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Residents ready to battle Loop 202

By J. Craig Anderson
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A group of Ahwatukee Foothills residents is gearing up for a legal battle against the Arizona Department of Transportation over plans to build a freeway through the Phoenix community. Protect Arizona's Resources and Children, or PARC, has formed a nonprofit corporation to collect donations, hired an environmental lawyer and has asked critics of the proposed Loop 202's South Mountain Freeway to join in its cause.

"PARC is taking a leadership role in consolidating various opposition groups to the South Mountain Freeway," said the group's lawyer, Tempe-based attorney Howard Shanker.

The group has a Web site, www.protectazchildren.org, outlining its reasons for opposing the L-shaped freeway's proposed alignment from Interstate 10 west along Pecos Road through Ahwatukee, and then north through a portion of South Mountain Park to I-10 at about 55th Avenue in the West Valley.

The Web site, which prominently displays images of babies, children and wildlife, says the freeway would displace hundreds of families, require the demolition of a nearby church and back right up to an elementary school playground.

"More importantly, the most recent federally funded research has concluded that children who attend school or who grow up near freeways are put at severe respiratory health risk," the site states.

Both statements may be true, ADOT officials say, but the former would not be if developers and Phoenix officials hadn't ignored repeated warnings of a coming freeway, and the latter applies to children all over the Valley.

"You take basically any freeway in the Valley and you have existing homes and existing schools in close proximity," ADOT spokesman Matt Burdick said.

The only difference in Ahwatukee, he said, is that developers built in the freeway's path after it was proposed in 1988.

In all, about 220 homes - all built after 1988 - would have to be condemned to make room for the initial six-lane freeway and a future expansion to 10 lanes.

"It certainly hasn't been a surprise to anybody that the freeway has been planned," Burdick said.

Another of PARC's concerns is that the South Mountain Freeway would cut through the west end of South Mountain Park, which isn't compatible with wildlife preservation and outdoor recreation.

ADOT is studying the environmental impact of a freeway in the area, which is required by federal law. It will

release a draft copy of its report this summer, Burdick said, which will be followed by meetings and a public comment period of at least 45 days.

Shanker said PARC intends to hire its own experts to scrutinize the report, but he questioned whether ADOT would give serious consideration to their criticism.

If not, PARC may opt to file a lawsuit in federal court to halt the freeway project, he said. To do so, it would have to prove ADOT didn't follow proper procedure in researching and selecting the freeway path.

"If they didn't follow the process properly, we can delay it or stop it," he said.

PARC members also question whether the freeway's proposed \$2 billion price tag is justified given the limited benefit it would provide to residents. Shanker said its primary use would be as an alternate route for interstate trucking.

But Burdick said without another east-west freeway, traffic through the Valley will likely grind to a halt in the coming decades.

"You're connecting the two fastest-growing areas: the southeast Valley and the southwest Valley," he said.



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