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Top Stories

Wider I-10 gets closer Preliminary planning under way to add lanes from milepost 161 to I-8

By LARRY LOCKHART, News Editor

November 01, 2007

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Road ahead

1 - The number of workdays per week one commuter estimates it took her to travel I-10.

2 - At least how long, in years, it will take for the I-10 widening to begin.

5 - The number of lanes planned in each direction when I-10 is complete.

24 - The number of miles along I-10 planned to be widened.

Commuters can't wait for Interstate 10 to be widened between Casa Grande and Phoenix. But adding lanes to the busy freeway is like the accidents that often clog the road - all you can do is wait.

Mary Kortsen figures she was spending the equivalent of an extra workday a week commuting to the Valley before she opened her own paralegal office in Casa Grande after being elected to the City Council this spring. She had commuted for most of the last 20 years.

"At the end, I was spending a minimum of two hours a day on the road," she said. That's 10 hours a week - at best.

And the commute will get worse before it gets better. Traffic will continue to increase while the Arizona Department of Transportation plans and designs the wider freeway. And once construction begins, at least two years from now, traffic is likely to be even more snarled until the extra lanes can be completed.

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But the first step toward that widening has been taken. A Sept. 25 decision by the Gila River Indian Community granted "right of entry" permission to ADOT to begin studying how to widen the freeway's last 24 miles into Phoenix. The segment on the GRIC will be part of a 39-mile corridor story ADOT will undertake in preparation for widening I-10 from GRIC's northern boundary at milepost 161 to the interchange with I-8 near milepost 200 southeast of Casa Grande.

"We have no design at all right now. We will look at the environmental impact, then at the feasibilities," said Teresa Welborn, a spokeswoman for ADOT.

The eventual changes could be staggering. Welborn couldn't say that the results will be the same north of I-8, but a corridor study for I-10 between Picacho Peak and I-8 calls for up to five lanes each direction plus two-lane frontage roads on either side of the freeway by the year 2030.

"Right now it's extremely preliminary," Gila River spokeswoman Alia Maisonet said of widening I-10 through the GRIC. "They (ADOT) will be doing an environmental study. I do know they're going to be looking at all the possibilities, including the median."

That would be the quickest and easiest way to add lanes to the often-clogged freeway, since it wouldn't involve additional right of way. There is some room on the outside of the existing freeway as well, but much of that could be gobbled up by wider shoulders and frontage roads.

Maisonet said the Gila River Indian Community has a number of concerns:

-- **Interchanges.** The community will negotiate with ADOT for another interchange in the Sacaton area, possibly at Seed Farm Road since it leads directly to the community government buildings in Sacaton, and improvements to one or more other interchanges.

-- **Public safety.** The community would like to see wider shoulders so that law enforcement officers have more room when approaching vehicles that are stopped. Also, space is limited when helicopters are required to fly out persons injured in accidents.

-- **Cultural concerns.** Some areas abutting the freeway right of way are considered culturally sensitive and therefore will be off limits if a wider right of way is required.

Even acquisition of land that isn't culturally sensitive could be difficult, Maisonet said.

"It's pretty difficult to get our land," she explained. "A lot of that land is owned by private landowners, and there are quite a few. You could have 10 or 15 landowners on an acre of land."

"We're looking at alternatives. They either could build within the current right of way or go through the Bureau of Indian Affairs and landowners to widen the right of way. We're trying to work with ADOT as best we can."

She said study time for ADOT normally is two years, which means work couldn't possibly begin before that. Design work, contract bidding and other preliminaries could push construction back even more.

Kortsen said her northbound drive in the morning normally wasn't bad until she reached Queen Creek Road, but that southbound traffic in the afternoon was



much heavier, despite very little commercial (truck) traffic.

"When I first started to commute in 1988, I would rate it about a 3 on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the worst," she said. "By April of this year it was probably a 9."

Kortsen was one of the lucky ones, though. In nearly 20 years of commuting, she was never in an accident. She attributes her good fortune to defensive driving skills she learned from her father.

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