, but it has also raised serious questions

about MAG's ability to plan in the first place.

MAG spent 25 years doing nothing about finding a viable alternative to the Pecos alignment (blasting a highway through South Mountain has never been a viable idea).

Now that they have been forced to finally consider a viable alternative, does it make sense that it is suddenly extremely important to move ahead with planning for the Pecos alignment?

Why has MAG authorized the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) to spend millions of taxpayer dollars on an alternative that won't happen – especially at a time when state services, including many ADOT services, are being severely cut?

Why is the SMF a higher priority than:

- finishing the real truck by-pass along State Route 85 that connects the I-10 near Buckeye to the I-8 near Gila Bend?

SR-85 is not a freeway.

If it were made into a freeway (a much less expensive alternative than the SMF), it could be renumbered as I-10 (what is currently I-10 going through downtown would be renumbered also), and it would provide a natural way for all "through" traffic to by-pass the city.

Does MAG really want to reduce air pollution?

By-passing the city with I-10 would provide a route for all the truck traffic that currently uses SR-85, along with a lot of other traffic that currently goes through the city.

Wouldn't keeping all this traffic out of the valley be a major step toward reducing air pollution in the valley? Wouldn't creating a SMF actually add all the traffic that currently uses SR-85 to the traffic that currently goes through the valley?

It may divert some of the traffic away from downtown, but it wouldn't take it out of the valley. In fact, wouldn't it just make the pollution in the West valley worse because of the extra truck traffic coming through to get to the new "short cut"?

- fixing the Broadway curve?

The Broadway curve is a major traffic congestion area both because of the volume of traffic on I-10 and because the traffic flow at the Broadway curve currently creates a bottleneck.

MAG once tried to claim that the SMF would significantly reduce the volume of traffic at the Broadway curve, but they have since had to back down from that exaggerated claim.

MAG also seems to have thrown their hands up in the air to indicate that they can't do anything about the traffic bottleneck at the Broadway

curve.

ADOT seems to think that their engineers can't find a way to improve traffic flow there. Are ADOT engineers really that inept?

An analysis of the traffic flow at the Broadway curve shows that the bottleneck is created by a large portion of traffic criss-crossing lanes in front of each other because exiting traffic must fight with entering traffic.

Respectable civil engineers can certainly design elevated ramps as necessary to accomplish different traffic patterns that would eliminate so much criss-crossing traffic.

Moving up the priorities of the truck by-pass and the Broadway curve, and lowering the priority of the SMF would accomplish needed improvements for current highways.

It would also permit MAG to take the time to get it right with a regional traffic solution in the South Mountain corridor.

Why not take a better look at the new types of traffic patterns that have been created by the current economy? Now that light rail is a proven concept for the valley, why not consider light rail as a solution? It would cost half as much and not introduce an unnecessary and polluting truck by-pass into the valley.

Does MAG really have a different, hidden agenda? Are they really trying to push through the SMF so their friends in the trucking industry can get a short cut through the city?

What happens when the SMF becomes the default for the CANAMEX highway and Mexican trucks (not required to live up to our air pollution standards) jam the SMF?

Providing a "good" solution for regional traffic in the South Mountain corridor could be a win for everyone.

We must hold MAG to serving the people – not political agendas – by providing sound, responsible transportation solutions for the Valley of the Sun.

Let your local government know that you want its MAG representative to vote for more responsible money handling!

They must require MAG to make necessary improvements to current highways and to take the time necessary to find a transportation solution for the South Mountain corridor that works for the good of the entire valley, the people and the environment.

Together we can make a difference.

Do you agree with this opinion? Click "add a comment" below to soundoff.

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