

Airport project too risky, say aldermen

BY SUZANNE WILTON AND RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 6, 2011

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"I know the mayor has been promoting this idea that it's Kumbaya . . . but that doesn't mean to say that council is dysfunctional because we disagree on an issue as big as this one," Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart says of the mayor's push for the Airport Trail tunnel.

Photograph by: Mikael Kjellstrom (Kjellstro, CAL

CALGARY - Mayor Naheed Nenshi's "Kumbaya" council has changed its tune, with two aldermen cranking up dissent over the contentious airport tunnel.

"In some respects, the honeymoon is over," declared Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart on Sunday. "I know the mayor has been promoting this idea that it's Kumbaya . . . but that doesn't mean to say that council is dysfunctional because we disagree on an issue as big as this one."

Colley-Urquhart made the comments on the eve of a potentially fractious decision by council on whether to proceed with the tunnel project.

She and Ald. Gord Lowe came out swinging Sunday against Nenshi and his push to break ground this spring on an Airport Trail underpass, under a new runway that's to be built.

Colley-Urquhart and Lowe - respectively the vice-chair and chair of the finance and corporate services committee - raised the alarm on a number of risks they said need to be addressed before the project proceeds.

Many of those risks, said the pair, are contained within a confidential document that was circulated to aldermen Friday.

"It's really caused me to take a step back and do a lot of homework and consulting with administration over the past 72 hours," said Colley-Urquhart.

The Ward 13 alderman also hit back against comments the mayor made to another newspaper on the weekend, suggesting while other council members may not always agree with him, they should take time to appreciate that he's always right,

"According to the mayor, he's always right and it's going to take council members a while to catch on," she said, referring to a comment Nenshi reportedly made on the weekend to another media outlet. "I think the mayor needs to be careful."

Council will today stare down several scenarios: green-light the tunnel project and extend Airport Trail to the northeast ring road at a cost estimate of at least \$295 million; spend slightly less by stopping Airport Trail at Metis Trail or 36th Street N.E.; or rejecting the costly tunnel option altogether.

Nenshi, who wants the full project to go ahead, acknowledged Friday the city may face a higher price tag associated with the acquisition of airport property and other related costs.

On Sunday, he declined to comment or engage in a political battle. A spokesman for the mayor said it would be inappropriate for Nenshi to talk about a confidential report.

Lowe, however, questioned why the report is confidential in the first place.

"One of the mayor's key platform things was openness and transparency," Lowe said. "I find that in the way these reports are coming down and the way they're constructed, there's anything except openness and transparency."

He also finds "offensive" one part under a section of the public report called "stakeholder consultation" in that indicates 99 per cent of voters cast a ballot for a mayoral candidate in favour of the tunnel.

Lowe's main concern is how this project will be financed in part through Municipal Sustainability Initiative (MSI) money from the province. It's being proposed that \$173 million of that money, which is only coming online in 2018, be used for the project. The city will have to borrow that amount in the interim.

Lowe said the province has lived up to its future sustainability initiative commitments, but when budgets

are tight it sometimes stretches the period over which the money becomes available.

He said he worries if that happens, other city projects that will depend on the cash will suffer. He is also concerned about the cost of borrowing to fund the tunnel and dislikes the idea of using capital grant money to pay interest on loans for projects.

"It's equivalent of mortgaging your house to buy a loaf of bread," he said.

The airport tunnel could be a crucial vote for Nenshi, who has poured a great deal of effort and political capital into the project.

If he succeeds in convincing council to approve the project, it will be his first major victory as mayor. If he fails, it could be a big blow.

"Victories build you," said Mount Royal University political analyst David Taras. "They build your reputation and they build your prestige and they build your political clout.

"But losses work in reverse. You lose prestige and prestige translates into power. Maybe you can afford one loss, but then you can't afford several loses."

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