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NEWS online print edition



# Bypass considered to ease traffic on I-10

## Potential routes' impact on environment, business raises concern

**Glen Creno and Catherine Reagor**

The Arizona Republic

Jun. 25, 2007 12:00 AM

State highway planners just wanted to take a peek at some ideas for cutting traffic on Interstate 10 between Phoenix and Tucson.

But the informal look at creating a bypass around the congested road already is stirring passions.

Cities are worried about losing trucker and tourist money. Environmentalists don't want another road carved through a forest or river basin. Home builders want better access to their new communities.

Drivers who use I-10 wish the bypass would open tomorrow.

"Something needs to be done with it," said Dan Baker, operations manager for the Arizona Shuttle, a Tucson van service that hauls people between the two cities. "It's pretty much a war zone now."

All of those concerns revolve around one thing: deciding the best way to move traffic through the swath of development between Phoenix and Tucson. I-10 is the main road and figures to become more congested.

Ioanna Morfessis, an economic-development consultant who formerly headed the Greater Phoenix Economic Council, said effective transportation corridors will be critical to Arizona's economic future.

"Let's face it, most roadways don't get built until after they are needed," said Morfessis, also a development consultant for Maricopa. "I think we're better than most places in the United States."

### Phoenix-Tucson merger

Urban planners predict mushrooming growth will connect the two cities into a vast megapolitan area.

That so-called Sun Corridor is one of 10 "super-sized" metro areas expected to be epicenters of growth during the next four decades. The megapolitan designation by the U.S. Census could help Arizona get government money for infrastructure like

roads.

The I-10 bypass would bring another major roadway to the area. It would generally run east and west with the aim of carrying cross-country drivers who want to skirt traffic in Phoenix and Tucson. There's no official cost estimate, but one expert estimated it could exceed \$4 billion, the price of the Central Arizona Project.

Housing professionals agree that much of the open space between Phoenix and Tucson will be developed in the next 15 to 20 years, about as long as the 15 to 20 years it would take to build an I-10 bypass.

"The I-10 is the Valley's most important transportation corridor, and it's overburdened and deteriorating," said Richard Hubbard, executive director of Phoenix-based Valley Partnership and past deputy director of the State Land Department.

About 120 miles separate the downtowns of Arizona's two biggest cities. But planned developments already stretch more than 60 miles south of metro Phoenix deep into Pinal County. In Tucson, housing projects already reach 40 miles north of the city, so there's less than a 20-mile gap between the two cities' growth.

The cities' combined population is about 5 million. Forecasts call for the corridor's population to double by 2040.

Nate Nathan, of the land brokerage Nathan & Associates, said when he started selling land in 1980, people were predicting that in 20 to 25 years Phoenix would merge with Tucson.

"It's happening," he said. "Look at the developments between Phoenix and Tucson.

"The Valley's growth is heading west and southeast," Nathan said. "Reliever roads to I-10 are the most important long-term transportation decisions Arizona has now."

## **ADOT's plans**

The bypass has no cost estimate or construction timetable. Planners will collect such data as costs and environmental impact and make a recommendation to the state transportation board. The board could vote to proceed sometime before the end of the year, according to an ADOT planning schedule.

For starters, ADOT is showing 15 tentative routes for the bypass. The routes swing as far north as Globe and as far south as San Xavier. The bypass could connect to I-10 in the Phoenix area in several possible spots, ranging from the I-10/Loop 202 junction to points west of Buckeye, to an east-west roadway south of those two points. The east side of the bypass is controversial with cities in southeastern Arizona.

No route is locked in, and more may be created as ADOT collects comments. The agency has held one round of comment sessions, mainly in southern Arizona. Another round will be set for the fall, after the draft bypass study is released.

Curtis Lueck, a Tucson transportation consultant, estimated the project's cost at more than \$4 billion.

"That's on the low side," he said. "There's right-of-way acquisition, relocation of business and houses. The difficult part is going to be the environmental elements of the alignment and mitigation efforts."

Lueck said high costs might lead the state to consider a toll road for the bypass. S.L. Schorr, vice chairman of the state transportation board and senior partner with law firm Lewis and Roca in Tucson, started the talk about the bypass. He initially was looking for ways to reduce I-10 traffic in Tucson. He began talking to engineers, who said the study could include Phoenix as well. About 30 percent of the traffic on I-10 in Tucson involves cross-country drivers. Routing them on a bypass would decrease congestion.

I-10 will be widened between Phoenix and Tucson, but not enough to handle the expected traffic, Schorr said.

"We need to consider alternatives, both as a region and as a state," he said. "We need to consider commuter rail between the Phoenix and Tucson metropolitan areas. And then I think we have to consider other corridors to parallel I-10 in the Tucson area."

## In the path of growth

Even though ADOT's bypass study is informal, municipalities are concerned.

Pinal County, which sits between Phoenix and Tucson, already has traffic troubles. The county is having a transportation planning summit on Aug. 2, where the potential I-10 bypasses will be discussed.

Pinal County Supervisor David Snider said an I-10 bypass through that county could be a "mixed blessing." He said a bypass could help open up parts of Pinal County from distant I-10 or I-8 corridors, but the roads could cut major swaths through developable land. Cities don't want to lose the tax money they get from truckers and tourists who stop at their motels and restaurants.

It's uncertain how much traffic would peel off of I-10 and onto the bypass. But some southeastern Arizona cities don't want to see the bypass loop to their east.

"We would lose some people coming off the freeway to stay in our city and spend money here," said Michael Leighton, Willcox city manager.

He thinks Willcox stands to lose half of its truck-driver business if a bypass runs to the city's east.

Further east on I-10, Benson has a similar outlook. City Manager Martin Roush said a route beginning west of the city would provide an easy route for drivers from Sierra Vista and the nearby Fort Huachuca Army base on State Route 90 in southern Arizona.

Eloy, on I-10 between Phoenix and Tucson, doesn't want to be bypassed either. Joe Blanton, interim city manager, said a big piece of the city's operating budget comes from truck stops on I-10.

"If I was a land speculator, I would be buying land at this point," Blanton said. "There are too many alternatives out there. I'm not sure I like any of them."

But Blanton said Eloy, a fast-growing city of about 10,500 in what would be the center of the Phoenix-Tucson megapolitan, has other concerns. He doesn't want to see the bypass routed too close to the city either. He said that would limit development options in Eloy's 325-square-mile planning area.

Blanton is a former Buckeye city manager and still lives in the West Valley town. He remembers how Buckeye was hurt when I-10 opened, stealing traffic from State Route 85 and damaging business on the town's main drag.

Blanton commutes to Eloy on State Route 85 and I-8. He said there's rarely a lot of traffic on I-8.

## Roadblocks

Environmental groups don't want to see a new highway disrupting river basins or forest land. They say that some of the possible routes could impact the Ironwood National Forest west of Tucson or the San Pedro River valley in southeast Arizona.

"There's too much at stake with that migratory bird corridor and bird habitat to put another freeway through there," Michelle Harrington, director of the rivers program for the Center for Biological Diversity in Phoenix, said of the San Pedro.

Environmentalists noted that the bypass would also become a magnet for development by dropping a freeway into areas previously more difficult to reach. That would broaden the impact of the highway through ecological areas.

"None of these routes are acceptable," said Keith Bagwell, chairman of the Tucson-based Rincon Group of the Sierra Club's Grand Canyon Chapter. "We don't need another freeway. It's not going to solve our problems. Build them, and they just fill up and create more noise and pollution."

He said high gas prices also work against more freeway construction.

Schorr agreed that rail should be part of a long-term transportation plan for the Phoenix-Tucson corridor. The Sierra Club filed a letter detailing its objections to the bypass at public comment sessions. One of the group's key arguments: Build rail lines in existing transportation corridors. That would be cheaper than buying land and laying pavement, the group said. It also would produce less pollution.

"We need to get a grip on our transportation and land use issues and recognize that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results," said Sandy Bahr, conservation program director for the Grand Canyon Chapter's office in Phoenix.

Arizona remains a car-centric culture. Baker of the Tucson van company said it will be difficult to steer drivers into other kinds of commuting.

"You know the Wild West. 'I'll give up my car when they pry my cold dead hands off the steering wheel,' " he said.

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- [Chuck0983](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 5:07 AM
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Generally, almost all good, sound and cost effective measures on anything, the Sierra Club is against. So, you have to disregard their comments. This corridor is going to be controversial no matter where ADOT puts it, so, they need to just try and keep the environmental impacts to a minimum and go for the biggest "bang for the buck" and "Git 'er done.!!!

- [Dave4417](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 5:42 AM
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Will never happen!

- [Dana8591](#) | [Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 6:08 AM
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Remember years ago talk of a large regional airport midway between Tucson and Phoenix that would have high speed rail service between the two? This talk must have been in the early eighties. Oh what a great idea that sounds like now! A large airport with at the time all the unobstructed land they could ever want. Alleviate congestion and air pollution generated by Skyharbor. And the high speed rail running between Tucson, the airport and Phoenix. I guess it just had too many advantages and had to be quashed! Oh to yearn for a second chance at that. But, if it sounds too good and makes too much sense it won't happen. There are too many people that would have to get a "piece" of the action to get behind a project like that. Foremost, all the politicians and special interest didn't and couldn't have the foresight, if they did they would have been buying up property in the right of way. Or maybe they are doing that right now and it will be a great idea once again!

- [Charles6315 | Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 6:32 AM
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I'm with Dave417 It'll never happen.

- [rapscallion67 | Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 7:04 AM
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Hello.... the bypass already exists. I-8 to SR 85. Why spend all these resources trying to figure out how to build something that is already there?

- [John2500 | Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 7:11 AM
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Widen the 10 to 8 lanes, then simply double decker it all the way from Tucson to Phoenix; have the bottom level be a toll road. How nice to drive to Tucson (or Phoenix) in shade!

- [Hugh406 | Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 7:21 AM
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Trains?? That's a good one. Let's see if I got this right, I take the train to Tucson, and then what? Walk to all my meetings?

- [John694 | Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 7:31 AM
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I agree that the I-10 to SR85 to I-8 already exists and should be used more. Also, ban trucks from using any freeway during the same hours that the carpool lane is used for carpoolers.

- [John694 | Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 7:31 AM
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- [KenC | Profile](#)
- Posted: Jun 25, 2007 at 8:10 AM
- [Report a violation](#)

Not sure what makes an old, vague, re-hashed thought "news" exactly but yes, the I-8 'bypass' is already there and SR85 is being widened to make it more practical. At the pace of ADOT we can expect ground-breaking about 10 years after the location has been announced and property values in the ROW have multiplied several fold.

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