

Dissenting aldermen fear Airport Trail tunnel too risky a venture

BY RICHARD CUTHBERTSON, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 9, 2011 6:29 AM

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Ald. Dale Hodges voted against the tunnel and said one of his big concerns is the airport won't entertain a long enough lease for the tunnel land.

Photograph by: Lorraine Hjalte, Calgary Herald

CALGARY - As the dust settles on city council's decision to approve the airport tunnel, the project continues to be plagued by concerns it is too risky for the city to press ahead on.

And less than 12 hours after council narrowly gave the nearly \$300-million tunnel its blessing, the airport authority noted in a statement Tuesday that a series of "complicated and critical items" still need to be resolved with the city.

While proponents in the northeast cheered council's decision, city administration is being sent to look at the prospect of using levies or tolls to help pay for the project.

As they do, some on council opposed to the underpass continue to raise fears about the total cost, where money will come from, and the risks to the city if construction goes ahead.

Details of such issues are contained in a confidential report, according to some on council. Efforts by a handful of aldermen to make that report public were turned down by council Monday night over concerns it revealed the city's strategy for negotiations with the airport.

One of the key concerns of some aldermen is that the multimillion dollar project will be built on land not owned by the city.

"The airport has all the authority, so it's a totally one-sided negotiation," Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said.

There are also questions about whether the airport authority even wants the tunnel. The authority has for several years said it plans to go ahead with constructing a new runway without the underpass.

A spokesman for the airport authority declined to comment beyond the statement issued Tuesday morning.

Ald. Dale Hodges voted against the tunnel and said one of his big concerns is the airport won't entertain a long enough lease for the tunnel land.

"When you look at the sum total of all the issues, including the relatively short terms that we could ever be able to lease the land for, at the end of day you end up trying to negotiate an infrastructure project on someone else's land," he said.

But others say these things will be worked out in an agreement with the airport.

Ald. Jim Stevenson, who has lobbied hard for the project, said Tuesday that agreement will give the city access and said council decided the tunnel was worth the risks.

"We've sent our administration back to them to say, 'Here's the parameters. Within these parameters, you're free to make an agreement, to make a deal' " Stevenson said. "If the airport doesn't agree to those things, then, of course, they have to come back to us and say, 'We're unsuccessful.'"

The total estimated cost for the tunnel, including contingencies, is \$295 million. The project would extend Airport Trail underneath a runway the airport will soon build, connecting Barlow Trail to Stoney Trail.

But there are still significant funding questions at play.

Roughly \$173 million worth of provincial cash coming to the city in 2018 will be funnelled into the project.

The remaining amount will be found in pockets of other money, gobbling up much of the pot that could have headed to other unfunded projects in the city's future.

City officials are also going to take a closer look at whether levies or a toll could be imposed on the project. The idea gained some traction with council Monday night.

Ald. Gord Lowe said when a capital project benefits an identified group, it's appropriate they shoulder the costs.

The general manager for city transportation said Tuesday more work needs to be done to see whether a levy would even be feasible under the Municipal Government Act.

Levies are typically levelled on new developments (to pay for future projects, such as a fire station), not on already established communities.

"We'll look at what ability do we have to do it, how might we apply it, at what rate might we apply it," said Mac Logan.

He said it also remains to be seen if a site-specific levy for new developments in the airport area can be done.

But levies and tolls may not be a popular idea with some.

One proponent of the tunnel is concerned about where such levies and tolls might start and stop and what projects might qualify in Calgary.

"Would joggers, say, be required to have a bar code fixed to their posterior crossing the Peace Bridge, for example, and pay a slight toll, if you wanted to be amusing about this," said Curtis Fernets, the general manager of the Sheraton Cavalier Calgary Hotel.

On the question of tolls, a city report said an initial estimate is that a \$3 per vehicle charge would generate just shy of \$5.5 million a year, based on 15,000 vehicles.

But it also notes such user fees are not popular in Calgary, and points to the uproar over the \$3 LRT park-and-ride fee.

There are also questions about whether drivers would simply avoid the tunnel altogether if they faced a charge.

"The concept of a toll is interesting," said Lowe. "My gut feel is that if you put a toll on that road, nobody will use it."

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