

\$930 million Loop 303 expansion in Surprise likely to begin this year

by **Lesley Wright** - Jul. 9, 2010 11:05 AM

Carlos Chavez/The Arizona Republic
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Surprise's future retail projects remain stuck in the recessionary mud, but the freeway that will deliver people to those future developments is moving ahead with due speed.

Later this month, planners expect the final piece to drop into the puzzle of federal, state and local approval needed for work to begin on an expanded Loop 303 from Interstate 10 to Grand Avenue.



The Loop 303 bridge over Grand Avenue in the West Valley.

The Arizona Department of Transportation designed the updated freeway, still just a two-lane roadway for long stretches, to serve as an outer loop that will better connect the outskirts of the West Valley with the region.

Surprise views a fully functioning Loop 303 as essential for its growth from a small bedroom community to a city with jobs, entertainment and shopping of its own. Several projects are on the books, including the master-planned Prasada development, which will be anchored by a Westcor regional mall straddling the Loop 303 between Waddell and Cactus roads.

Economic powerhouse

"You build it and they will come," said Surprise Councilman Richard Alton, who likened Loop 303 to the busy Loop 101. "Once completed, it will give us the opportunities such as Glendale and Peoria receive," he said.

Jeff Mihelich, Surprise community and economic development director, said the freeway is one of several catalysts that "will enhance both local and regional traffic flow while simultaneously providing a more robust retail development."

Another economic catalyst is the AZ TechCelerator, a business incubator on Bell Road meant to nurture employers. But few incubators provide the sales-tax revenue that is the lifeblood of city budgets.

Mihelich said the benefits from future Loop 303 businesses include jobs, shopping, dining and a reduction in the "sales-tax leakage" to nearby cities with better retail facilities.

Maze of financing

Financing for freeway construction comes through a maze of government bodies. But some crucial votes this spring and summer have opened up funding for the \$930 million Loop 303 project. The state eventually plans to transform the roadway into a six-lane divided highway all the way from south of Interstate 10 to Interstate 17.

The Maricopa Association of Governments, the countywide planning agency that carries the federal stamp of approval, will vote on the construction plan on July 28.

In June, the state's Transportation Board approved the plan and the Federal Highway Administration gave ADOT the green light last year.

ADOT officials have begun preparing Sun City Grand residents for construction that is set to begin late this year or early in 2011. The state agency expects to finish the freeway stretch that runs from Mountain View Boulevard to Peoria Avenue by 2015.

The freeway will taper down gradually from Mountain View so it is fully depressed as it travels under Bell Road.

While Sun City Grand residents have their concerns about noise, view-blocking walls and construction dirt, the city's economic development officials are relieved to see the vital piece of the economic infrastructure take shape.

"Loop 303 will be beneficial to get things moving," Surprise Mayor Lyn Truitt said. "It is an important transportation line in Surprise. As it gets completed, you will see more commercial, retail and housing there. I'm really excited about the progress being made."

Retail stalled by the economy

The city's residents will have to wait out the economic downturn before seeing their favorite retailers move close to home.

The planning and building of the Prasada regional mall is on an indefinite timeline as Westcor waits for "market demand" to recover. Estimates put the opening of the mall into 2015 or later.

In 2007, Westcor agreed to finance and build the project's infrastructure and the city agreed to reimburse the developer up to \$240 million with sales tax generated by the retailers

The Prasada master plan also calls for 7,200 homes, office complexes, a hospital-medical campus, restaurants and entertainment venues.

Shoppers likely will find two power retail centers, anchored by Target and Walmart, in Prasada as soon as next spring.

Sands Chevrolet opened in 2008 at the 303 Autoshow at Prasada, one of 10 auto dealerships the city hopes to lure. And the Marketplace at Prasada, a neighborhood shopping center southeast of Cotton Lane and Greenway Road, is open.

While jobs and shopping are on the menu, residents in the meantime can expect construction appetizers.

"There is going to be a little bit more pain involved in terms of traffic," Truitt said.

<http://www.azcentral.com/community/surprise/articles/2010/07/09/20100709surprise-loop-303-expansion.html>