

## New plan for tram up to Mt. Lemmon

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Oro Valley considering aerial lift as part of big development at base

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A tram from metro Tucson to Mount Lemmon, an on-again, off-again idea for years with various local governments, is on again - sort of - in Oro Valley.

Town officials say a tram would create a vibrant new tourist destination and improve access to the mountain from west of the Catalina Mountains.

They have asked representatives of a proposed development just west of the Catalinas to set aside part of the site to be used as a launching pad for the tram. They have also discussed the tram idea with four University of Arizona and Biosphere 2 officials - and won their enthusiasm for the idea as a way to promote "geotourism," or tourism that makes use of the region's natural, scenic assets.

For now, the tram remains "in the conceptual stage," Town Manager Greg Caton said. Holding back plans are the same two issues that have sunk the ambitious idea before: cost and controversy.

The town has no money or firm cost projection for the project right now. A \$50 million estimate "may be on the low end," Caton said.

Environmental activist Carolyn Campbell, of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection, said her group would be dubious about the idea due to expected construction impacts on the Coronado National Forest.

What's needed to move forward is a feasibility study of costs and benefits, and a push from the Town Council, Caton said. The cables and other machinery needed to lift the tram uphill would have to scale the rugged Catalinas near if not through the Pusch Ridge Wilderness Area. Because motorized equipment isn't allowed in wilderness areas, a congressional exemption would be needed. Even if it went through national forest outside the wilderness area, the Forest Service would still have to approve the project and conduct an environmental review.

In 2005, the Pima County Board of Supervisors green-lighted a tram feasibility study. But it balked at spending \$100,000 to conduct the study out of concern the project would scar the Catalinas. That's even though the route proposed at the time would have avoided the wilderness, first up a power line route then up Cargodera Canyon.

Recently, Oro Valley Mayor Satish Hiremath said someone else will have to take the lead in pushing for a feasibility study of a tram starting in the town.

"For the town, there are other tangible things we need to work on versus hoping the feds will come in and dump twenty, fifty or eighty million" in the town's lap, Hiremath said.

At the same time, he said, he's always interested in anything that could help the town's economic development prospects.

Last January, Oro Valley hosted a lunch meeting at the Hilton El Conquistador to discuss the idea, town officials told the Star in response to a public records request. Present were Hiremath; Caton; three other town officials; three officials of SunChase Holdings, the proposed developer of nearby Desert Springs; Joaquin Ruiz, dean of UA's College of Science; and three other UA and Biosphere officials.

The \$359 lunch tab was paid for by the town, Oro Valley officials said.

No commitments were made, but Ruiz praised the tram's potential to boost local tourism. Southern Arizona has an enormous amount of biodiversity that should attract tourism if the effort were properly structured, Ruiz, now Biosphere 2's acting director, said in a recent interview.

"We would have field trips to the Desert Museum and Kartchner Caverns - all assets to deal with natural history. And we would have programs at the Biosphere and at the Mount Lemmon telescopes, but to get there you have to drive around to the top of the Catalinas. With easy access, I think that would make it easier for people to go to more places."

Since the January meeting, the tram idea has essentially sat idle, Town Manager Caton said. Eric Bose, a SunChase official who was at the luncheon, said that while company officials have had general discussions with the town about a tram, "we don't have any plans or

provisions" for a launch pad on the 108-acre Desert Springs property.

"They have a long way to go, is our impression," Bose said. "But it's an interesting idea."

Travis Huxman, former Biosphere 2 director, wasn't at the Hilton luncheon, but said he is aware of 10 or 15 "visioning meetings" in the past five years involving various groups in which people brought up the idea.

"When we met with Oro Valley officials, especially when Paul Loomis was mayor (Loomis left that job in 2010), he had brought it up a couple of times. It came up in meetings with state parks officials when they were losing funding, and there were lots of creative discussions about how to keep them funded," said Huxman, now director of the Center for Environmental Biology at University of California-Irvine.

The project would reduce the impacts of traveling to Mount Lemmon by car, as does the tram up Albuquerque's Sandia Mountains, he said. It also opens the mountain to more users, particularly those who can't or don't want to drive the twisty mountain roads, he said.

"The key is for the economy to come back and for money to be raised," said Huxman, who added that a public-private partnership probably would be needed.

The biggest hurdle would be getting it through wilderness if necessary, he said.

Whether it's in the wilderness or not, the Sonoran Desert protection coalition would still have concerns about a Mount Lemmon tram, said Campbell, the coalition's executive director.

"It would be a big, linear construction project through the forest," she said. "They are not going to be just dropping things in from the sky - bulldozers would be going up there."

Bill Garner, a longtime Oro Valley councilman, said he likes the tram idea but doesn't believe it's feasible. Before the town pursues the project, it needs to consult with the congressional delegation to see if legal issues are a problem, Garner said:

"We have to move in baby steps to see if the idea can go anywhere."

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#### DID YOU KNOW?

The Sandia Peak Tramway outside Albuquerque draws about 250,000 passengers annually.

It was approved and built for \$2 million during the 1960s, long before the federal government created the Sandia Mountain Wilderness in that area.

It would probably cost \$50 million to build it now, said George Boyden, the tram manager.

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