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## Freeway projects to get fast-tracked

*Freeway projects will start years early*

### **Bob Golfen**

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Plans to speed up construction of some Valley freeway projects by as much as 14 years were approved Wednesday by the Maricopa Association of Governments.

The association board, hoping to provide relief for commuters and travelers from growing congestion, approved unanimously the acceleration of six freeway projects in various parts of the Valley and buying right-of-way for a planned southeast Valley freeway.

The acceleration plan still has one more hurdle, approval Friday by the State Transportation Board, which is expected to pass the recommended projects. The association is the county's planning body and largely responsible for decisions about major highway projects. The board is comprised of mayors of all the cities in the county.

The money to accelerate the construction comes from a \$307 million appropriation, called the Statewide Transportation Acceleration Needs account, or STAN, approved by the state Legislature in July. Sixty percent of that money goes to Maricopa County projects, 16 percent to Pima County and the remainder for statewide projects.

The cost of the county projects totals \$193 million, which is covered by the state appropriation including accrued interest.

All of Maricopa County's accelerated projects are part of the 20-year Regional Transportation Plan of freeway, highway and transit improvements approved by county voters in 2004. The projects are programmed throughout the 20 years, but because of rapid growth, there has been a push to move some projects ahead.

The Valley projects that will move up on the construction schedule are:

- Adding a third lane to Interstate 10 from Verrado Way to Sarival Road in the far

west Valley, accelerated to a 2009 start date from 2023;

- Adding a third lane to Interstate 17 from Carefree Highway to Anthem Way in the far north Valley, moved to a 2009 start from 2023;
- Adding an HOV lane to Loop 101 from Tatum Boulevard to Princess Drive in Scottsdale, moved to 2008 from 2011;
- Adding an HOV lane to Loop 101 from Baseline Road to Santan Freeway in Mesa, moved to 2008 from 2010;
- Building a partial interchange for the future Loop 303 at Bell Road in the northwest Valley, moved to 2008 from 2011;
- Making road improvements on Cactus and Waddell roads for crossings at the future Loop 303 in the West Valley, moved to 2008 from 2011.
- Purchasing right-of-way for future construction of a Williams Gateway freeway from Loop 202 to Ellsworth Road in Mesa, moved to 2007 from 2014.

"We couldn't have balanced the spending any better," said Eric Anderson, transportation director for the Maricopa Association of Governments.

"Acceleration has an immediate impact that will help the region as a whole," he said.

The STAN funding marks the first time that the Legislature has used state general-fund money for highway projects, Anderson said.

State Sen. Thayer Verschoor, R-Mesa, who last session chaired the Senate Transportation Committee and helped push through the STAN funding, said he was "committed to getting another \$200 million" to accelerate other freeway projects in the Regional Transportation Plan.

"Sooner is better than later when it comes to building freeways," said Verschoor, now the Senate majority leader. "Accelerating these freeways will open up economic growth."

Surprise council member Cliff Elkins, who represented his city at Wednesday's board meeting, said STAN has opened the door to providing more state funding to hurry freeway construction.

"From what I see, it's a prototype of where we have to go in the future," Elkins said.

Several West Valley cities that have collaborated to pay the interest on loans to accelerate the widening of I-10 further east have been critical of STAN because they are getting no financial relief from the appropriation.

According to the legislation, STAN money can be used only for projects that were

not previously funded.

"I'm just sorry that Avondale's part (of I-10) was left out of the equation," Avondale Mayor Marie Lopez Rogers said before the vote. "The language (of the legislation) really works against cities that want to work together."

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