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A small planning group, including clockwise from left, William Ramsey, Steve Brittle, Howard Shanker, Melanie Pai and Greta Rogers, is preparing to make a full-court press on the Arizona Department of Transportation against the proposed Loop 202 extension through Ahwatukee Foothills. (Photo by Doug Murphy/AFN)

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Local group to challenge freeway: Will go to court if needed

By Doug Murphy
Staff Writer

Full of questions and not very happy with the incomplete answers they have received so far, a group of residents have organized a nonprofit group and are prepared to take on the state and federal government in the ongoing battle over the South Mountain Loop 202 Freeway.

"The Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) wants to put a freeway next to elementary schools and through South Mountain Park and it's a bad idea," said Melanie Pai, one of the founders of Protecting Arizona's Resources and Children (PARC) that has filed with the state and federal governments to become a nonprofit organization with donations being tax deductible.

Pai, along with William Ramsey, Greta Rogers and Jim Yochim are listed as the directors, according to articles of incorporation filed with the Arizona Corporation Commission, with the mission to help educate the public about the problems associated with building a 10-lane freeway where Pecos Road now is.

PARC
 Protecting Arizona's
 Resources and Children
 P.O. Box 93666
 Phoenix, Ariz., 85070-3666
www.protectazchildren.org

And if need be, they are prepared to go to court over the freeway project. "And we're going to win," Rogers said. Advising the group is Ahwatukee Foothills resident and attorney Howard Shanker. His law firm represents community, Native American and environmental groups in a variety of environmental and natural resources matters. PARC plans a major community-wide kickoff sometime in January.

"It's important for the people of Ahwatukee Foothills to know we need their

assistance," Pai said. PARC's opposition focuses mainly on air quality concerns, especially for the 6,000-plus students who attend public schools within yards of where the freeway is planned.

Recent studies by the federal government and the health industry have shown that fine particular matter, called PM 2.5, can get deep into a person's lungs and cause problems. But according to Dan Lance, an engineer with ADOT, the proximity of schools to freeways has never been a factor in route selection. "We've built freeways right next to schools and we've seen schools built right next to freeways without a problem," Lance said earlier this year.

But PARC supporters see some hope in a 2005 lawsuit brought by the Sierra Club to block a freeway widening project in Nevada, which was settled after the federal highway administration agreed to install air filtration devices in schools next to the project to monitor air quality in five locations across the country to study the health impact of air pollution near freeways. "We need to set a new precedent of how we plan freeways in this state," Pai said.

Other freeway concerns include ADOT's plans to cut through a corner of South Mountain Park, which includes cutting deeply into two ridges that are religiously significant to the Gila River Indian Community and the traffic the freeway will attract is also a worry to some.

Environmental activist Steve Brittle is advising PARC and has concerns about hazardous cargos that would travel on the freeway, particularly chlorine, a common substance used in industries across the Valley. "Ahwatukee Foothills, of all the towns in Arizona, is least prepared to evacuate," in the event of a major spill, said Brittle, a member of the Maricopa County Local Emergency Planning Committee, which has studied the issue.

He said that if people in Ahwatukee Foothills are concerned about air quality, "You have to stand up and fight or they will ruin your community."

Brittle also pointed to heavy industrial pollution on the west side route of the freeway, including a plume of polluted groundwater between 7th and 91st avenues and soil contamination near the fuel storage tanks at 55th Avenue. Once ADOT buys the land for the Loop 202, those responsible for the pollution would be off the hook for cleanup and taxpayers will end up shouldering the financial responsibility, Brittle said.

The Loop 202 South Mountain Freeway has been on the maps since 1988, running east to west along Pecos Road from Interstate 10 by Ahwatukee Foothills, through a corner of South Mountain Park and reconnecting with I-10 in the West Valley around 55th Avenue.

Because of new freeway design standards the \$1 billion project would require the demolition of 255 Ahwatukee Foothills homes to make way for the freeway and the water retention areas. If the freeway were built below ground level, to lessen the noise impact, even more would have to go.

Some freeway opponents have looked south of Pecos Road, hoping that the Gila River Indian Community will allow the freeway on tribal lands, but a 2001 resolution by the Tribal Council opposes any proposed freeway or truck by-pass on Indian lands.

ADOT plans to reconvene a citizens advisory team to discuss the freeway route sometime in January. A draft environmental impact statement is due by summer with the final route decided by next year.

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