

Birth of a freeway

Work takes shape on Loop 303 stretch in northwest Valley's open desert

by **Sean Holstege** - May. 13, 2009 12:00 AM

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On the far northwestern fringe of the Valley, the region's first new freeway in years is taking shape.

Miles from any visible home, work crews are building bridge foundations on the banks of the Agua Fria River. In about 2 ½ years, motorists should be driving over it, as part of a new 14-mile stretch of Loop 303. When it opens by early 2012, a four-lane highway will carry traffic from Interstate 17 to Grand Avenue, running through north Phoenix and Peoria about 5 miles outside the circle of the existing Loop 101.

The current Loop 303 work, budgeted at \$355 million, represents the first new freeway built with money from Proposition 400, a regional sales tax passed in 2004.

The sight of freeway bridges and overpasses forming in the open desert may strike some as out of step during the depths of the worst economy in generations, but transportation planners say they are building for the inevitable future development.

Even among fast-growing Western states such as Arizona, a new highway in pristine countryside is a rarity.

"We haven't had a freeway program in this country since the 1980s," said Bob Hazlett, a senior engineer with the Maricopa Association of Governments. "Phoenix is probably the last place in the country building new freeways."

Loops around Denver and Las Vegas, plus a toll road in Southern California, are the most recent exceptions.

"It's rare even for the Phoenix area, in that we've been concentrating on improvements to existing freeways," said Doug Nintzel, spokesman for the Arizona Department of Transportation. "This is the birth of a whole new freeway."

A short stretch of Loop 303 was built from Grand Avenue to Happy Valley Parkway by the county Transportation Department as part of an older, local transportation measure. Through Glendale and Goodyear, a two-lane surface road already traces the route of the future freeway.

The full highway will take shape in phases. Ultimately, ADOT envisions five lanes of freeway in both directions for the northern stretch of the loop.

Recently, the Federal Highway Administration cleared an environmental study for another part of the loop, the connection to Interstate 10. The action allows ADOT to begin designing that freeway, which will ultimately feature the largest interchange in Arizona, a five-layered structure at I-10 in Goodyear.

A full 36-mile freeway linking Interstates 10 and 17 is slated to open in early 2015, and by the time it's upgraded into a full six-lane freeway, Loop 303 would cost \$2.2 billion, at current estimates.

A freeway is formed

The work on the northern stretch began in February. The groundbreaking was the first for a new freeway since work began on parts of the Red Mountain Freeway in early 2006. It also is largely invisible to most people in the Valley.

A traffic detour on Happy Valley Parkway where the existing Loop 303 is to continue north marks the only sign in populated areas that a new freeway is coming.

Roughly 3 miles from the closest stucco subdivision, huge machines bore holes near the Agua Fria. Workers tie up the steel cages that will be dropped into those holes to reinforce future concrete bridge columns. Nearby, heavy machinery pushes huge mounds of earth into place where future interchanges will go, even though the connecting roads exist only on maps.

Near Peoria's Vistancia development, ADOT has built a hockey-rink-size enclosure. Behind a chain-link fence stand neat rows of saguaros, chollas, ocotillos and other protected desert plants. The nursery represents ADOT's largest-ever cactus-preservation effort, Nintzel said. Hundreds of plants in the freeway's path are being saved and replanted.

Farther east, bulldozers have started grading the future roadway as it winds over low hills and empty washes toward I-17. There, it will connect just south of Carefree Highway.

When the work is done, contractors will have excavated nearly 5 million cubic yards of earth and paved nearly 800,000 square yards in concrete.

The seclusion brings advantages and challenges. It allows ADOT to build more quickly because crews don't have to navigate around existing traffic or homes, but the remoteness makes it harder to truck in materials.

"The rattlesnakes are really our loudest neighbors right now," Nintzel said.

That same remoteness leads some to question why the highway is being built at all and whether the road will create urban sprawl.

Building for future

Planners at the Maricopa Association of Governments say Loop 303 will serve three purposes. It will:

- Help divert traffic around central Phoenix as people try to get from the West Valley to the north.
- Relieve local congestion in the growing northwest part of the region.
- Accommodate future growth in that area.

"Loop 303 is designed to get people around and through the northwest Valley," Hazlett said. "It gives them another way to get from I-10 to I-17. Demand on I-17 continues to grow, and Loop 101 is already experiencing some issues with congestion."

MAG predicted that Loop 101 will "become overloaded in the near future" and that the entire 36-mile future Loop 303 will carry up to 148,000 cars a day in 20 years.

Environmental studies for the section of Loop 303 now being built show that five of six local arteries will be congested by 2030 if Loop 303 isn't built. With it, only Happy Valley Parkway would be slightly congested.

By then, MAG projections show, neighboring areas will see populations more than triple and jobs grow sevenfold.

One north Phoenix area, about half the size of Tempe, is projected to grow from nine people and no jobs to a population of 7,500 and an employment base bigger than 12,000.

Long-range forecasts can be notoriously unreliable, especially in fast-growing states like Arizona that depend on growth. Over the past few years, inflated, inaccurate projections contributed to a glut of housing. Now, with the foreclosure crisis and economic crash, the Valley can't fill the homes that exist. All that makes some people question the idea of building a freeway to handle even more growth, growth that hasn't happened yet.

"They are prioritizing the needs of developers over the needs of current residents. It's not that sensible," said Alex Nelson, transportation specialist at the Arizona Public Interest Research Group.

"Building more roads is not a sustainable way to relieve congestion," he said, adding that several Proposition 400 investments in mass transit should take priority because the economic slump has threatened funding. The proposition authorized increasing the sales tax by half of 1 percent; tax revenue now is far below projections.

ADOT builds the roads local communities plan for and, in this case, pay for. MAG says it plans the entire transportation network based on the actions of cities in the region to give developers permission to transform the northern desert into communities.

"We are responding to the master plans that are already there," Hazlett said.

"A lot of times in transportation planning, we play catch-up. Here, we are trying to do some planning in advance. Will our projections happen by 2030, or 2035 or 2040? Nobody really knows. But they will happen."