

West Valley's Northern Parkway plan wins federal approval

by **Rebekah L. Sanders** - Aug. 4, 2010 09:21 AM_____The Arizona Republic

Northern Parkway, the planned high-speed, multilane roadway, has crossed the last hurdle of government approval, and construction is now a year away.

The project is expected to free up many of the traffic jams West Valley commuters battle and spur homebuilders and industrial companies to build in the area. Detractors say it will disrupt the semi-rural quality of life that residents enjoy and force some businesses and homeowners to relocate.

For now, Northern Avenue near Loop 101 is a four-lane road with stop-and-go traffic around retail shops. As it heads west into the triple-digit avenues, the road narrows to two lanes, leaving behind housing subdivisions and heading toward farm fields, plant nurseries, the White Tank Mountains and the Wildlife World Zoo and Aquarium.

The open land is already marked for growth that municipal leaders expect in the future: new home builders advertise on the sides of semitrailers along each side of the avenue. At Loop 303, much of the land falls within Glendale's planning area, and city leaders hope to see industrial development take root there.

Development has stalled with the sputtering economy, but leaders are moving forward to expand Northern in anticipation of an economic recovery.

Federal transportation officials gave their final blessing in May to fund a large chunk of the \$329.9 million project, close to a decade since Glendale planners first floated the idea of widening Northern Avenue.

Maricopa County officials over the next year will complete final designs and purchase land needed to extend the road on each side. By next summer, construction should begin on the first phase, widening Northern Avenue from Sarival to Dysart Avenues from two to four lanes.

Later phases would bring the road to six lanes at Loop 101 and add overpasses to several intersections to speed traffic. Bridges at Agua Fria and New rivers, to be completed by 2015, would keep Northern Avenue from flooding during storms.

The majority of improvements ending at Loop 101 are expected to wrap up five years from now. Additional widening, traffic lights and overpasses along the stretch would occur later.

If future funding is secured, construction would begin on the section of Northern east of Loop 101, adding an overpass across the freeway so drivers can bypass a stretch of shopping centers and additional lanes as far east as Grand Avenue.

Northern Parkway is a feat of engineering and governmental cooperation, said Glendale Transportation Director Jamsheed Mehta. The 12.5-mile project spans three cities - Glendale, Peoria and El Mirage - and county property.

"It is remarkable considering you've got so many political jurisdictions involved," he said. "This is probably one of the most expensive local public works projects in the Valley. . . . And here we are, locals, doing what would have been a state or regional (project)."

There have been bumps along the way.

Residents of Peoria and county neighborhoods like Suncliff, Country Meadows, Rovey Farms and Summerset, object to increased traffic and several homes that would be removed. A handful of business owners that would lose parts or their entire properties question the need.

"There will be people that will be affected," Peoria Transportation Planning Director David Moody said. So some changes have been made.

Transportation officials plan to add traffic lights at 107th and 111th avenues to help drivers enter and exit the neighborhoods.

"What's left is going to be a pretty good project," Moody said. "You're going to have a nice, controlled arterial project that will get you to I-10, get you to downtown Phoenix, get you to the Capitol," by intersecting with Grand Avenue.

Mark Burkhart, 53, worries noise-buffering walls aren't planned high enough to protect his home at 108th Drive, one block north of the planned parkway.

"I built a nice courtyard out front (of the house) and I don't want to hear all that noise," he said.

But Burkhart, a construction supervisor for Salt River Project, understands the need for better transportation options in the West Valley. He uses Northern Avenue to Loop 101 to get to work.

"It's fairly busy," he said. Northern Parkway is "going to help alleviate the traffic."

Residents in the far West Valley could benefit greatly from the faster east-west route, even though some areas, like Surprise, aren't pitching in city money.

Pat Morton lives in Cortessa, a development in the county near Olive Avenue and Loop 303, just south of Surprise.

"The traffic in this area is becoming very heavy," said Morton, 73, a retired real-estate agent. "The roads that lead here are old, two-lane farm highways."

Few streets cross the Agua Fria River, which bisects much of the West Valley and stops up traffic, she said. Northern, Olive and Bell Road do, but currently they're packed with cars, and Glendale Avenue is blocked by Luke Air Force Base, she said.

"It's part of progress," Morton said. "It's going to become a really dangerous situation if they don't do something."

Commercial property broker Brent Moser believes Northern Parkway will bring an economic boost as well.

Industrial businesses could begin migrating to the vacant land that is plentiful along the western section of Northern Avenue and along Loop 303 to take advantage of the new route for transporting goods as well as a nearby railroad alignment.

"The Valley for the last 30 to 40 years has needed a major east-west corridor," Moser said. "All of a sudden you'll be within a 30-minute commute of the West Valley."

Northern Parkway funding

- **\$221.1 million** - Federal highway funds and county transportation sales tax.
- **\$37.9 million** - Glendale.
- **\$28.4 million** - Maricopa County.
- **\$19 million** - Peoria.
- **\$9.5 million** - El Mirage.
- **\$14.2 million** - Maricopa County Flood Control District and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway Co.
- **\$329.9 million** - Total.

Source: Glendale Transportation Department.