

# Aldermen cast doubts on mayor's tunnel plan

BY JASON MARKUSOFF, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 4, 2011

Presented By:



Mayor Naheed Nenshi, speaking at a news conference on Thursday, uses a new city transportation report to argue for building the airport tunnel at a cost of \$294.5 million.

**Photograph by:** Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald, Calgary Herald

Critics are poking holes in Mayor Naheed Nenshi's key arguments that council should approve \$294.5 million for an airport tunnel -- that it's cheaper to build the tunnel than not build it, and the money taken from elsewhere won't really be missed.

The mayor and allies are pressing colleagues to support the underpass for a new airport runway.

But many aldermen who have endorsed the project in the past now say they're undecided about the trade-offs and consequences of devoting much of the city's future infrastructure dollars to the project.

"It does tie up a lot of the funds for the next few years, and you don't decide quickly on that," Ald. Peter Demong said Thursday, though he noted he will consider the economic benefits that a good airport-area link would bring.

Although \$83 million of the tunnel funds would come from money set aside for other future transport projects, Nenshi noted that most of that cash is for projects that won't be ready for years, while construction must begin on the Airport Trail extension this spring or the costs of tunnelling beneath the runway in the future would be stratospheric.

"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."

One project Nenshi admitted would face delays -- linking a 61st Avenue bridge the province is building over the southeast ring road -- will draw ire in a growing business region just east of the coming highway.

Stoney Trail's completion will cut off 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 out 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.

Dave Gilkes, president of the 84th Street Access Association, struck a more conciliatory note. The Airport Trail link "is terribly, terribly important for Calgary" and for international freight, so maybe the flyover connection can wait a year, he said.

Mac Logan, the city's transportation general manager, noted the transportation department might be able to find other cuts to keep that flyover link on schedule for 2013.

Money for the tunnel would also be taken from plans for links to future ring-road expansions, which Nenshi down-played because of chronic provincial delays on completing Stoney Trail.

But southwest Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said that trade-off makes her a likely "no" on the tunnel, since she's hoping for a quick completion of the southwest's 37th Street/ Weaselhead route.

"We've been waiting 40-50 years for the southwest ring road. So, clearly, the battle lines are drawn on this," she said.

"And to pull money away from the transportation budget to do this wee, tiny piece of infrastructure when you have (more) people south of Fish Creek that really don't have any way out."

Ald. Ray Jones, meanwhile, is one of at least five firm "yes" votes for the project, leaving only three more to be found among the many undecided members to reach the required eight. "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," he said.

Nenshi uses a new city transportation report to argue that building the tunnel at nearly \$300 million is less than the \$325 million to \$425 million estimated for extra interchanges and road widening to create a workaround at Country Hills Boulevard.

However, while the "do nothing" option takes into account the next 30 years of necessary upgrades, the estimate for building the tunnel doesn't include the future road-network upgrades and potential

interchanges that would eventually support the underpass.

Logan said the figures might be similar and the tunnel option could wind up cheaper -- some planned interchanges on Airport Trail may not be needed, depending on traffic flows -- but his department didn't fully estimate that long-term impact.

"The report's not saying the 30-year cost is only \$300 million," he said. "We're trying to say to council that the do-nothing option has a cost. And that cost is significant, probably in the same order of magnitude as building this project."

But he said the tunnel route does make the most sense. "Given the same investment, you're going to end up with a better system if you build the length straight across Airport Trail."

Ald. Druh Farrell, who has voted against the tunnel before, said she's undecided because it's unclear to her what the "ultimate solution" would cost.

Ed D'Antoni, a former city roads manager, questioned the mayor's numbers.

"He's out to lunch. You'll need interchanges you wouldn't normally need," said D'Antoni, who retired in 2005 and said he proudly voted for Nenshi.

The Herald has also learned that city administrators will warn council behind closed doors Monday that the tunnel project features various risks that could wind up costing the city even more, since negotiations on compensation and other allowances to the Calgary Airport Authority are still ongoing.

However, Logan and Nenshi both said there are unusually high contingencies within the estimate for the complex underpass construction.

Northeast residents are counting on the underpass for east-west access, but the whole city will benefit from a potential airport LRT connection through the tunnel, said Judy Brown of the Saddle Ridge Community Association.

#### Tunnel Timeline

- April 10, 2006: The Calgary Airport Authority urges city council to start work on a road under a future north-south runway, stating it's a priority for an east-west artery and an associated tunnel to be built before the runway is constructed.
- July 28, 2008: City says it will ask federal and provincial governments to consider funding a tunnel under a future airport runway.
- Dec. 22, 2009: The city and airport sign an agreement to pay a total of \$90 million toward the \$287-million project with a March deadline to secure funds from the federal and provincial governments.

- March 1, 2010: The project is grounded after the deadline passes with the provincial and federal governments refusing requests for cash.
- Oct. 2010: A lobby group of northeast communities and businesses put the tunnel at the top of the election agenda, winning favour among many aldermanic candidates and most mayoral hopefuls.
- Oct. 25, 2010: With the election of Mayor Naheed Nenshi, the tunnel is put back on the table for discussion.
- Feb. 2, 2011: Borrowing costs and concessions to the airport authority will bring the price tag for the tunnel and extension to \$294.5 million.

Compiled by Karen Crosby and Norma Marr, Calgary Herald Source: Calgary Herald Archives

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