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Mayors move to restore freeway funds

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Valley mayors want to restore funding for the proposed Williams Gateway Freeway.

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The federal economic stimulus package is designed to get money quickly flowing again by funding infrastructure projects where construction can begin in a matter of weeks.

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Dodging a bullet

The path of the Williams Gateway Freeway caused concern among Pinal County residents who feared the most southern route could pave over their homes and schools, but intense lobbying seems to have paid off and a new route skirts their area.



SOURCE: Arizona Department of Transportation

Scott Kirchofer/TRIBUNE [[http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/page/image?](http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/page/image?filename=images/photos/2009/02/26/vj3ygtv8.jpg)

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decided unanimously Wednesday night to request from a pool of federal funding for highway projects \$20 million for initial designs and property purchases for the proposed Williams Gateway Freeway.

Plans call for the freeway, officially called state Route 802, to run 22 miles and connect east Mesa with Florence Junction in Pinal County. The design would be for the interchange at Loop 202 near the namesake airport and a mile

of highway to Ellsworth Road.

According to the Arizona Department of Transportation's Web site, construction would begin after 2015 — six years from now, when lawmakers in Washington want the money spent in six months.

"I don't think that's what the (stimulus) bill calls for," State Transportation Board chairman Delbert Householder said Thursday.

In all, the Maricopa Association of Governments' Regional Council, composed of more than two dozen local mayors and representatives from the Indian communities, asked for nearly \$195 million in stimulus money.

The largest amount of funding would be allotted for the widening of Interstate 10 near Buckeye, Interstate 17 in north Phoenix/Anthem and U.S. 60 in the north West Valley. Those projects are ready to go.

Whether MAG's request for funding Williams Gateway's design will pass muster now is up to the state board, which meets Tuesday. If that panel approves, then it's on to the Federal Highway Administration.

But Householder didn't sound as if he looking favorably upon the 802.

"If there are some other projects that are shovel-ready, that's probably the way I'll vote," said Householder, adding he wants money spent on increasing highway safety and preserving pavement.

Also skeptical was a member of the Regional Council.

"We go down a slippery slope if we vote on something that might or might not qualify down the road," El Mirage Mayor Fred Waterman said. However, he later cast an aye vote.

Federal Highway Administration spokeswoman Nancy Singer said, in general, design work is eligible for funding under the stimulus package, "but we would have to look at the project in its entirety." The Williams Gateway project has yet to come under the agency's scrutiny.

Regional transportation officials have said construction of the Williams Gateway is crucial for the East Valley.

Proposed developments in the area around Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport include the Gaylord Hotel and Convention Center and an aerospace research and development institute. Also, the airport has plans to build a new passenger terminal on the east side, which is expected to be complete by 2020.

Proponents add that the highway would relieve traffic on the overburdened roads connecting Queen Creek and Pinal County with Mesa and beyond.

Mesa intergovernmental relations director Scott Butler said the minimum needed is not \$20 million but \$12 million, which would go solely for design. And once the design work is done, Butler added, the city not only then could issue bonds for \$200 million worth of construction work, but move up the timetable by three years, as well.


"We really think this is a very, very wise investment for the state," Butler said.

According to Butler, the 802's biggest hurdle will come at next week's meeting of the State Transportation Board.

If that panel gives the Williams Gateway a thumbs down, Butler said it would come not in the form of nays but in an approval of MAG's request — minus \$20 million.

"The board doesn't really pick and choose, but it can put on a dollar limit," Butler said.



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