

MAG may slice \$4.5 billion off freeway plan

Valley mayors to decide where to spend with economy tight

by **Kerry Fehr-Snyder** - Nov. 3, 2008 03:46 PM
The Arizona Republic

Several transportation projects could be on the chopping block when Valley mayors this month begin cutting at least \$4.5 billion from the Valley's 20-year transportation plan.

The shortfall is largely because of lower than expected sales-tax revenue as well as increasing construction costs. Policymakers must decide whether to move ahead on the county's 20-year Regional Transportation Plan or modify planned projects. Some projects may not be cut but scaled back.

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 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 to hear three arguments:

- Projects such as Loop 303 and 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 of funding that 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 approved by the 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

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projects that carry the biggest traffic loads, including fixing problems with Interstate 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 supports building the proposed Loop 202-South Mountain Freeway because it would relieve bottlenecks along I-10 by giving motorists another way to commute from Ahwatukee to west Phoenix. It would cost \$2.68 billion for 22 miles of freeway.

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.

"We need to understand the revenues and, of course, the cost," Cavanaugh said. "From there, it's going to take some pretty intelligent crafting."

Cavanaugh said many committee members agree that work must continue on Loop 303 in the West Valley. That freeway has been planned since 1985.

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

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

Cavanaugh favors commuter rail, such as a Phoenix-Tucson route being studied, to alleviate long-distance traffic tie-ups.

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