

Mesa pushes to start work on freeway

by **Gary Nelson** - Jul. 8, 2009 12:00 AM

The Arizona Republic

Work on the proposed freeway near Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport will be accelerated, providing relief to thousands of southeast Valley commuters who thought the project had been derailed earlier this year.

The 22-mile Arizona 802, called the Williams Gateway Freeway, will eventually link Loop 202 with U.S. 60 near Florence Junction, but the Mesa City Council wants to rush work on the first mile, which would go from Loop 202 to Ellsworth Road.

That would provide better access to Mesa's burgeoning Gateway area, especially for a planned terminal on the eastern side of Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport. It would also bring relief to commuters who depend on Ellsworth Road for access to and from Queen Creek and northern Pinal County.

The first mile isn't scheduled to open until 2016, but Scott Butler, Mesa's intergovernmental affairs director, said, "With all the growth going on at Gateway, we can't afford to wait until 2016 to get this freeway started."

Mesa thought it had a leg up on the project early this year, thanks to a special account set up by the Legislature during better economic times.

The Statewide Transportation Acceleration Needs fund offered money to local governments that want to get freeways built ahead of schedule, and by early this year it had \$20.4 million set aside for Arizona 802.

In January, Mesa decided to borrow \$217 million through a bond issue to design, build and buy land for the first mile. It had intended to use the \$20.4 million in STAN funds to pay most of the interest and use voter-approved Proposition 400 sales tax to cover the rest of the interest, as well as the principal.

That plan evaporated just a few days later when the Legislature, faced with a staggering budget deficit, voted to "sweep" \$104 million from the STAN account into the general fund.

Now a Plan B has emerged, and it is expected to be approved by the Mesa City Council tonight. It involves \$8 million raised by Proposition 400 for Arizona 802.

That amount, Butler said, "was just a drop in the bucket" compared to the freeway's massive cost. But Mesa has worked out a deal with the Maricopa Association of Governments and state Department of Transportation to use the \$8 million the same way it would have used the STAN money.

In other words, Mesa will issue bonds, about \$45 million worth, for design and right-of-way acquisition for the first mile.

The \$8 million from Prop. 400 will pay the interest. Future Prop. 400 revenue will pay the principal. The city, Butler said, will pay nothing.

It's the first time Prop. 400 money has been used this way. "We've really become the guinea pig for this," Butler said.

With design work done and land purchased, Butler said, the first mile of Arizona 802 will be "shovel-ready" in case federal funds become available. In any event, he said, the road could be built as soon as 2012, with an expected total cost of about \$200 million.

The first mile of Arizona 802 will be the most expensive stretch because it requires an intricate interchange with a curving portion of Loop 202.

Prop. 400 is scheduled to pay for the Maricopa County portion of Arizona 802 from Loop 202 to Meridian Road. No funding source has been identified for the Pinal County leg. **Reach the reporter at gary.nelson@arizonarepublic.com.**

<http://www.azcentral.com/arizonarepublic/local/articles/2009/07/08/20090708freeway0708.html>