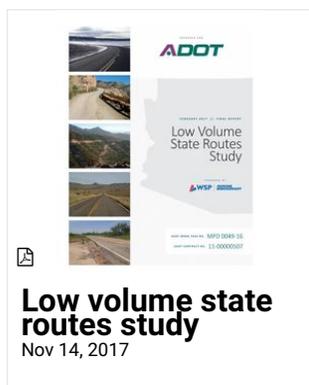


ADOT engineer: It's time for a serious discussion on the Coronado Trail

Ken Showers Nov 15, 2017



CLIFTON – The Clifton Town Council held another of many discussions about the future of the Coronado Trail.

During the regular November meeting, council members and the public were given a presentation by Arizona Department of Transportation District Engineer Bill Harmon. The presentation encompassed progress and plans on a number of local projects, and most notably the discussion of U.S. Highway 191 from Morenci to Alpine.



ADOT statistics say an average of 81 vehicles travel the Coronado Trail daily.

The serious discussion led to a packed meeting room with members of the public and other community partners. Prior to the presentation, Clifton Mayor Felix Callicotte asked for the crowd to allow Harmon to finish his presentation before asking

questions.

"The reason I'm here is to extend an invitation, so we can come to the table," Harmon said. "The time is approaching to have a conversation."

He discussed a low volume study produced by ADOT that presented data on 22 different routes throughout Arizona.

"Segment 21, US191, from US 191x near Granville to SR 180 Alpine," as its documented in the study, is fraught with a number of issues that Harmon said are not new. The route is more than 100 years old, with features in disrepair and geography that lends itself to constant damage by the elements and fire.

The road sees an average of 81 vehicles daily, a low volume as compared to the cost of maintenance. The study detailed an average of \$8,152.70 average annual cost per mile. That's \$658,249.37 per year, and a total of \$3,291,246.86 from 2011-16.



ADOT District Engineer Bill Harmon gives his presentation before the Clifton Town Council

A second concern that Harmon has is the growth of the Freeport Morenci open-pit mine, which has led to the road being shifted several times over the years, at Freeport's expense.

"I'm not here to tell you the sky is falling, (but) the money I put in is really ineffective in maintaining the route in the long run," he said.

Alternatives he presented encompass several options. One is to continue the status quo with road realignment and allocating funds there instead of constant repair.

Harmon said Freeport has been an outstanding partner to ADOT, but Freeport's need to regularly shift the road's alignment would eventually make it too difficult to traverse.

A second option floated was to have an alternate route built along the San Francisco River, but the costs and difficulties that would come with that effort are what the engineer called a "show stopper." By Harmon's estimate, the undertaking would be somewhere in the neighborhood of \$300 million to \$500 million.

"That's hard to justify for 80 cars a day," he said.

The third option he presented is the Mule Creek route to U.S. Highway 180 in New Mexico, coming back to Alpine. That path, he said, is already considered a preferred route, but acknowledged that all the proposed routes and options have concerns and problems.

"There are no easy answers, but there are a lot of hard questions," he said.

Harmon wrapped his presentation by encouraging the input of everyone affected by a possible closure of the trail so that they can move forward, saying, "If ADOT does anything, it's with as broad a consensus as possible among stakeholders. What I envision for our next step is working with leadership to develop an engagement plan."

Following that plan, ADOT would be working under that direction and identifying all possible stakeholders in the next fiscal year.

Callicotte remained unmoved by Harmon's call for unity, and lectured the engineer, saying, "One size does not fit all. We're not Maricopa County." Pressing the issue he said, "What I'm seeing is that Maricopa wants the money coming here to build another freeway. They don't care about Greenlee County."

In fact a new freeway has been proposed, Interstate 11, which would start at the border in Nogales, run up to Phoenix and connect the state capital to Las Vegas. Phoenix and Las Vegas are the only two major metropolitan areas in the nation not currently connected by an interstate highway.

An investment firm owned by entrepreneur and philanthropist Bill Gates recently purchased 25,000 acres of land outside of Phoenix to develop a community that the proposed freeway would run through.

Harmon was also grilled by Councilman Ray West on the details of the study.

"Was the study precipitated by a lack of money?" West asked.

"There is a lack of funding, but it was spurred by an invitation from Freeport in 2015." Harmon said.

"Is it the mine or the funding?" West clarified, Harmon said it was both. Cutting to the chase, West asked hypothetically, "Would it still be an issue if it was properly funded?" Harmon said yes, indicating that his largest concern appears to be future alignments and the effect it would have on normal traffic.

Greenlee County Sheriff Tim Sumner expressed concerns once again about the difficulties that closing the road would pose for law enforcement, as well as Search and Rescue.

The public also weighed in on the issue with several concerned about the possibility of becoming trapped in the event of natural disasters.

"Don't bottle us in, this is our lives!" one unidentified woman told Harmon.

During a trip to up the Trail to gather photographs for this story one local man who attended the meeting stopped to speak with the Copper Era concerning his fears should the area experience another catastrophic flood as has occurred in the past.

"Everyone in Morenci would have nowhere to go." he said.

Councilman Luis Montoya questioned Harmon about ADOT's timeline and when the state agency might reach a conclusion on the trail. Harmon estimated it would be several years before ADOT has a firm idea on what will happen, and stressed that no decisions regarding the trail had yet been made.

Callicotte finished the session by declaring that, "As long as I'm mayor, you can be assured, you won't close it. Be assured, this Town Council will be on (our) side, not the state's."

Stakeholders interested in providing comment on the future of U.S. Highway 191 in Greenlee County can contact Harmon at 928-432-4919, or by e-mail at bharmon@azdot.gov.

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