

Calgary's SW ring road 'best deal possible,' says band

Construction costs too high: taxpayers group

BY JAMIE KOMARNICKI, CALGARY HERALD MAY 25, 2009 6:44 AM



Details of the long-awaited deal between the province and the tribe on the construction of the southwest Calgary ring road -- set to be voted on by band members on June 30--haven't been made public.

Photograph by: Courtesy, Alberta Ministry of Transportation

CALGARY - As Tsuu T'ina leaders bill an agreement with the province as the last chance for a deal on the southwest ring road, a taxpayer lobby group says it might be cheaper to delay construction.

Details of the long-awaited deal between the province and the tribe -- set to be voted on by band members on June 30--haven't been made public.

However, documents show the province is offering the Tsuu T'ina as much as \$275 million--with a minimum \$240 million held in trust by the federal government-- in exchange for about 400 hectares to build the mammoth highway. It would run through the heart of the reserve bordering Calgary's southwest boundary.

In addition, the band stands to gain nearly 2,000 hectares of Crown land on the reserve's northwest edge.

Sources have also confirmed to the Herald that Tsuu T'ina's overall share in the deal is worth close to \$500 million, including cash payments, land transfers and infrastructure upgrades.

Though the ring road will alter the face of the reserve and force several band members out of their current homes, the tribe's leaders say the deal will "radically improve access" to Tsuu T'ina land.

Indeed, according to information packages provided to band members, the province has agreed to shoulder the estimated \$ 100-million costs for the Strathcona Road and West-Hills interchanges-- roadways which would be built primarily to provide access to Tsuu T'ina property.

Both sides made concessions, but Tsuu T'ina negotiators say they've reached the "best deal" for the band.

For example, the additional 2,000 hectares of Crown lands the province has agreed to make available to Tsuu T'ina were initially to be paid for by the Nation, but are now set to be transferred to the band at no cost.

Band leaders aren't the only ones highlighting the benefits of the proposal.

Nearby residents of the Lakeview community are "very much hoping" the band votes in favour of the agreement, said Lakeview Community Association president Jim Royer.

The southwest community has been plagued with outdated infrastructure that clogs traffic, particularly at Glenmore Trail and 37th Street S. W.--a major interchange planned for the ring road.

"We see it as a very positive step for Calgary and for Lakeview as well," said Royer.

"It doesn't hurt our community and it helps the traffic bottleneck."

But Scott Hennig, Alberta director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, raised concerns over whether the province is getting the best value in the multimillion-dollar deal.

Inflated construction costs of the past few years haven't yet stabilized, he said.

"We know for a fact that prices are coming down in infrastructure. The question is: Are they coming down by enough?"

After waiting several decades for the road to be built, another few years are bearable-- and prudent-- when it comes to spending the huge dollars attached to the project, he said.

According to the document, either side may still pull out of the deal if certain conditions aren't met.

The roadway -- set for an "ultimate build" of a 16-lane highway or two ring roads within the same corridor in the next few decades --includes plans for interchanges at 37th Street-Glenmore Trail S. W., 90th Avenue, Anderson Road and 130th Avenue.

The deal with Tsuu T'ina and the overall costs to build the road could reach a tab of \$1.5 billion.

Construction will have a huge impact on the Tsuu T'ina reserve land and will require the realignment of

the Elbow River and Fish Creek as well as the relocation of Weaselhead Road and Seven Chiefs Road.

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