

Lemmon tram idea said worth exploring

Arizona Daily Star, The (Tucson, AZ) (Published as The Arizona Daily Star) - October 12, 2003

- Author/Byline: Mitch Tobin
- Section: TUCSON/REGION
- Page: B1

Instead of driving up Catalina Highway, people bound for Mount Lemmon may one day board a gondola in Oro Valley for a 20-minute ride up the mountain.

Top county officials and some Summerhaven residents think it's worth exploring the idea of building a 5-mile "Sky Island Tram," similar to what's already in use in Palm Springs, Calif., and Albuquerque.

Backers say the project would turn a profit, increase tourism on Mount Lemmon, ease parking problems in Summerhaven and make the mountain more accessible for people unable or unwilling to take the road trip.

But skeptics doubt whether the project's finances will pencil out, and critics fear it will spoil the Catalinas' natural beauty.

"I think the community has to look at the option," said Ray Carroll, the Republican county supervisor who represents Summerhaven. "I'm still convinced there needs to be an alternative mode of transportation to Mount Lemmon."

Through a 1997 transportation bond, county voters approved \$1.5 million for a shuttle bus between Tucson and Summerhaven. Arthur and Mary Faul offered 1.2 acres of their land for use as the final stop. But many residents objected, complaining it would drop bus riders in a neighborhood too far from the center of town.

Because tram riders would be without transportation, many think some type of bus service would be needed on the mountain, so the tram might complement - rather than replace - the shuttle from Tucson.

Curtis Lueck, a local transportation consultant, gave county supervisors a feasibility study last month for free. The project, as outlined by Lueck, would involve:

A route that's outside of the Pusch Ridge Wilderness, where development is banned.

The lower station would be located somewhere between Catalina State Park and Biosphere 2. The upper station would be near Summerhaven or Mount Lemmon Ski Valley.

The ride would last 15 to 25 minutes and might cost \$15 to \$23 for a round trip.

Using two 80-person trams with operators would cost about \$20 million to build and cost \$2.1 million each year to run and maintain.

Using 16 10-person gondolas that don't need operators would cost \$10 million to construct and \$1.7 million to operate.

Both concepts would attract about 200,000 riders per year and yield annual profits of \$1.1 million to \$2.8 million.

The design, environmental reviews and construction would take six or seven years.

"I'm not an advocate of the tram," Lueck said. "I'm an advocate of studying the tram idea."

A van or bus running up Catalina Highway would be far cheaper and easier to get going. But Lueck and other consultants say it would lose money.

A 1999 study for Pima County estimated only 19,000 people would use the service and, with tickets at \$4, it would require a \$661,000 annual subsidy. That translates into taxpayers spending \$35 per passenger.

"It would probably be cheaper to give everyone a free rental car," Lueck said.

The notion of building a tram in the Catalinas isn't new. One concept dates to 1965. In 1992, developers proposed spending \$30 million to run a 5-mile line from Catalina State Park to Summerhaven. But none of the ideas ever left the station.

Steve Plevel, district ranger for the Santa Catalinas between 1979 and 1991, said he saw three proposals during his tenure. "Everyone came in enthusiastic," he said, "but they went out and did the economics and I never heard from them again."

The project would require a special permit from the Coronado National Forest, but without an actual proposal the forest has no opinion on

it, spokeswoman Gail Aschenbrenner said.

The Sierra Club's Tucson chapter also doesn't have an official position on the tram, but it opposed a previous effort to build one.

"There's so much habitat invasion in our Catalinas. This would be the last straw," said Rich Genser, the group's conservation co-chairman.

"I think it would be a good thing for business up there," said Bruce Wilson, who owns a lot on Mount Lemmon that he said sometimes gets blocked by parked cars. "It would attract visitors who come to Tucson who wouldn't otherwise go up to Mount Lemmon."

Cabin owner Tom Thomas would rather see the county first try the shuttle bus. "They should utilize the road. It's already there and they've spent millions redoing it," he said.

In Albuquerque, adults pay \$15 to board the Sandia Peak Tramway, which whisks them up a 10,378-foot mountain in the Cibola National Forest. "Time and terrain seem to move in harmony as passengers lift from the desert floor, above canyons and lush forests, to the mountain top," says the tram operator, which calls its 2.7-mile ride the world's longest.

In Palm Springs, 400,000 people a year take the 2.4-mile tram up Chino Canyon in the San Jacinto Mountains, with adults paying \$20.80 each. The project - completed in 1963 and funded by \$8.5 million in private bonds - was the brainchild of engineer Francis Crocker. Initially dubbed "Crocker's Folly," the tram became reality after helicopters made 23,000 trips to build four towers in steep, roadless terrain.

Summerhaven residents are already contemplating big changes for the village. At an open house Thursday, planners unveiled a variety of ideas: adding a small parking garage, rerouting the town's main drag to highlight Sabino Creek and building a pedestrian plaza to host farmers markets and evening concerts.

Lueck thinks the tram could transport freight up the mountain and offer all-weather access during the ski season. The project would likely be a public-private partnership and a portion of the revenue could go to the U.S. Forest Service. But Lueck recognizes it may be a long, tough sell.

"If there's political will to make it happen, it will happen," he said.

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- *Record: MERLIN_1671825*
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