

S.W. ring road tab may hit \$1.5B

Tsuu T'ina offered nearly \$500M benefit in secret deal

BY DON BRAID, CALGARY HERALD MAY 22, 2009



Construction work continues on the massive ring road interchange with 16th avenue April 7, 2009.

Photograph by: Gavin Young, Calgary Herald

As Prime Minister Stephen Harper announces money today for one Calgary ring road project, the real monster is shaping up on the west side of the city.

Several sources say the total cost to the province of the southwest ring road through the Tsuu T'ina reserve could easily hit \$1.5 billion in cash, land and construction costs.

The Tsuu T'ina band itself will receive cash payments, as well as land transfers and infrastructure upgrades, worth close to \$500 million.

The exact cash figure in the secret provincial-band agreement wasn't available.

But sources agree the large majority of roughly \$500 million will be paid as land and upgrades.

On top of the band's take, the province will likely spend \$800 million to \$1 billion on actual construction of about 21 kilometres of highway.

Construction estimates from provincial sources are still inexact, though, based on the cost of other ring road projects in Calgary and Edmonton.

Meanwhile, the band is moving closer to one of the greatest decisions in its long history.

Nine open houses will be held on the reserve between June 3 and June 18, including three with elders and six more general sessions.

The momentous vote on the deal with the province comes June 30. Until then, details of that agreement will be held in tight secrecy.

Only one copy will be available at the band office for members to read. They won't be allowed to copy it or take it away.

Only band members will be admitted to the open houses.

They'll see presentations and hear details, but no paper will leave the room.

Between 800 and 900 eligible band members are expected to vote on the package.

As part of the agreement, the province pledged not to make the document public until it's ratified by the reserve.

Variations on this project have been kicking around since 1947, of course, and deals have been announced before.

My favourite is a Herald headline from June 17, 1960: "\$5 Million Ring Road System Set For City."

Costs have obviously risen since then. But it's hard to chart recent escalation because the province has always been vague about estimates.

It's safe to say, though, that nobody anticipated a bill of \$1.5 billion when these negotiations were launched on March 11, 2005.

Perhaps fortunately, the government won't have to face most of those costs for some time, even for years.

There's no chance a shovel will hit the ground in this fiscal year.

After the Tsuu T'ina ratify the deal, if they do, it must still go to Ottawa for approval. That can easily take a year or more.

The project is scheduled for completion by 2015, but even that could be variable.

The deeper worry is that the project could be shelved because of the limp economy and shrinking government revenues.

Provincial officials say, however, that money should be available when-ever the project begins because

it's part of the 20-year capital plan.

Despite all the false starts and frustrations over more than 60 years, this moment seems very different.

Once the band approves the road, thus sealing a formal agreement with the province, construction might meander, but it will be inevitable.

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