

Road Ruckus

Why is Picture Rocks Road a two-lane nightmare?

By TIM VANDERPOOL

Those were the days, back when families filled the Chevy with sandwiches, gasoline and a hankering for Picture Rocks Road. They'd chug up this bucolic Tucson Mountains byway, coast into a bald patch of desert and feast on the supernal vista of slopes tumbling into Avra Valley.

But those days are long gone. Now Picture Rocks is a cramped, curvy thoroughfare carrying up to 8,000 cars each day from booming Avra Valley into Tucson. Unfortunately, the park also slices through about three miles of Saguaro National Park, on the city's westside. And that not only raises squirmy jurisdictional issues, but also dispatches thousands of park creatures to the great hereafter (see "Roadkill Blues," Sept. 29).

"We think it's a very large problem," says Sarah Craighead, superintendent of Saguaro. "A lot of animals die, and we have visitor and safety issues. There are quite a few car accidents. Visitors using park trails cross that road. It's a very dangerous situation."

The carnage alone has some calling for closure. "Picture Rocks Road has never been viewed as an appropriate commuter route," says Daniel Patterson, a desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "But that's what it's become. Not only does it kill lots of wildlife, but it also dramatically harms the natural values on that end of Saguaro National Park."

Still, others such as Fred Metz and his wife depend on that road. The retirees live in Picture Rocks, an unincorporated community on Saguaro's northwest flank. "If there is an emergency, Picture Rocks is the only road into Tucson," he says, "unless we want to go 15 miles out of our way."

It's a sad dilemma for this scenic old byway, which may predate Arizona's 1912 statehood. Picture Rocks became enclosed by federal land when Saguaro West was added to the already existing eastside preserve in 1961. But it but only grew into a headache decades later as Tucson swelled. "When the park was first established, the urban area didn't reach us," says Bob Love, the park's chief ranger. "A lot of roads out here were still dirt roads. But population density has increased right up to the park boundary."

That also means far more traffic than two-lane Picture Rocks was built to handle. And it's expected only to get worse; Craighead says the Pima Association of Governments predicts current traffic could double to around 16,000 cars daily by 2025. "Of course, the road won't handle that many cars. It's not possible to get that many cars on it."

So what's the fix? Not surprisingly, this is where things get tricky. Saguaro is currently revising its general management plan, which is expected to include several "traffic calming" measures such as speed bumps, warning lights and kiosks where Picture Rocks enters the park. But simply closing the road to through traffic would be a tough sell. One reason is its funky jurisdiction. "We have a management agreement in place with the county, where the park does law enforcement and maintenance on Picture Rocks," says Craighead. "But the county owns the road." Closing it "would be a county decision, and as far as I know, there are no plans" to do so.

Not that Saguaro officials would likely weep over such a move. While they won't openly discuss closure, the notion did pop up in the park's 2000-2005 Strategic Plan. *This road draws heavily on our staff time and money, it reads, and it is not critical to the enjoyment of the park. Local residents want to keep the road; the park would like to close the road as soon as an alternate route is available to the residents.*

Shutting down the road could also be politically ugly. In the early 1980s, Pima County deeded right of way, within park boundaries, to the U.S. Interior Department. But the deed contains a caveat, according to County Transportation Director Kurt Weinrich. If Saguaro were to close Picture Rocks, he says, the county could reassert control. Still, there's built-in wiggle room: Actually invoking this measure "would require two actions to happen. One is that the park service physically closes the road to traffic. Second, the Board of Supervisors would have to decide whether they want to invoke the reversion clause."

Regardless of who controls Picture Rocks, Patterson blames the Regional Transportation Authority—a consortium of local governments—for neglecting Avra Valley's traffic growth. "This is an area where the RTA has failed," he says. "They're not getting serious about proposing an alternative route around the north end of the Tucson Mountains."

Patterson also points a finger at Pima officials. "It's unethical for the county to permit continued development out in Avra Valley, knowing that people are going to be speeding up and down Picture Rocks Road everyday," he says. "Not only do you have roadkill, but you're harming the overall quality of a national park."

District 3 Supervisor Sharon Bronson represents the Picture Rocks area. She didn't return a phone call seeking comment.

But Gary Hayes, the RTA's executive director, says plans for a so-called "western loop" might soon unfold. This alternative commuter connection would link Avra Valley's heavily traveled Sandario Road to others north of the park. Still, he says, the proposal needs a kickstart. "At least we need to discuss starting the process of dedicating right of way" for a new route.

Regardless, none of this happens unless voters choose to pay for it, says Hayes. "We've been unsuccessful four times in trying to get a dedicated funding source to improve our transportation system, and it's just become more exacerbated as time has gone on. So a lot of what we're doing is fixing past ills," like Picture Rocks Road.

A proposed half-cent county-wide sales tax hike, slated for the ballot in May, might fund some relief. In the meantime, says Patterson, local leaders should get off their duffs. "The county needs to say that Saguaro National Park is important to Pima County—that we're not going to continue to have it cut in two by Picture Rocks Road."