



GRIC gives reluctant OK to look at freeway routes on tribal land

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Last Thursday the South Mountain Loop 202 was charging forward in high gear with construction possible by 2013.

By Monday the process was back in neutral after the Gila River Indian Community sent the Arizona Department of Transportation a letter saying the community was willing to assist in conducting a study of possible freeway routes south of Pecos Road, on the Gila River Indian Community.

But giving permission to study a route doesn't mean they were happy with the idea.

Gov. William Rhodes wrote: "The Community's assistance in this matter should not be construed as our approval of an On-Reservation alignment. The Community's official position remains the same: (a) we oppose any desecration of Muadag (South Mountain) (i.e. oppose the current Off-Reservation alignment), and (b) we oppose an On-Reservation alignment."

But, wrote Rhodes, because there is a high likelihood that the freeway will be built, the community wants to explore all options to mitigate any effect it might have to the land and their culture.

To see the letter from Rhodes to ADOT director John Halikowski, visit www.ahwatukee.com.

The letter arrived a day after the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team met Jan. 28 for a briefing on how the process was supposed to proceed.

The tentative timeline, according to ADOT spokesman Tim Tait, showed public hearings on a draft Environmental Impact Statement sometime this fall showing the freeway path on Pecos Road, through South Mountain and then north to Interstate 10 along 59th Avenue.

"That's making assumptions that we're on the track we're on now," Tait said Thursday night.

But now the timeline appears to be pushed back to allow engineers to study potential routes on the Gila River Indian Community.

"We do not yet know how this will affect the timeline for completion of the study, but ADOT remains committed to moving as swiftly as possible, and is acting immediately on the opportunity presented by the Gila River Indian Community," Tait said Monday afternoon.

It's just the latest hiccup in a freeway that has been dogged by problems.

Originally designed in the mid-1980s, the freeway was quickly put on the back burner when funding ran dry.

Brought back to life in 2004, the freeway's cost quickly grew from around \$1 billion to \$2.5 billion.

Bob Hazlet, a senior engineer with the Maricopa Association of Governments, which does freeway planning for the county, told the citizens advisory team last week that with "value engineering" the scale of the freeway has been cut to help meet a \$6.6 billion county-wide budget deficit for freeway construction.

Changes from the \$2.5 billion estimate in 2008 include reducing the size from 10 lanes to eight, which reduced the amount of land and homes that need to be purchased and realigning the route to follow 59th Avenue in the west, cutting the cost down to \$1.9 billion.

For Tim Lank, the cuts all come down to ADOT saddling Ahwatukee Foothills with a second-rate freeway.

"This is the Wal-Mart freeway. It's going to be at ground level instead of below grade," said Lank, who lives in Ahwatukee Foothills and doesn't look forward to sound walls 20 feet high.

"What did you call it? The Great wall of Pecos," he said.

Nathaniel Percharo, a member of the tribe and the advisory team, said last week that he was under the impression the tribal government would be sending the letter to invite ADOT to review possible routes that skirt major ridges in South Mountain that the tribe considers sacred.

But he also conceded there was opposition to the idea and that any route would need to be approved by the community, probably at the November general election, which could further delay any movement on a draft environmental impact statement.

The next meeting of the advisory team was scheduled in March where changes scaling back the original plans were to be discussed.

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