

Resistance to the Extension of the Loop 202

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English 102

May 10, 2012

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Is an eight-lane freeway bulldozing through South Mountain and communities south of Phoenix, Arizona the answer to de-congesting Phoenix traffic? Would the city of Phoenix rely on 30-year-old studies to solve current traffic catastrophes? The Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) and the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) project negative impacts for not extending the current route of the Loop 202 Freeway, by eight-lanes.

In 1983, MAG named corridors for an “integrated freeway network”, (Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) Loop 202 (South Mountain Freeway) Library, n.d). The South Mountain Transportation Corridor was defined as “...A roughly two-mile wide corridor from I-10 near 51st Avenue, around South Mountain, to I-10 near Chandler Boulevard”, (ADOT, n.d.). This nearly 30-year-old idea has still yet to come to fruition. However, ADOT and others are relentlessly pushing their notion of the freeway on the residents of Ahwatukee, the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) and Laveen.

According to Anderson, (2006) ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said “Without another east-west freeway, traffic through the Valley will likely grind to a halt in the coming decades,” (p.3). Six years later after this quote was made, the Loop 202 has not been extended to accommodate MAG’s 1980’s planning. In fact, every community that the freeway has been proposed to be built through has come out in opposition of the freeways extension.

GRIC has conveyed their opposition to the freeway since the 1980’s. As referenced to in MAG’s Transportation Policy Committee’s October 2011 Minutes, (MAGTPC, 2011, p.2), during the call to the public, a letter was read from the 1986 GRIC Governor Donald Antone raising concerns on behalf of GRIC. In the September 10, 1986 letter to HDR Infrastructure Inc. (the corporation responsible for developing the Environmental Impact Statement Report (EIS), Governor Antone stated, “...It is the tribes unchanged position that an Environmental Impact

Statement should be the first step in route selection”. The letter continued to affirm that, “... We [GRIC] have concerns about the potential negative environmental impacts to the reservation”.

Another concern of GRIC’s pertaining to the expanding of Loop 202 is the potential threat of the “Off-Reservation Alignment” desecrating South Mountain. South Mountain is Sacred to not only the Akimel O’odham of Gila River, yet to all O’odham tribes (Gila River Against Loop 202, September 2011). According to GRAL202 South Mountain is sacred for the role it plays in the creation story of the Akimel O’odham, Onk’ Akimel O’odham, Tohono O’odham, Hia’ched O’odham and Pee Posh peoples.

In Rivas, (2011), internationally recognized Tohono O’odham human rights activist Ofelia Rivas expressed her feelings to ADOT on the sacredness of South Mountain to: “Muhadag Do’ag, the mountain out of which the proposed freeway extension to the 202 is to be carved, is a sacred (holy) male mountain. It is the keeper of the stories of the sacred bear in O’odham history. Muhadag Do’ag is a healing mountain and is a vital part of the well-being of all O’odham and their culture.”

In February of 2012, as reported upon by Gila River Indian News, River, G., & Say, V. (2012), GRIC voted in favor of the no build option (p.1,4). This was the first “vote” by any community that would be directly affected by the freeways extension. However, GRIC has opposed the freeway through letters and written resolutions. GRIN Staff (2012) also reported “In 2000 the Community Council approved a resolution that opposed a freeway across community lands.”

In addition to the GRIC opposition of the extension, one on reservation group called “Gila River Against Loop 202” (GRAL202) has been animatedly opposed to the freeways expansion. The group operates a blog and has been organizing public events both on the

reservation and off since 2011. Most recently, the group protested the January 2012 MAG and Citizens Transportation Oversight Committee (CTOC) meetings, Gila River Against Loop 202 (2012, January 20). As seen in other posts to the groups webpage such as Gila River Against Loop 202 (2012, January 20) GRAL202 has been active in responding to media articles that have pushed for the freeway to be built on the reservation.

Although GRIC has consistently opposed the freeway, ADOT still alludes to proposing the freeway to GRIC (ADOT Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway Library, Frequently Asked Questions, n.d.). In the most updated release of the Loop 202's Frequently Asked Questions, ADOT stated, "As the process moves forward, ADOT and MAG will continue to coordinate with the Community on remaining concerns and potential methods for mitigating those concerns" (ADOT FAQs #1).

Private Limited Liability Development Company Pangea, has also been at the forefront of maneuvering the freeway through GRIC. The February 2012 Az Republic article by River & Say, (2012) discussed Pangea's desire to develop along the proposed freeway route. Less than a month after the GRIC vote in favor of no build, Joe Perez of Pangea held a press conference along the proposed route of the freeway. The event was held to announce a new voter initiative effort of Pangea's, to garnish signatures for a "land-owners only vote", petition for the freeway. River and Say (2012), also shared Pangea's ideas for development along the proposed route, "Pangea wants to build retail, restaurants and other developments on 500 acres near the freeway."

GRIC is not the only community that has concerns pertaining to possible negative outcomes of the freeway. River and Say (2012) mentioned that "...Ahwatukee Foothills

residents worry that the 22-mile, eight-lane freeway would bring traffic, noise and pollution to the quiet community.”

River and Say (2012) also shared the opinion of long-time Ahwatukee resident, Community Activist and freeway opponent, Gretta Rogers. Gretta Rodgers said that: “I'm opposed to the Pecos alignment being part of the Maricopa County freeway system...this is a bypass, and that's what the truckers want" (p. 1). Rogers made another reasonable point in Hurtado, A. (2011), “if the Loop 202 is extended, ... Arizona Department of Transportation needs to take a closer look at the recommendations for a different location, or at least make it a parkway that wouldn't allow trucks carrying dangerous materials to use it.

Also in Hurtado, A. (2011), Rodgers explains her frustrations with addressing safety concerns with the freeway. While attending a public meeting about the freeway Rodgers asked “What their plan was for a hazardous emergency occurring on the highway?” Her question was directed to the fire department that was present. Rodgers explained, “Whomever the captain was that came out at the time said, ‘We've got that all planned for, Mrs. Rogers.’ I said, ‘Tell me what your plan is.’” The chief answered, “Well it would depend on the situation.” Rodgers felt as though this did not actually answer her question.

Another Ahwatukee group, Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children better known as (PARC) has been strongly opposed to the proposed extension. PARC has been so successful that their rallies have brought out hundreds of Ahwatukee residents, Groff G. (2006, March 23). PARC has three compelling “major issues” with the freeway. Issue number one, [the] “Destruction of a significant portion of South Mountain.” Issue two, the “Canada-Mexico (CANAMEX) truck bypass introducing new, potent dangers for the valley.” And three, they say it would be a, “waste of taxpayer dollars that could be spent elsewhere” (p.1).

In *Destruction of a Significant Portion of South Mountain*, PARC (n.d.), they note “Blasting through three ridges of South Mountain is an outrageous, irresponsible action that would permanently disfigure South Mountain, destroying the integrity of the park, the mountain, and its ecosystem (p.1).

PARC also pointed out on their *Destruction Of South Mountain* page that “...preserve land such as South Mountain Park Preserve is protected from destruction, except from ADOT. “No one is permitted to mess with these preserve areas —except ADOT!”

The subject of Land Preserve Protection was also highlighted in the Article, *Questions remain on blasting into South Mountain*, Doug, B., (2009, November 11). The article quoted the wording from a 1985 vote by Phoenix residents “...In no event shall any real property within any City Mountain Preserve be sold, traded or otherwise alienated, designated or deleted from the Mountain Preserve except by approval of a majority of the electors voting.” The article continues to further point out that, “a state law passed in 1990, House Bill 2218, also says cities can’t transfer preserve land for freeways with a vote.”

PARC’s second point of contention with the freeway is that it would become a by-pass for truckers using the CANAMEX highway. The CANAMEX Corridor Coalition (n.d.), webpage provides a definition for the freeway, “as defined by Congress in the 1995 National Highway Systems Designation Act, is a High Priority Corridor.” The Corridors route through Arizona is, “I-19 from Nogales to Tucson; I-10 from Tucson to Phoenix; and United States Route 93 in the vicinity of Phoenix to the Nevada Border.”

ADOT has been persistent in stating that the expanding of Loop 202 would not become a part of the CANAMEX freeway. In their frequently asked questions regarding the freeway, *ADOT Loop 202 (South Mountain Freeway) Library/FAQs*,(n.d.) they affirm that, “It is not the

intent of ADOT or FHWA to include this proposed freeway as part of the CANAMEX corridor” (#36 ADOT, FAQ). PARC’s CANAMEX Truck By-Pass/Pollution (n.d), recognizes that it is “ADOT’s official plans...to build...the CANAMEX highway to run from Wickenburg to the State Route 85 “truck by-pass” between the I-10 at Buckeye and the I-8 at Gila Bend.” However they raise a critical point, this plan is unfunded. They further point out that any large diesel fuel trucks could chose to diverge from highway 85 because it is a slow and crowded 2-lane road, and use Loop 202 as their default route (p.1).

PARC’s third point against the freeway is that it is a “Waste of Tax Dollars”. In Waste of Tax Dollars (n.d.), they lay out numerous questions surrounding the expansion of the freeway. One good reoccurring point is “why has MAG never considered light rail for the South Mountain corridor instead of a freeway?” They also add that an “extended bike path... [and] new Park and Ride lots”, could improve the way of life in Ahwatukee.

Other extremely relevant points raised by PARC also state were that ADOT is violating the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA), by attempting to “predetermine the best solution before all others are explored.” In response to MAG’s “need to address traffic needs of the valley”, PARC points out numerous parts of the valley transportation system that could be higher priorities. Some of those could be “fixing the Broadway curve” and “finishing the real truck by-pass along State Route 85” PARC Waste of Tax Dollars (n.d.).

Perhaps one of the starkest drawbacks that the proposed freeway brings with it is the question of additional pollution. Oppermann, R. (2010), an article from the Ahwatukee news explored both sides to the issue of air pollution with the loop 202. Oppermann, R. (2010), states that “Proponents of the Loop 202 argue that it will ultimately alleviate pollution by reducing congestion on roads where stop-and-go traffic has proven to be the greatest contributor of PM10

pollution.” However, on the other side of the debate Oppermann, R. (2010) also says “Critics respond that by drawing commuters from outside of Ahwatukee Foothills and limiting routes for local drivers, the Loop 202 will promote more congestion, not less” (p.1).

In the same article Sandy Bahr, director of the Sierra Club’s Arizona chapter brings up a very fitting point “It really hasn’t been borne out with any of the other freeways.” Bahr also stated “We keep going down the same roads so to speak. We create a lot of sprawl where everyone feels like they have to get in their car to do anything.”

Another reoccurring concern of Oppermann, R. (2010) is the health of 7,000 some children attending school adjacent to the proposed route extension. “At least three schools and several neighborhoods in Ahwatukee Foothills stand within the 500-meter range of Pecos Road [the proposed route].” Oppermann cites Vliet, P. (1997) a study by the Health Effects Institute that “reviewed more than 700 worldwide studies of vehicle emissions and found that areas most affected by traffic-related pollution are within 500 meters of the pollution’s source” Opperman (2010). According to Kim et al. (2004) “truck traffic has been more strongly associated with these adverse outcomes than total vehicular traffic”. Which again raises the question so many freeway opponents have asked, would the expansion become a by-pass for large diesel trucks.

Vliet, P. (1997), was also referenced by the New York Times. Wald (2010) noted “Vibration and noise rather than air pollution could also cause some health damage, the report said.” Wald (2010) also reported “A relationship was found between pollution from vehicles and impaired lung function and accelerated hardening of the arteries.” Bringing the point back locally, Opperman (2010) also said that “A 2008 study of Maricopa County by... Arizona Department of Environmental Quality and Arizona State University found a correlation between elevated amounts of particle pollution and asthma-related absences at nearby schools.”



Those in Ahwatukee and GRIC are not the only ones that are concerned about the proposed expansion. A group called “No South Mountain Freeway” has also compiled a vast assortment of resources against the Freeway. The group has recently organized others to protest the January and MAG and CTOC meetings. The group referenced a recent action they did in a blog post titled “Dear CTOC, what part of sacred don’t you understand” No South Mountain Freeway (2012). The group utilized the meetings call to the public to raise concerns. At the protest of the February MAG meeting members of Occupy Phoenix “Mic-Checked” the meeting interrupting the meeting for nearly ten minutes, Gila River Against Loop 202 (2012).

One of the group’s major points has been asking about an updated Environmental Impact Statement Report. In April 2011 the group accompanied by a member of GRIC went directly to HDR Engineering Firm with a letter to both ADOT and HDR. The letter demanded HDR and ADOT to respect GRIC’s voice in consideration of the freeways expansion, No South Mountain Freeway (2011). The letter was read in the main entrance of the firms lobby.

Since the 1980’s there has been resistance to ADOT and MAG’s proposed expansion of the loop 202. The resistance has not been only from those in the area that would be immediately affected. The reasons for individuals resisting the freeways expansion has greatly varied as well. As the raised concerns of the freeway would negatively impact a wide variety of people, the ages and race of those resisting the freeway has varied greatly as well.

With the nearly 30-year-old study still trudging forward with no Environmental Impact Statement Report insight, one is left to wonder if the concerns being raised will ever be included in MAG’s study. Perhaps one of the most foretelling quotes from Opperman (2010) came from the former South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team member Laurel Arndt. She is currently a faculty associate at ASU’s School of Geographic Sciences and Urban Planning.

Arndt said “Phoenix is automobile dependent... are we looking at connecting people or are we just looking at connecting cars? The scope of the project is very limited and when you make it that narrow you’re going to end up with a freeway” Opperman 2010.

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