

Nenshi warns Calgary airport tunnel would delay southeast connector road

BY JASON MARKUSOFF, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 3, 2011

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Barlow Trail will be closing in April 2011 if money is not raised for an airport tunnel in Calgary.

Photograph by: Christina Ryan, Calgary Herald

By spending \$295 million to quickly build the Airport Trail tunnel extension, council may have to delay completion of a southeast connector road that would prevent a growing business park from being isolated on the opposite side of the southeast ring road.

Although \$83 million of the tunnel funds would come from money set aside for other future transport projects, Mayor Naheed Nenshi said none of it would erase any projects from the books.

However, much of that comes from cash for future ring-road connections, and the mayor said the city roads linking to a planned ring-road flyover at 61st Avenue S.E. may not be ready for the bridge's 2013 completion.

"That one project on 61st avenue might be slightly delayed; nothing else that is currently on the books is being delayed," the mayor told reporters Thursday as he tried securing public and council support for

the tunnel ahead of Monday's council meeting, the project's decision day.

Mac Logan, the city's transportation general manager, said that connection could be delayed to 2014, but added that there may be other funding options or places to cut from roads construction.

Nenshi downplayed the flyover delay by arguing that green-lighting the underpass beneath the runway wouldn't affect links to major interchanges on the southeast ring road at Peigan Trail or 114th S.E.

But the move would frustrate businesses in a rapidly growing shipping and industrial zone just east of the ring road. Stoney Trail's completion will cut off their 84th Street access to Glenmore Trail, and business leaders had to press the provincial transportation minister to give them the escape route at 61st Avenue".

"Now the city is going to pull off and we're going to wind up with a bridge to nowhere?" asked Trevor Fridfinnson of Bison Transport, which relocated last decade to take advantage of ring-road access.

He's part of the 84th Street Access Committee, which estimated that the district's firms would incur tens of millions of dollars in extra fuel costs and lost business losses if businesses didn't have an access at 61st Avenue.

The mayor is arguing that no other project has the pressing demands of the tunnel, since construction must begin this year as the airport authority begins construction on the new runway situated where the soon-to-be-closed Barlow Trail currently sits.

"There are no specific projects that are on the cutting board as a result of doing this," Nenshi said.

"It does however, restrict a lot of the flexibility we have (for future projects). My argument is that I would rather fund something we know we need today, than have a pot of money set aside for something we may or may not need in the future."

Northeast Ald. Ray Jones is another firm "yes" vote on the tunnel.

"I can understand why people in other parts of the city won't see a need for it, but they will once Barlow Trail's closed and they get stuck on Deerfoot Trail for a long period of time," Jones said.

But council has voted down building the tunnel to safeguard other construction projects in the past, and the fear of such trade-offs will again scare off some potential tunnel supporters on council.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said she's a likely "no" vote, because she doesn't want to lose money devoted to future connections for southwest portions of the ring road. She's rooting for the 37th Street/Weaselhead option, and hopes it can be completed as quick as possible.

Nenshi said with the province's delays on finishing Stoney Trail - the 2015 completion date has been

thrown out the window - that it's not much of a sacrifice.

"Given the timelines on the future ring road, I'm not particularly concerned that this will defer that stuff greatly," the mayor said.

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