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City needs to pull back the reins on development near Spruce Meadows

By [MICHAEL PLATT](#)

The cloud on the horizon is exhaust fumes.

That'd be the tail-pipe pollution of a major freeway, soon to be passing by the front door of Spruce Meadows, if official promises of an "imminent" southwest ring road deal prove true.

Nonetheless, officials at the boom-besieged equestrian oasis say they are determined to stay put, even as the city consumes the surrounding countryside with increasingly busy roads and new communities.



"We have no intention of moving -- clearly we're not a franchise that's easily relocated," said spokesman Ian Allison.

That's not to say Spruce Meadows isn't worried about future development in the area, and its impact on the 33-year-old horse-jumping facility.

Officials at Spruce are very concerned -- in particular, with the ring road, which will eventually connect Hwy. 22X with 37 St. S.W., opening a new rush-hour route for thousands of suburban motorists.

Of course, the cynical will scoff -- the ring road's been a rumour since before the Calgary Tower was built.

But Premier Ed Stelmach says a deal is all but signed with the Tsuu T'ina Nation, which means the road might be started within a summer or two -- and Stelmach tends to speak in facts, not maybes.

The original freeway design calls for something like 10,000 cars a day to pass by the front gates of Spruce Meadows, but that number now seems naive, with the 80,000-resident community of Providence set to be built in Calgary's southwest corner as soon as the ring road is open.

Calgary has never shown much foresight when it comes to the number of cars actually using roads: Deerfoot Tr., for example, was designed for something like half of the 160,000 vehicles that use it each day.

It adds up to a route that will be a lot busier than the bustling freeway originally envisioned, and Spruce Meadows will suffer the consequences.

At least, it will suffer if steps aren't taken to protect the horse park, which draws 1,000 horses and 4,000 riders and family members annually, while generating \$60 million for the local economy.

The National tournament opens this Wednesday at Spruce Meadows, opening another season of international competition, and what was once a pleasant excursion into the country for thousands of fans is now a drive through drab suburbs.

Allison admits the new road, when it comes, won't be pretty.

"Deerfoot Trail -- that would be a good way of describing it," said Allison.

What Spruce is hoping is that someone in the government, be it city or provincial, might spare them a thought or two before the new road is finally opened.

"We hope there's some good consideration given to the transportation plan -- accessibility is super important for us," said Allison.

It's a lot for the pony people to bet on -- especially when city council so recently ruined the facility's rural ambience, all but ignoring the protests of Spruce owner Marg Southern when it approved the neighbouring community of Silverado.

Southern feared a community built only metres away would destroy the country setting of the facility, and the city's compromise was to allow only estate-sized homes to overlook the park, with a thin wetland barrier between.

That losing battle three years ago might have awoken Spruce officials to what's coming: "We recognize Silverado is the first of many to come," said Allison -- but it doesn't bode well for their place in future development decisions.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart, whose ward ends just west of Spruce Meadows, says ring road development could be devastating to the facility, with up to 250,000 people expected to eventually live in the deep southwest quadrant.

"Places like Spruce Meadows will be significantly impacted by this," she said.

The alderman says Spruce Meadows often gets overlooked by the city, because it is partially located in the M.D. of Foothills, and because it's an independent entity, unlike other tourist attractions such as the zoo and Heritage Park.

"They are a victim in many ways of being in so many jurisdictions," said Colley-Urquhart. "Who's really thinking of Spruce Meadows?"