

Tram to summit of Mount Lemmon envisioned

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Author/Byline: Douglas Kreutz; The Arizona Daily Star

An aerial tramway to the summit of Mount Lemmon "will definitely become a reality" - whether it's 10 years or 25 years from now," the coordinator of the controversial plan vowed yesterday.

He said the first step in a required economic viability study for the \$180 million project will be underway in the next few weeks.

"It's going to be a slow process, but the tram has to happen," said Dan Kennedy, a spokesman for would-be developers of the five-mile tramway on national forest land.

"It's going to happen because it just makes too much sense," Kennedy said. "It's just the perfect solution to get people out of the desert heat in the summertime and get them up there to see that beautiful mountain without creating a major impact on the mountain.

"And it could just do wonders for the Tucson economy by helping attract tourism," he said.

An environmental group spokesman maintained, however, that the tramway would have a major and negative impact on the mountain. He said environmentalists will "fight the project tooth and nail" if it gets beyond the planning stage.

Meanwhile, a U.S. Forest Service official emphasized that the economic viability study is just the first of many requirements, including a comprehensive environmental impact statement, that developers would have to meet before work could begin on the project.

The proposed tramway route would run from Cargodera Canyon, near Catalina State Park northwest of Tucson, to a point near the 9,157-foot summit of Mount Lemmon.

Under Kennedy's proposal, the cableway would be suspended 30 feet above the ground. The system, using tram cars with a capacity of 12 people per car, could transport 1,200 people up the mountain in an hour, Kennedy said.

He said the first step in the economic viability proposal involves filing a written request for information from the Forest Service concerning the income of Mount Lemmon Ski Valley and any other concessions operating on national forest land.

"We need to show that there's enough income going in on the mountain to provide some support for the tram," said Kennedy, who operates a marketing company in Tucson. "We can't just charge \$20 a head" for a ride on the tram."

By persuading operators of Ski Valley and businesses in the mountain community of Summerhaven to contribute to tram operating expenses, it would be possible to keep fees to \$12 or less per round trip and provide reduced rates to regular Tucson customers, Kennedy said. He said businesses would profit from such an agreement because the tramway would bring new customers to the mountain.

The information request probably will be filed within a few weeks, Kennedy said.

He estimated that the tramway would cost \$30 million and that other facilities, including a lodging complex at the base of the mountain, would cost about \$150 million.

Kennedy, who described himself as "a legwork person for parties (developers) who wish to remain unidentified at this point," acknowledged that the project has no investors so far.

"We have some people who say: 'When you get to a certain stage, we'd be interested in investing,'" he said. "But the present economy is a great time for the tram. Interest rates are falling ... and you've got construction companies just dying for a large project of this sort."

Kennedy said the economic analysis, environmental impact statement and public hearings - not to mention obstacles such as legal challenges - could delay the project until the year 2000. Actual construction would take about a year, he said.

Craig O'Hare, Arizona conservation chairman for the Sierra Club, said the group opposes the tramway proposal because of its expected impact on the mountain's scenery, recreation areas and wildlife.

"If it even begins to become a serious proposal, the environmental community will come out of the woodwork to fight it and make sure it doesn't happen," O'Hare said.

"Mount Lemmon already is excessively recreated, and this would make the situation even worse," he said. "By bringing more people up the mountain, it could ruin the whole experience.

"A tram could also have an impact on the bighorn sheep living in the area, and on other wildlife," O'Hare said.

Tom Quinn, district ranger for the Forest Service, said Kennedy has a right to request information on forest-land concessions under freedom-of-information laws.

He said the laws allow concessionaires to seek exemptions from revealing financial information under some circumstances.

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