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New tactics in bridge battle Alderman asks MLAs to halt projects

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Calgary Herald

Tuesday, December 09, 2008

Four aldermen are calling on the city to cut off negotiations with a world-renowned architect who is to design two controversial pedestrian bridges.

Their renewed opposition comes as one of the four, Ald. Andre Chabot, said he has approached a dozen MLAs about having them scuttle city council-approved projects that may breach provincial funding guide-lines -- a move that inspired a tongue-lashing from Mayor Dave Bronconnier.

Approved in September, the \$25 million for the two bridges over the Bow River became a lightning rod for criticism of city spending, with some aldermen leading the charge.

Other aldermen said the bridges would be a showpiece of inner-city development that would move an increasing downtown population to and from work.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, one of the bridges' opponents, said Monday she and three other aldermen will soon ask council to end talks with European architect Santiago Calatrava.

Colley-Urquhart argued the talks could jeopardize getting provincial infrastructure cash earmarked for the project because the money is contingent on putting the project out for public tender.

"I don't think that the funding should flow if (the city hasn't) followed the guidelines," said Colley-Urquhart, whose desire to cut off talks is backed by Chabot, Ald. Ric McIver and Ald. Joe Connelly.

The group is hoping to bring its proposal to council next week, adding the urgency is heightened because the contract with Calatrava is close to being signed.

John Hubbell, the city's general manager of transportation, said the city is finalizing contract details with Calatrava to design the bridge at the west end of Prince's Island (the other will be near the Calgary Zoo).

"He has a world reputation for designing very nice bridges," said Hubbell, in explaining city staff's recommendation to open design talks directly with Calatrava.

Ald. Gord Lowe said he would have preferred an open, juried competition to settle on a bridge design, but council has already put the cash aside, so the project will remain as is.

"It's a cooked goose," he said. "It's done."

Jody Korchinski, a spokeswoman for Alberta Municipal Affairs, said the provincial

guidelines call for accepted practices to be followed, which typically means public tenders, but added the province makes exceptions if need be. The province has already approved the bridges project and the funding has been secured, she added.

Chabot, meanwhile, said his concern about following guidelines has already led him to speak to several MLAs--including some cabinet ministers --about cutting off provincial funding for some city-approved projects.

"I said, 'If there's any possibilities for you guys to challenge what we're approving or to delay some of them . . . then I would encourage you to do that,' " he said.

Bronconnier called Chabot's move "highly inappropriate."

"It's very unusual that you would have a member of council try to usurp the authority of city council when (council has), in fact, agreed with a project and put in funding. In my view, that's a breach of a person's office," he said.

"We would never move forward on an agreement that we have signed -- that I have personally signed--and be in breach of that agreement."

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