Duo tilts at freeway 'windmill'

COLUMN

/////

Every so often the idea of running a crosstown freeway atop the Pantano Wash and Rillito River pops into view. A year ago, Hank Savko and Federico Sanchez presented their particular plan to Tucson's Mayor and Council Transportation Subcommittee.

Sanchez, 57, is a retired Pima County probation officer. Savko, 67, a retiree, once owned several service stations and an auto parts store. In other words, these guys are not kooks. And at first glance, their plan seems plausible:

It calls for running giant concrete pipes along the Pantano from roughly Irvington and Houghton roads, then connecting to pipes along the Rillito.

The pipes - capable of handling even floodwaters - would continue to the Santa Cruz River near Interstate 10 and Orange Grove Road.

Central Arizona Project water would also be pumped eastward through the pipes. Some water would percolate to the ground through openings in the pipes, for recharge.

The rest would wind up at Houghton Road at the Pantano Wash as a source for a water park. Parks and jogging paths would be built along the riverbanks.

The freeway itself would rumble above the pipes, level with the riverbanks, with on-and-off ramps at every major thoroughfare at the Rillito or Pantano, says Savko.

Light rail would run up and down its middle, then continue on its own to and from Downtown, hugging a bank of the Santa Cruz River.

The subcommittee liked the plan enough to direct a review by Department of Transportation Director Jim Glock. The review was less than favorable. "He gave us 110 reasons why it wouldn't work," Savko says.

I got considerably fewer. But cost remains a major hurdle. Just fleshing out the details would cost millions, Glock says. And - surprise - wiping out homes and businesses to put in a freeway is actually cheaper than running one down a riverbed, he adds.

According to figures supplied by his office, it would cost roughly $100 million per mile to run a freeway through the riverbeds. A more traditional freeway, including right-of-way acquisition and construction, would cost about half that amount.

Undeterred, Savko and Sanchez turned to the Pima Association of Governments, which is preparing a long-range regional transportation plan.

Their review was equally cautious - considering the federal government has regulatory jurisdiction over our washes.

"This concept would be subject to an environmental impact statement costing several million dollars, would take several years to do, and in the end the likelihood it would be approved is slim," says Don Freeman, PAG Transportation Programming Manager.

As for the idea of pumping CAP water through those pipes, the expense would be prohibitive, says Mitch Basefsky, spokesman for Tucson Water. And the Pantano, he adds, would not make for good recharge because of its silty and claylike soil.

"There are also lots of landfills along the Pantano, a couple of which have groundwater contamination," says Basefsky.

Savko dismisses these objections with: "If you have a plan and are trying to do something, there are always ways of getting around things."

True. And I salute him and Sanchez for their hard work and ingenuity. Still, I'm happy to leave Tucson's riparian areas alone. Who wants to jog next to a freeway?

So now what? Do we continue to choke on traffic? Build freeways only around Tucson's perimeter? Slash a swath through the middle of town? Whatever we do, says Freeman, it will take lots of money - and something even harder to come by in this town: a consensus.

"As long as the Tucson community is divided the way it is now, it's not going to happen." Ain't that the truth.

Bonnie Henry's column appears Sundays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Reach her at 434-4074 or at bhenry@azstarnet.com or write to 3295 W. Ina Road, Suite 125, Tucson, AZ 85741.