

Catalina Highway - Building a better road isn't a bad idea

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It's a good idea to improve the road to Mount Lemmon because a better road will be easier to close.

Mount Lemmon's fate will be decided as traffic goes from heavy to unacceptable. It won't be long. The forest in some areas is already suffering damage from too much use. The solution for the cool, green gem that rises at Tucson's backdoor is to limit traffic and offer visitors another way to get to the top.

The old road is many things, from breathtaking to heart-stopping. Its hairpin turns have heard more prayers than some churches. But for all the emotional, aesthetic, dazzling, incredible things the road is, it has one big lack: It is not practical for buses.

The prison labor force that picked and blasted the road out in the '30s and '40s created a driving surface that was only 18 feet wide in some places. Unless reconfigured, it can't be transformed from an auto to a shuttle-bus route.

The new road will be 28 feet wide and built to accommodate buses. It will stand as a multimillion dollar challenge to the Forest Service to institute bus service to the top and limit - or eliminate - car traffic.

It won't be easy. Private property owners and businesses at the summit need access, and side roads to places like Rose Canyon Lake will remain inadequate for bus travel. But it is a worthy goal - as those who've seen how the tram system improved Sabino Canyon can attest.

A wider, bus-friendly road will eliminate the best argument the Forest Service has for not closing the road.

Two lower sections of the project are complete. The work involved moving about 300 cacti and revegetating roadside areas to mitigate damage. It was done well and sensitively. The next phase of the work involves two sections of roadway higher up. Widening there will mean cutting down 1,600 ponderosa pines, aspens and other trees.

Those trees will not fall silently. Some environmental interests criticize the loss of wildlife habitat the tree-cutting represents. Some say widening the road will attract more traffic to the mountain. They see a bad road as a good way to discourage people from going to the mountain, and they want to keep the road bad. That's nonsense.

The old road lives in the minds of long-time Tucsonans like an old friend. But sentimentality aside, the road is dangerous, hard to maintain and totally inadequate to the demands being made on it.

Improving it is a good idea in the short-term for safety and maintenance reasons. In the long term, it is a great idea because those with imagination will be able to turn a better road into a better way for Tucsonans to climb their backyard mountain.

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