

Torpedo the tram

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A tram to the top of Mount Lemmon was a bad idea the first couple of times it was suggested. Today, it is still a bad idea.

The tram idea resurfaced with a feasibility study given to the Board of Supervisors last month. It contained some details for the construction and operation of a tram.

The best argument against a tram is that it would further destroy the mountain's beauty. A 5-mile tram line would scar sightlines from the bottom, wherever the lower station may be, to the very top.

Tourism and business atop the mountain would undoubtedly take off if a tram carrying 200,000 people per year were constructed. However, business and tourism should not trump the idea of conserving the environment that makes tourism possible.

A story in the Star on Sunday noted that the route would be located outside of Pusch Ridge, where development is banned. Development may not be allowed now, but that ban has done little to stop the destruction of big horn sheep habitat. It's not a lesson that should be repeated.

"There's so much habitat invasion in our Catalinas. That would be the last straw," said the Sierra Club's Rich Genser.

The study's release was a matter of odd, if not bad, timing. The mountain has been under severe stress in the past few years from drought, a beetle invasion that destroys trees and two devastating forest fires. The Aspen Fire this year raged for nearly a month and charred more than 80,000 acres. The fire also destroyed much of the commercial and residential areas in Summerhaven. Clearly, Mother Nature has been harsh to the Santa Catalina Mountains.

We are certain the ride to the top of the mountain would be spectacular. It would no doubt surpass the scenery from similar tram rides in Albuquerque and Palm Springs. After all, neither of those trams start in the Sonoran Desert and its unique landscape.

But there is nothing about towers, cables and gondolas that can be made compatible with the desert at the bottom or the forest at the top.

Tucson residents hold dear Mount Lemmon and the Santa Catalina range. A tram would not enhance the Tucson desert and sky mountain experience. It would help to destroy it. The study said building the tram would cost somewhere near \$20 million. Maintaining and running the tram would cost another \$2.1 million.

Those are not prohibitive costs. But costs should not be the deciding factor.

The more important factors are the aesthetics and the impact a tram would have on the mountain. If so, there is nothing to suggest that what Mount Lemmon needs is a tourist tram.

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