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June 6, 2007

## Q.C., other boom areas could get \$10M boost to ease traffic

By Dennis Welch  
Tribune



Vehicles exit The Villages at Queen Creek subdivision onto Ellsworth Road in Queen Creek.

Tim Hacker Tribune

Hyper-growing cities and towns such as Queen Creek likely will get a financial boost from the state to help pay for local street construction and alleviate traffic woes. Democratic and Republican Legislature leaders have tentatively agreed to create a \$10 million fund to lend money for transportation projects in the state's fastest growing regions.

"We have three-hour wait times to get out to Queen Creek," said Senate Majority Leader Thayer Verschoor, RGilbert. "By no means is this money going to build the roads they need, but it will help them get the projects started."

Queen Creek officials said they will use the money to start improvements on Meridian Road, which was described as "the next critical north-south corridor for Queen Creek."

Only places that have experienced a population boom greater than 54 percent in recent years could qualify, said Verschoor, the chief architect of the plan who has worked closely with leaders in the Queen Creek community.

Nearly a dozen cities and towns across the state meet those guidelines, but Verschoor said Queen Creek stands at the front of the line because of the extent of its problems.

Qualifying cities, towns and counties would apply for the money with the Arizona Transportation Board, which would make the final decision.

Each municipality or county would borrow the interest-free money and would have to reach agreement with ADOT on the payback period.

The proposal, which is being discussed as part of this year's budget negotiations, is an element in a more comprehensive plan to accelerate transportation projects throughout the state.

A budget agreement has been held up as Democratic and Republican lawmakers wrangle over tax cuts and school-

choice issues. But the transportation plan appears to have strong bipartisan support.

"This didn't have much resistance," said Senate Majority Leader Marsha Arzberger, D-Willcox.

Lawmakers decided this year to try to find more money for transportation projects as Arizona continues to grow at the nation's fastest rate. As the population grows, the increased number of vehicles on the road has strained highway and street systems.

Lawmakers appear to have agreed on a plan put forth by Gov. Janet Napolitano to free up as much as \$500 million by extending the repayment period for transportation bonds to 30 years from 20 years.

Of that money, \$62 million would go into the Statewide Transportation Acceleration Needs account. Sixty percent of that account is spent on projects in Maricopa County.

Verschuur said the decision to take \$10 million out of that was made to ensure rapidly growing areas could construct local roads needed to continue growing.

Although local cities and towns normally pay for arterial road construction, he said the state needs to step in because places like Queen Creek have become a regional problem as commuters from nearby communities cut through on their way to Maricopa County freeways.

Queen Creek Town Manager John Kross said the town would use the money for improving Meridian Road - which is a largely dirt road running from Pinal County at Empire Blvd. north to Apache Junction.

"We really see that as the next critical north-south corridor for Queen Creek," Kross said. "It is so critical for our citizens' quality of life and for efficient traffic movement for Pinal County residents."

Initial estimates put a \$75 million price tag on the Meridian Road project, Kross said.

"In this day and age, \$10 million doesn't go very far for construction costs," Kross said. "It is a wonderful start for design of the right of way. With \$10 million we can make significant progress with that first step."

Queen Creek officials have spent a lot of time at the Capitol this session, and have retained a lobbyist to argue for more money to help what they see as a regional transportation issue, Sanders said.

Those officials say 75 percent of the traffic on the town's roads comes from passthrough traffic from Pinal County's Hunt Highway corridor. Some residents were concerned about the town's plans to take on a \$10 million loan to deal with that issue.

"I'm not sure we should be borrowing money to solve Pinal County's problems. Maybe they ought to co-sign with us," said Queen Creek resident Thom Schuett.

Schuett said \$10 million sounds like a big number but, when it comes to roads, construction is "wildly expensive."

"I'm troubled it's a loan - Queen Creek is getting loaned up," Schuett said.



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