

Highway construction to close Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park

by Nicholas Hodell / photo: Susan Wong / Cronkite News

A drag racing tradition in Chandler's Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park that dates back to the 1980s is set to come to an end.

The Wild Horse Pass Development Authority has announced that the 2023 NHRA Arizona Nationals will mark the final year for the event at the venue.

A new overpass that is planned for the widening of several miles of Interstate 10 will take the space that currently occupies part of the facility, according to a Wild Horse Pass release.

The Arizona Department of Transportation's tentative Five-Year Transportation Facilities Construction Plan released on March 18 shows a blueprint to add capacity to a 26-mile stretch of I-10 leading up to the racetrack. ADOT documents reveal that a general public lane and an HOV lane will be added in each direction. Construction would not start until the 2025 fiscal year. The construction project is slated to cost nearly \$140 million.

All of the funding for this project, according to ADOT's tentative five-year plan, will come from the Regional Area Road Fund. This fund comes from the Maricopa County Transportation Excise Tax, a half-cent sales tax that has been in place since 2004. ADOT said in a statement that the funding for the project is allocated by the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG).

"MAG has been working closely with GRIC (the Gila River Indian Community) to advance plans for additional access to the Wild Horse Pass area, and any future improvements will follow the required state, federal and GRIC review and approval processes," the association said in a statement.

The future additions to Interstate 10 may not be the only thing that is forcing the end of drag racing at the Chandler venue, though.

Last year, the Wild Horse Pass Development Authority announced plans to

develop the area with the help of Sunbelt Holdings, a real estate development company. The master plan showed a blueprint to develop the area where the drag race track and Firebird Lake are now, with additional hotels, corporate offices, mixed-use commercial buildings and new restaurants.

The National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) has raced in Arizona every year since 1985, with the exception of 2021 due to COVID-19 protocols. From that first year until 1989, the event took place in October and was known as the Fall Nationals. Arizona's stop in the NHRA schedule was moved to its current February slot in 1990. The new proposal was made within the existing I-10 framework. There is no word on whether the additional development is part of the reason, along with future work on Interstate 10, to discontinue the Arizona Nationals at Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park.

"The NHRA Arizona Nationals have provided NHRA fans countless memories for many years, and our race teams, partners, and NHRA officials look forward to celebrating the track in 2023 as we close out this chapter in NHRA history," NHRA President Glen Cromwell said in a statement.

"Arizona has been an incredible supporter of the National Hot Rod Association and Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park for the past four decades, and we are very grateful for this tremendous fan support," Elizabeth Antone, the interim general manager of the Wild Horse Pass Development Authority, said. "We know this final race will be a celebration that NHRA fans are famous for."

The Chandler venue does not just host the NHRA, though. Firebird Lake hosts drag boat races on an annual basis. And Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park hosted a round in the inaugural season of Nitro Rallycross, a rallycross series, on its off-road course last year. Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park also has two asphalt road courses which can be used for drifting events in addition to normal track days and races.

The exact dates for the final edition of the NHRA Arizona Nationals at Wild Horse Pass Motorsports Park next year are yet to be determined. ■

