

Ring road going to Tsuu T'ina vote

BY KIM GUTTORMSON, CALGARY HERALD MARCH 24, 2009



The province says it has reached a draft agreement with the Tsuu T'ina First Nation over land needed to build the southwest leg of the long-awaited ring road, Alberta's Transportation Minister said Monday.

Photograph by: Courtesy, Alberta Ministry of Transportation

CALGARY - The future of the southwest ring road now sits in the hands of about 800 members of the Tsuu T'ina Nation, who will vote in June whether to sell about four square-kilometres of territory to the province or quash a decades-long attempt to run the freeway over band land.

During Treaty Day on June 30, eligible members will be asked to approve a deal that will see the band give up a strip of land on the eastern edge of its reserve in exchange for new land and an undisclosed amount of money.

Should a majority not agree to the deal, Chief Sandford Big Plume said any plan to run the southwest connector through their land "can be put to rest. It's done."

Using a portion of the reserve for a major road has been talked about, off and on, since 1947.

In recent years, with increased traffic causing congestion in the city, pressure to build a highway on Calgary's western edge has intensified. There have been numerous false starts, with promises a deal was imminent.

But the chief said he wouldn't apologize for taking the time to make sure the deal reached was the best possible.

With Big Plume's announcement Tuesday that the band council had signed off on a deal, all involved

agree that a significant step toward making the road a reality has been achieved.

Band members must also ratify the deal, and the federal government must pass an order-in-council to transfer the property to the province.

"The land is sacred land for us," Big Plume said. "Those are not empty words, that is the truth.

"For us, negotiating the land for an urban highway has been difficult. The road has to mean more to the Tsuu T'ina than a cash infusion. It has to be part of a plan to buy business and careers and hope for generations."

He admitted to mixed emotions about recommending the land be transferred.

Some band members Tuesday weren't aware of what the deal entails and didn't want to comment. At least one man said he doesn't agree with the concept.

"I don't think it's a good idea to give away more land," he said.

Big Plume, calling it an historic day, refused to provide details until they are shared with the Nation members, but said the new land is concurrent with the existing reserve.

The first meetings will be held with elders, likely in June, and then there will be open houses for band members to learn what is included in the agreement.

Transportation Minister Luke Ouellette said the council approval means the long-awaited deal is moving forward.

"I think it's great," he said, adding that it could mean a ring road encircling Calgary will be completed by the provincial goal of 2015.

It's premature to discuss what happens should band members not approve the deal, Ouellette said.

Darshan Kang, the Liberal transportation critic, said a ring road is vital for Calgary but he believes the province also needs a plan B.

"I think we've heard about these deals before," he said. "And we have to know the details of the deal. It's why they should've come out today."

For many Calgarians, the details of the deal are less important than the fact there is one and that the southwest ring road is a step closer to reality.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, who represents an area south of the Tsuu T'ina Nation and whose constituents would love to have a north-south alternative to drive, said while there's still a long road

ahead, she is optimistic.

“To my understanding the benefits to the residents of Tsuu T'ina were never there to the extent they are today,” she said of previous deals.

Ouellette said they will now work with the federal government to try to ensure that the land transfer - should it be approved - move swiftly through.

Big Plume said they've talked to the federal government as well and doesn't anticipate the process taking as long for the Tsuu T'ina as it has in some other cases.

kguttormson@theherald.canwest.com

© Copyright (c) The Calgary Herald