

Planners approve jump start to Gateway freeway spur

by **Kerry Fehr-Snyder** - Jan. 24, 2009 07:00 AM
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Freeway planners are accelerating construction of the first mile of the Williams Gateway Freeway to connect to the Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport.

Mesa officials had requested that the project's design and construction move forward so that the Loop 202-Santan Freeway would connect to Ellsworth Road and a new eastern entrance planned for the airport.

The Maricopa Association of Governments on Friday approved Mesa's request for \$20.4 million in funding from a statewide transportation fund to cover part of the project's interest costs.

"This is a fairly basic connection to the 202," said Eric Anderson, MAG's transportation director.

Williams Gateway Freeway, also known as State Route 802, is a 22-mile stretch that would run from the eastern end of the Loop 202-Santan Freeway through Pinal County and connect either to U.S. 60 or Arizona 79. Planners are evaluating four different alignments for the freeway, which is estimated to cost \$325 million to \$546 million.

The first mile would involve building ramp connections and is expected to cost \$217 million. The cost to finance that is \$39.6 million, which will be offset by the \$20.4 million in state transportation money.

That leaves Mesa and MAG splitting the balance, with each paying about \$9.6 million, said Dan Cleavenger, Mesa's transportation manager.

But Mesa could be on the hook for the whole financing bill if the Legislature cuts the transportation fund, the Statewide Transportation Acceleration Needs funding. STAN funding is vulnerable because it was appropriated by the state Legislature, which is trying to balance the state budget.

Under the current plan, construction could begin on the freeway in 2012, four years ahead of schedule. No source of funding for the Pinal County portion of the freeway has been identified.