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I-10 is expected to be bottleneck for many years

By HAROLD KITCHING, Staff Writers

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"I think one of our greatest challenges for our city is with bottlenecks."

It's one of those truisms that everyone knows but bears repeating.

Councilman Dick Powell made the comment during a City Council study session at which an update of the city's small-area transportation plan, reaching out to year 2030, was outlined.

The update seems to address problems within the city and what will become the city, Powell said, but doesn't seem to really factor in a narrow, overcrowded Interstate 10.

"What level of service are we looking at by 14 years when we're supposed to be 176,000 people, when we have three or four lanes on Interstate 10?" he asked. "And if we don't, when do we hit gridlock and we just can't live with it?"

The short answer is that there is much talk about improving I-10, but little action in the main Casa Grande area.

Studies are under way on eventually widening I-10 from the Marana area to Casa Grande, but action on the area from the city to the Valley has been on hold.

"As you know, it doesn't take too much today to have I-10 break down and have delays getting either to Maricopa County, to the Phoenix metro area, or from the Phoenix metro area toward Casa Grande," Dan Marum from the Wilson & Company consulting firm replied.

"The Arizona Department of Transportation is keenly aware of the capacity constraints that they're facing on I-10. There are studies under way to move the design process forward and negotiations with the Gila River Indian Community on improvements to I-10 north of Casa Grande."

That will take years, and in the meantime Casa Grande continues to grow, drawing residents from the Phoenix area who live here but work there.

The study projects a Casa Grande population of 92,600 in 2010, 176,000 in 2020 and 260,000 in 2030.

"One of the things that is a key factor in affecting the amount of demand that Casa Grande has for travel on a regional corridor like I-10 is the jobs-housing balance here in Casa Grande," Marum said.

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"And we worked hard with Rick Miller (Casa Grande's planning and development director) to try to understand not only your existing employment scenario but to forecast forward the 2010, 2020 and 2030 employment forecasts or employment scenario that will occur here to match the level of population and housing increase that we saw."

The study estimates Casa Grande provided 15,700 jobs during 2005. One chart projects that to rise to 121,400 by 2030, while another section says it will be 130,000. Most of those jobs will be filled by residents from the growth areas of the city. The study shows 18,092 residences during 2005, expected to grow to 91,587 by 2030.

"While we've held that ratio of today's jobs to housing balance rather consistent," Marum continued, "as we move forward with growth, certainly a more successful and a more aggressive economic development program to bring high-quality jobs to Casa Grande would reduce the burden for that external travel on the freeway system."

"Now, that doesn't solve any of the folks that have to use I-10 today for daily commuting, and I'm sure there's some folks here tonight that are part of that community that has to commute on I-10."

ADOT is aware of the problems for Casa Grande, as well as for the other growing cities clustered around Phoenix, Dianne Kresich, a senior transportation planner with the agency, told the council.

ADOT had been working on a study a couple of years ago that would have recommended widening I-10 to three lanes in each direction from Casa Grande to Phoenix, she said, but the study "has basically been abandoned because at the time, as you probably recall, discussions with the Gila River Indian Community more or less broke down."

"But fortunately within the last several weeks, that study is alive again, the study contract has been reissued. Gila River has agreed to join in discussions, so there is movement forward on that quite long segment between Route 202 and Selma Highway."

That work, plus the section from Selma Highway south to the Marana area, she said, is all part of ADOT's vision of a 10-lane I-10.

"That is the widest that ADOT says I-10 is going to be," Kresich continued. "The median will remain as it is. They're not planning on significant building to the center, because they're planning on reserving that for as-yet-undetermined uses. It could be possibly a train in the future, a special truck lane, whatever."

The bad news, she said, is that while discussions with Gila River are again alive, "we don't know how long that's going to take." Even if an agreement were reached now, it would take additional years for design and eventual construction.

ADOT is also aware that even with 10 lanes, I-10 will not be able to smoothly handle eventual traffic, Kresich said.

"In fact, I think they're saying that if the population projections from the Pinal County small-area study are used, 10 lanes of I-10 will only cover half of the projected traffic within 40 years."

Studies are under way, she said, "to look at the need for not only arterial networks in a lot of the unincorporated areas but freeways from the west side of

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Phoenix coming into this part of Pinal County."

But the main question, Powell persisted, is I-10 from Casa Grande to Phoenix.

"If an agreement were reached with Gila River today, would we be looking at 10 to 15 years before we see even three lanes in each direction?" he asked.

Given the time it takes for freeway negotiations, land acquisition, planning and construction, Kresich replied, "that's probably best-case scenario."

That certainly compounds things, Powell observed.

"If we're 176,000 people in 14 years and we're trying to use two lanes, nobody - literally nobody - will be able to move," he said. "It doesn't matter how we get along inside the city or across it.

"And right now every vehicle that goes north out of Casa Grande crosses the Pinal Avenue-I-10 interchange. Whether they're getting on before that or coming from west or east, every one of them goes through that, and that's our real big bottleneck we have.

"The city of Maricopa has the same thing. They may eventually have the benefit of having some lanes from the west come down."

Gridlock would negate a comprehensive traffic program and growth, Powell said, because "we would literally be unable to build homes because we can't get anybody down here (on clogged roads).

"In this (small-area transportation study), will we get basically a level of service or congestion if we looked at our roads right now for 40,000 people and then when we look 14 years out with the assumption we don't get four lanes?" he asked.

"We're developing, we need to know. You put developments in, but if you can't get anybody in or out of them it doesn't do any good.

"Will it establish what will happen if we don't get more lanes out on I-10, what level services we are going to be and what kind of traffic congestion we're going to be in?"

That's a hard question for planners and consultants to answer, given that there is no crystal ball.

"In our draft final report and actually in some of our technical memorandums that we've prepared for review and comment by our technical advisory committee, we've included detailed level of service plot from our travel demand model," Michael Gorton, another Wilson & Company planner, said.

"Each time we produce a plot or a forecast for the next 10 years of growth, that's based on the existing system at that time. You're able to see where the deficiencies occur and then why we made the recommendations we made. We call that deficiency-based planning, and that's what we've done in this study and that will be included in the technical material that we leave behind.

"The tool that we've developed would be available for (city) staff to keep pace with changes that might occur, say, when a new master-planned community moves in front of the other and the development maybe is going to occur in a different part of the community. It's a process that can be undertaken to update that model."

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