



Freeway to hell

[Commentary by Jon Talton](#)

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What will be the final nail in the coffin of the city of Phoenix?

I vote for the Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway.

If the freeway is built, it will be a gamble for everybody – a bet that the old sprawl model can work one last time to generate short-term profits for the Real Estate Industrial Complex by turning largely worthless land into sites for tilt-up commercial space, subdivisions, shopping strips, In-N-Out Burger boxes and the entire dreary aggregation of suburbia. Some stand to get very wealthy off the deal, including, apparently, Phoenix City Councilman Sal DiCiccio. Like so many “local leaders,” he is not a high-tech entrepreneur, venture capitalist, stem-cell researcher, professor or clergyman – he’s a real-estate guy. But with so much leverage still weighing down the development game and higher energy prices just around the corner, one has to wonder if the ol’ Growth Machine has one more go in it. Yet Arizona is like a dinosaur whose tiny reptilian brain hasn’t yet processed that its tail is on fire – so it will keep building out a 1965 transportation system.

It worked in LA in 1965 because Los Angeles actually had a real economy, not just a real-estate economy. And gasoline was still cheap; America itself had not yet had its national oil peak. Now Southern California has destroyed so much of itself with freeways and, facing the damage, has embarked on rebuilding its once-great rail infrastructure. Thus, LA now has one of the nation’s most extensive light-rail systems and commuter rail operations. In Phoenix (and this deserves its own Phoenix 101 post), freeways were mostly about maximizing profits for landholders and developers whose property was otherwise good only for agriculture or worthless desert. The real economy always lagged, and finally stopped trying to keep up entirely. But the biggest loser from the freeways was the city of Phoenix.

Phoenicians paid by far the largest amount of sales taxes that built the suburban freeways that then sucked development, residents and ultimately much of the region’s already limited business base out of the city. Yes, the city nominally benefits from the development along the Loop 101 in far north Phoenix – but that area is not culturally, socially or historically part of the city – and it can’t make up for the damage done by the Papago Freeway, or ultimately abandoned Paradise Parkway, or the probably hundreds of thousands of lost jobs. Much less can it make up for the damage done to the city economy by East Valley suburbs that exist only because of aggressive freeway building. And Phoenicians paid for this privilege.

The South Mountain Freeway would complete the encirclement of the city by suburban freeways. If the financial system allows it, it would lead to the predictable wave of soul-destroying warehouses and office “parks,” most built on spec. The leasing boys would be about town luring companies in the central city out to new space on the loop. And so limited is the local economy – yes, it is largely a zero-sum game. While some of this might be nominally located in the city limits, it will pull companies and potential investment away from downtown, the central city, even the Biltmore area. Thus, like its predecessors, this new freeway will help deter reinvestment in the existing urban footprint while helping expand linear slums, teardowns and empty land in the core.

The environmental consequences will be similarly atrocious. Car-caused pollution is already the largest smog problem in the region, which suffers from high asthma and other smog-worsened illnesses. This freeway will make it worse. It will help kill off the last of agriculture in the southwest part of the metro area, further aggravating the dangerous heat island. Apparently it will be the most expensive freeway yet built – that’s helpful for a state that is selling off its crappy buildings just to stay out of hock. And at a time when the world is changing, it is a foolish diversion of resources and attention. The metro area should be

focused on providing frequent, convenient 21st century transportation options, especially commuter rail, light-rail and trains to Tucson (and LA), as well as the Sky Train at the airport. These projects would create more jobs, especially permanent ones, than freeway-building. They would reduce pollution and give the region a chance, at least, in the higher-cost energy future.

Metro Phoenix has enough freeways. It has too many freeways. Need to bypass the city on Interstate 10? Do it at Casa Grande using Interstate 8 and then rejoin I-10 via Arizona 85, or vice versa.

The city of Phoenix is already at the tipping point. It has the majority of the metro area's poor, working poor, including low-skilled, first-generation immigrants with no way into the mainstream. It has the majority of social problems, linear slums and underfunded, underperforming schools. It lacks the economic size and diversity of any other city of its population, or even those considerably less populous. Thus it increasingly struggles to meet its "carrying costs" as a large city, much less compete in the world economy. Nor does it have the cool, energetic downtown and urban neighborhoods to attract young talent (choices its competitors all offer, while also having lookalike subdivisions outside town, too). The spec crapola in places like Chandler and Goodyear, built in the mid-2000s, will siphon off more economic vitality in whatever tepid recovery might come.

The South Mountain Freeway has no redeeming value – unless you're one of the elites who will profit from it. Or one of perhaps the majority that can't even imagine another "lifestyle" that isn't built around endless driving and freeways. That's how they roll in "the Valley," right?

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