

Opposition against Interstate 11 in Arizona cite existing roads, environment

Las Vegas and Phoenix are the only two cities in the nation with populations more than one million people that are not currently linked by an interstate. However, Interstate 11 will provide that linkage, with a 15-mile portion of the new road now open near the Nevada-Arizona border as of August 2018. [Submitted photo]

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By Howard Fischer, Capitol Media Services

PHOENIX — A proposed new highway from Nogales to Wickenburg — and eventually beyond to Kingman — has united a Republican legislator and environmental interests in opposition, albeit for different reasons.

Rep. Mark Finchem, R-Oro Valley, questions the wisdom of the state constructing hundreds of miles of new freeway when he says it can't even take care of the roads it already has. He said there are far better alternatives for moving freight from Mexico to Canada and back, especially rail.

The Center for Biological Diversity, for its part, finds little justification for constructing 280 miles of new road — some of it through environmentally sensitive areas — when the real demand to reduce traffic congestion is in the urban areas. Randy Serraglio, southwest conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, says the money would be better spent improving mass transportation.

Both views are contrary to those of Gov. Doug Ducey who has emerged as one of the leading proponents of the south half of the project which, depending on the final path, could cost anywhere from \$3.1 billion to \$7.3 billion.

Ducey sees this stretch of new road as part of what would eventually run through Kingman by upgrading U.S. 93 to interstate standards, ultimately connecting with an existing stretch of I-11 that already has been built in Nevada. More to the point, the governor envisions this as the next great international highway facilitating trade among Mexico, the United State and Canada, moving some of the traffic that now goes through California.

"So it's a long-term, something that will really benefit our state and allow us to be the player that we're going to be in terms of economic growth and development and trade," he told Capitol Media Services.

That's also what's behind the backing of the Arizona Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

"We believe that Arizona's future as a logistics hub is a bright one with the growth of cargo trade," said chamber spokesman Garrick Taylor, much of that linked to eventual ratification of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Trade Agreement. "We need to be sure we have the infrastructure in place to accommodate that trade."

On a local level, the proposal has other boosters, like officials from the city of Maricopa who believe that a new interstate highway on the edge of the community will translate to economic development.

Dale Wiebusch figures that once there is a highway that distribution centers will spring up around it, similar to the warehouses that have sprouted along the western edge of Interstate 10 in Phoenix. He said Maricopa could become the gateway for moving items from I-11 to Casa Grande and the East Valley cities of Maricopa County, suggesting it would become "an inland port."

The plan also has the backing of the town of Marana. But at least part of the issue there is the suggested alternative by Fincham and others of simply widening I-10.

"In the '60s, Marana's downtown was displaced by the creation of I-10," explained Town Manager Jamsheed Mehta. "Any further widening further widening of the existing alignment could be detrimental to our community."

Mehta said the town also believes that the return on the financial investment of a new highway is greater than simply widening a existing one. And he said a new highway, properly planned, could avoid the historic, archaeological and environmentally sensitive areas throughout Southern Arizona.

That's not the view of the Tucson city council which voted earlier this year to oppose the project, at least in part because of the proposed path that would run west of the city and through Avra Valley. The council resolution said the highway would conflict with the city's own priorities including protecting open space, dark skies and wildlife corridors.

Pima County's position is a bit more complex and nuanced.

County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said a new freeway running through undisturbed areas could have significant environmental, cultural and historical impacts. But the alternative of widening I-10 has its own human impacts in terms of more noise and pollution, to say nothing of the disturbance that having to rebuild interchanges would have.

At this point, Huckelberry said, there hasn't been sufficient study about the impacts of either alternative. And he said that, from the county's perspective, there would have to be significant mitigation of the negative effects — far more than a normal road-construction project — to justify either plan.

"If they don't reach those standards ... we will oppose either alignment," he said.

Sierra Club lobbyist Sandy Bahr sees another side to all of that, suggesting that the highway is designed to benefit those who own vacant land along the route.

"You don't think I-11 has anything to do with development in the West Valley or anything like that?" she asked, property that will be worth more if near a major freeway.

"There's a lot of people who have looked at what is the course this road will take and they have somehow positioned themselves to become very wealthy when the road is built — if it's built — for rights of way, for land use," Finchem agreed.

Then there's the question of who will use I-11.

The highway is being planned on the premise it would largely carry truck traffic, both alleviating some of the congestion along the parallel stretch of I-10 as well as attracting new commerce.

Finchem, whose legislative district includes a stretch of the proposed highway, said there's a much more efficient way to move goods: rail. And he said that happens with a lower carbon footprint than the equivalent number of trucks.

But the more immediate issue, he said, is financial. He said even if the project is constructed with federal dollars, that still leaves the state on the hook for maintenance.

"There are some potholes out here that if I hit those with my truck they'd cause an accident," Finchem said. "They're that deep and they're that big."

Finchem said the problems with financing are so bad that lawmakers found themselves debating this past year whether or not to fix a bridge in Globe, "a bridge that's critical to that community."

"So until we have the resources to maintain the roads that we already have, I don't think it makes a lot of sense for us to add additional roadway stock to the state and county responsibility."

Ducey took issue with the funding question. He said the state put an extra \$50 million into road funding this year alone, with three out of every four dollars spent going to road maintenance.

"That will be over \$2 billion over the next five years," the governor said.

Still, Ducey conceded that may not be enough.

"I think there's more that needs to be done," he said. "I think in different parts of the state we have different conditions."

But Ducey boasted of the fact that the state no longer diverts gasoline taxes and vehicle registration fees to help fund the Highway Patrol, leaving more for road construction and maintenance, a shift that has occurred every year since 2002.

That, however, tells only part of the story. The change occurred only because the budget that Ducey signed put the burden on the backs of car and truck owners, imposing a new \$32-a-vehicle registration fee to fund the Highway Patrol.

Finchem isn't alone with his funding concerns.

Rep. Noel Campbell, R-Prescott, said the only way the I-11 plan would make sense is if it were built as a public-private partnership. And that, he said, means a toll road to both finance the project and provide ongoing money for maintenance.

"The state can't take that on right now on its own," Campbell said.

But Campbell, whose district also would be affected by I-11, does have one request if the state does decide to proceed: Choose a path that moves the road closer to Wickenburg than one route being considered which would put it about 12 miles to the west.

"Nobody would get off the interstate to drive 12 miles into town," he said. "The town will dry up," he said, losing the traffic that now goes through there enroute to Las Vegas.

On the environmental side, Bahr said putting a road through the Avra Valley would have "devastating impacts." She said if there really is a need to build more vehicle capacity there is a better alternative.

"Using the existing corridors makes a whole heck of a lot more sense for truck traffic," Bahr said.

She also said that much of the congestion that is tying up traffic has to do with trucks actually coming into Phoenix, something that I-11 would not help.

And for those going beyond, Bahr pointed out that the state has — and is — building various bypasses, including the Loop 202 South Mountain freeway that will divert through traffic around the crowded urban core.

"How many more bypasses do you need?" she asked.

Serraglio expressed parallel concerns.

"The only places in the interstate highway corridor that are problematic for freight are in local urbanized centers where single passenger vehicle trips dominate the spectrum of vehicle miles traveled," he said.

"Building a 280-mile long interstate, brand new construction through pristine areas in many cases, is not the way to deal with that handful of bottlenecks in the existing system," Serraglio said. "It's an absolute waste of money and materials."

And both said there's something else that deals with the very nature of road construction itself: If you build it, they will come.

"Too many times transportation planners have made decisions that induce traffic demand," said Serraglio. "It's a very self-fulfilling prophecy when these guys come up with these projections."