Loose in the Foothills

by Bob Ring

Better Access to the Freeway

I hate to complain, but Tucson is a freeway-deprived city. How many of you go to Phoenix a lot? Or head east towards El Paso frequently? Is getting to Interstate 10 a problem? It certainly is for me and Pat.

When we met eight years ago, Pat lived in Gilbert and I lived in Tucson – same house as now, near Snyder and Kolb. As we got to know each other better, we burned up the roads between our houses – a distance of 105.2 miles.

We became experts in getting to the freeway. We had to take into account the time of day (commuter and school traffic) and road construction. But, no matter how we planned and schemed, the trip between my house and Interstate 10 on our primary route along Sunrise and Ina took at least 30 minutes. Still does. Of course stopping at Fry's for fresh doughnuts takes another 10 minutes. And there's always the possibility of being held up by a long freight train at the railroad crossing just before reaching the freeway. Now that Pat and I are together permanently here in Tucson, we sometimes travel northward on the longer but "scenic" route, Oracle to Arizona 79, through Florence.

When we head east from Tucson, we take Kolb south to Interstate 10. That takes about 30 minutes too. I believe we have discovered a universal driving time constant for Foothills travelers.

I asked a couple of friends in the Tanque Verde Valley how they get to Interstate 10 and how long it takes. Going to Phoenix they both drive Catalina highway to Tanque Verde to Grant across Tucson, a trip of up to 50 minutes! Going east they use Houghton south to Interstate 10 at the Foothills universal traveler constant of 30 minutes.

I'm sure many of you – especially Tanque Verde Valley residents - are aware of an alternate route north. You **could** drive up the Mount Lemmon highway (if it's open) and from near the mountain's summit, go down the dirt control road north to Oracle. Or you **could** head east to the end of Tanque Verde Road, through Redington Pass on dirt roads to Redington, where you **could** then go north to Oracle or south to Benson. I've driven all of these byways, and believe me, traffic will not be a problem.

But seriously, what are we going to do about our poor access to freeways here in the Foothills? Do you think we'll ever see the day of freeway spurs along Ina or Houghton to better connect us to Interstate 10? I think not. The only major-highway talk I've heard lately is about a truck bypass for Tucson, probably west of Interstate 10, even further from the Foothills.

Here's a thought: Let's simply **declare** that the current Interstate 10, from Houghton to Ina, **is** the truck bypass route (with downtown access) and then build a new freeway along the foothills that would connect with Interstate 10 at the existing Houghton and Ina exits. I've even got a

suggested new freeway route picked out: along (or over) Rillito Creek and Pantano Wash.

This is not as dumb as it may sound. When I lived in San Diego, I watched an innovative transportation department build the partially elevated California 52 freeway along San Clemente Creek. That freeway today is a model of efficiency, beautifully integrated into the San Clemente Canyon landscape.

So let's get serious and improve Foothills access to Interstate 10. At the same time we'll be making it easier to get to one of Arizona's top tourist attractions, Sabino Canyon.

(Courtesy Bob Ring)

Improving freeway access for the Tucson Foothills will require innovative engineering as suggested by this road sign in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee.