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Maricopa seeks traffic solution *Northern route proposed - now dirt road - to ease congestion on Arizona 347*

By ADAM GAUB, Staff Writer

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MARICOPA - With plans for a general aviation airport on the Estrella Sailport site in the works and an industrial corridor slated in the General Plan, the city of Maricopa is analyzing the possibility of adding a new road to the mix.

The route itself, Hiller Road, exists now as a dirt thoroughfare on the northern edge of the city limits bordering the Gila River Indian Community. With only Arizona 238 to serve the city's land to the west of Arizona 347 and north of the Ak-Chin Indian Community, Transportation Coordinator Kellee Kelley said the city realizes an alternate route is crucial to the area.

"Overall we're just looking to see if it's feasible," she said.

The road would tie in as part of the city's desire to use a loop system comprised of major arterials to divert traffic from Arizona 347 as far north in the city as possible. Development Services Director Brent Billingsley warned at a May 8 transportation forum that the study of Hiller Road was merely in the feasibility phase and that many pieces would have to fall into place properly to make it work down the road.

"We have not budgeted specific monies in the CIP (Capital Improvement Plan)," Billingsley said of any future plans for Hiller Road. "At this point we haven't designated any funds for right of way purchase."

That may come as good news to some private landowners, represented by Steven Voss, who are skeptical of the city's ideas to put a major arterial through the edge of their property.

"What you're proposing is a big impact to the property," Voss said.

The city has yet to determine any sort of plans for how wide the road could even be, however, as it is merely gauging the potential for that route.

Chris Willery, project engineer with consultant Aztec Engineering, said the nine-mile study falls into the initial parameters of what the city is looking for in an intra-regional route.

"High-capacity loop roads are recommended," he said.

On a broader scale, the city also is putting together a regional transportation plan that addresses needs in the entire general plan area 10 years into the future as well as to near build-out capacity.

Dan Marum, transportation planning manager with Wilson and Company, said the initial study results show two main alternatives as possibilities for relieving Arizona 347 in the future.

The first would create an expressway that would loop around the western

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portion of the Ak-Chin Indian Community while the other would focus on using Maricopa-Casa Grande Highway in a freeway- or parkway-type role.

Either way, the constraints of planning around reservation land leaves options limited, Marum said. The transportation planner said even with a potential added expressway, Maricopa may look similar to Tucson by the year 2030 with population capacity pushing 500,000 and limited high-capacity, high-speed roadways to service the city.

"The challenge is looking at what can be done in the 347 corridor to optimize travel while we look to alternate routes in the future," Marum said. "There's no mystery that 347 is challenging ... with certain portions already having traffic counts above the threshold. It's all about reducing that length of the interim period as best we can."

Marum said initial projections show one-third of miles traveled within city limits in 2030 will be under congested conditions.

Marum said the hope for Maricopa residents can come from the ongoing Hidden Valley Framework study, which is showing possibilities of placing Loop 303 down through Maricopa's western limits of the General Plan area, and the I-10 bypass study, which has shown potential high-capacity routes being installed just south of Ak-Chin land.

The existing land constraints, Marum said, may eventually split a number of Maricopa residents toward the West Valley for job opportunities if new roads are linked from cities such as Goodyear.

"Alternate routes can lead to the next wave of economic development," he said. "With just one way in and one way out, there are constraints now we aren't even thinking about."

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