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Freeway projects may be on chopping block

by **Kerry Fehr-Snyder** - Oct. 30, 2008 11:34 AM
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Several Southeast Valley transportation projects could be on the chopping block when Valley mayors begin the process next month of deciding how to cut at least \$4.5 billion from the Valley's 20-year transportation plan.

The shortfall is largely due to lower-than-expected sales-tax revenues combined with growing project construction costs, and policy makers must decide whether to move ahead on the county's 20-year Regional Transportation Plan or modify planned freeway projects. Projects may not be cut altogether but could be scaled back.

Southeast Valley projects that are among 18 Valley-wide that could be cut, delayed or changed:

- Interstate 10 East, \$811.4 million in carpool and general-purpose lanes, traffic interchanges and a mini stack.
- Loop 101 Price Freeway, \$135.2 million in carpool and general-purpose lanes.
- Loop 202-Red Mountain Freeway, \$607.8 million in carpool and general-purpose lanes, plus ramp work.
- Loop 202-Santan Freeway, \$448.5 million in carpool and general-purpose lanes, plus traffic interchanges.
- Loop 202-South Mountain Freeway, \$2.68 billion in new construction for 22 miles of freeway.
- U.S. 60 Superstition Freeway, \$173.8 million in carpool lanes, traffic interchanges and related work.

Negotiations at the Maricopa Association of Governments likely will pit parochial interests against each other as mayors try to hammer out which projects are essential and which can be delayed.

Gilbert mayor Steve Berman, who also is chairman of MAG's Transportation Policy Committee, said he doesn't look forward to tackling the list.

"To be honest with you, when we did the original allocations a few years ago, it was the most brutal, miserable process in the world," Berman said. "Every single mayor in that room was elected to take care of their community, but we had to look at the whole picture."

Berman said he expects committee members to make one of three arguments:

- Projects such as the South Mountain Freeway were promised in the last voter-approved tax,

Proposition 300, and should be built to meet that promise.

- Certain projects are more important because they would benefit the region as a whole.
- The amount cities receive for projects should be based on how much that city contributes to sales tax revenue.

Berman said he favors the third argument, although he also supports the notion of building projects already passed by voters. "We need to complete the projects that were promised back 20 years ago," he said.

Tempe Mayor Hugh Hallman, another committee member, said he will support projects that carry the biggest traffic loads, including fixing problems with the I-10.

"I will strongly advocate that the U.S. 60/I-10 interchange has to be improved because the Broadway Curve is the place where most of the congestion occurs," he said.

He also said he backs building the proposed Loop 202-South Mountain Freeway because it would relieve bottlenecks along Interstate 10 by giving motorists another way to commute from Ahwatukee to west Phoenix.

But Hallman said the MAG committee shouldn't evaluate the projects on a piecemeal basis.

"There has to be a fairly global examination of what our transportation needs are, first," he said.

Goodyear Mayor James Cavanaugh, past chairman and current member of the MAG committee, agreed that this is no time for horse trading for pet projects.

"We have to live by the word 'regional,'" Cavanaugh said. "As mayors, we have to think regionally."

Cavanaugh said the committee is awaiting updated revenue numbers, which have been falling with the worsening economy. He said many committee members agree work needs to continue on Loop 303 in the west Valley, which has been planned since 1985.

But he stopped short of making the same recommendation for the South Mountain Freeway. Rather than a full-blown freeway, the Arizona Department of Transportation should build a parkway with fewer lanes and fewer interchanges, he said.

He also suggested toll roads be considered as one solution to solving the financial crisis.