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Work in Mesa's Fiesta District to start after 3-year wait

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By Gary Nelson

The Republic | azcentral.com

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Three years after the City Council first approved the idea, a major overhaul of Southern Avenue in the Fiesta District begins this spring.

The City Council on Monday awarded a \$9.8 million contract to Haydon Building Corp., which will narrow and beautify the main east-west arterial street serving Fiesta Mall, Banner Desert Medical Center and Mesa Community College.

The work is scheduled to begin April 1 and last a year.

That timing would coincide with three other projects that have tied west-Mesa drivers in knots:

Light-rail [construction](#) along Main Street. The first phase, from Sycamore Street to east of Mesa Drive, will continue at least two more years. About the time that's finished, work on an extension to Gilbert Road will tie up another nearly 2 miles of Main Street.

Mesa Drive from U.S. 60 to Broadway Road, and Southern Avenue from Macdonald to Horne Street. Complications with utility work have delayed the projected completion date by three months, to this coming October.

University Drive from Alma School to west of Dobson Road, and on Dobson north and south of the Dobson-University intersection. City Engineer Beth Huning told the council last week that work should be done by July at the latest.

Councilman Dave Richins said he is all for the Fiesta project, but his northwest Mesa constituents are beginning to whine about the obstacles to getting around.

"I understand," Huning said.

But while two of the projects will be wrapping up in a few months, she said the inconveniences along Main Street will soon become more widespread.

When the light-rail project was planned, officials said they would leave downtown Mesa alone during the winter months, when traffic and business there is heavier.

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Come summer, downtown also will be torn up, Huning said.

The same strategy will be in play for the Fiesta project. As much of that as possible will be done in the summer, Huning said, "because we don't want to impact Christmas season at the mall."

Money for Southern Avenue is coming from a general-obligation bond issue that Mesa voters approved in 2008. The project was not on the original shopping list that was presented to voters, but as the recession dug in, Mesa saved enough money on other road projects to pay for the Fiesta District work.

It's a priority for Mesa because the city wants to leverage existing Fiesta District assets to create a node of activity based on the economic realities of the new century.

In the 1980s and for a few years beyond, Fiesta was one of the premier retail centers in the Valley. That luster faded as new venues siphoned customers away.

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The north side of Southern Avenue between Longmore and Alma School roads was particularly hard-hit, and there are still no signs of redevelopment for the long-vacant, fenced-off and much-maligned Fiesta Village complex on the northwest corner of Alma School and Southern.

A former power center across Alma School Road from the mall also is vacant, although Upper Iowa University plans to open a branch campus in the former Borders book store there this year.

That could be a straw in the wind as far as the Fiesta District's future.

Mayor Scott Smith has said repeatedly that although Fiesta Mall itself is surviving, retail will never again be the neighborhood's driving force. He envisions urban-style, mixed-use redevelopment, and in January he named Fiesta as one of four key economic-development nodes across the city.

The others are Falcon Field, the Gateway area and downtown.

Mesa officials hope the overhaul of Southern Avenue will help facilitate redevelopment by giving the neighborhood its own feel with distinctive branding, monuments and landscaping.

Narrowing Southern from six to four lanes is aimed at creating a more pedestrian-friendly and welcoming environment.

Huning told the council in a written report that Mesa originally was working with Achen-Gardner Construction on the project, but Haydon took over when Mesa and the original contractor could not come to terms.

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