

Paseo del Volcan gets funding, condemnation

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While the state Legislature deemed the Paseo del Volcan’s expansion worthy of \$1.5 million in capital outlay funds this month, the development also recently made a consumer watchdog list of the 12 most wasteful highway expansion projects nationwide.

A new study by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group Education Fund and Frontier Group identified a dozen “outright highway boondoggles” slated to collectively cost American taxpayers at least \$24 billion. New Mexico’s 30-plus-mile PdV project connecting Interstate 40 and U.S. 550 is among them.

“The Paseo del Volcan extension is a waste of taxpayer dollars,” said Lauren Aragon of PIRG’s New Mexico office. “The road would increase sprawl and put pressure on scarce water resources. It’s not surprising that the primary proponent of this \$96 million project is a private development company looking to build commercial and residential projects in the area.”

Gov. Susana Martinez had harsh words for PIRG and its report.

“PIRG is an extreme left-wing group that is trashing an important project that will eventually bring economic development and other valuable opportunities to a community in need,” she said in an email to the Observer. “The Paseo del Volcan extension is not yet underway because local leaders are working to secure funding. This project is one that the local community is looking forward to eventually completing.”



MARTINEZ: Opinion of ‘extreme left-wing group’

Moreover, others involved with the expansion say there is no single “private development” company spearheading the expansion.

A right-of-way donation – valued at about \$1 million – of 178 acres in Quail Ranch was secured in September, said John Black, a real estate broker with West Wood Realty, who has worked on the project since 1990. He added his company is not the only one with a stake in the development.

“Contrary to PIRG’s claim that landowners pushed the PdV freeway project, the approvals were driven entirely by a number of governmental agencies to try to plan for growth in our area,” he said. “We did not know the Federal Highway Administration, NMDOT and MRCOG were planning PdV to go through our land in Quail Ranch in 1990.”

Black said county officials mandated Quail Ranch, and others, to include PdV in its master plan in 1994.

“Landowners in the area, small and large, were forced to comply to the plans for this future freeway whether they liked the plan or not,” he said.

PIRG’s report also claims the project fails to account for changing transportation trends, especially among millennials – or those born between 1983 and 2000.

“Millennials ... are driving fewer miles, getting driver licenses in fewer numbers and expressing greater preferences to live in areas where they do not need to use a car often,” said Tony Dutzik, senior policy analyst at Frontier Group. “Despite the fact that millennials are the nation’s largest generation, and the unquestioned consumers of tomorrow’s transportation system, New Mexico is failing to adequately respond to these changing trends.”

Millennial Ann Marcelli of Rio Rancho disagrees.

“That’s not realistic, at least not yet,” she said. “In Rio Rancho, you have to drive places and there’s no real public transportation because there’s not a real need for that yet. Maybe once the city catches up and grows. But, for right now, it’s just too spread out.”

Aragon acknowledged nobody from PIRG visited the PdV project site to understand the community’s growth needs prior to labeling it a boondoggle. Nevertheless, she said it wouldn’t have made a difference in the nonprofit’s report.

“It’s just creating more debt for the millennials in the future by spending money on the Paseodel Volcan project instead of putting it toward current infrastructure needs,” she said.

Rio Rancho City Councilor Mark Scott concurred and questioned how well the project’s plans have been mapped out.

“The issue that I have not heard a solution for is, when we connect PdV to 550 how do we get the extra traffic over to I-25?” he asked. “The Bernalillo corridor is already too crowded and I have not heard that the pueblo is going to allow us to go across their land.”

Sen. Craig Brandt, R-Rio Rancho, dismissed the “road to nowhere” supposition.

“This assumes that the road will simply be a loop to avoid the Big I,” he said. “If it was, I wouldn’t support it. PdV is about connecting Rio Rancho to I-40 so that Rio Rancho can compete for industrial jobs and have more economic development. It is about jobs in Rio Rancho so we don’t have to cross the river every day to support our families.”

In addition to last week’s legislative nod, officials report numerous rights-of-way purchases between the Sandoval County line and Unser Boulevard are underway as part of the project’s gaining momentum.

“PIRG’s assessment is inaccurate at best and extremely disingenuous,” said Rep. Jason Harper, R-Rio Rancho.

“(PdV) is the most important, and will have the biggest impact, for economic development in Rio Rancho.”

