

SWCRR FUNCTIONAL PLANNING - BACKGROUNDER

OCTOBER 2005

SOUTHWEST CALGARY RING ROAD (SWCRR) – PLANNING AN IMPORTANT LINK

Since 1959, when the Calgary Metropolitan Area Transportation Study first mapped out a route that circled the Calgary core, City and Provincial planners have been looking towards the future of Calgary, to find a way for moving increasing traffic safely and efficiently around the city.

In 1959, their vision took them 30 years into the future. The city was a lot smaller then, and the circle was a lot smaller then, well inside city boundaries. Almost 50 years later the city has grown to its limits, but the question of a continuous Calgary Ring Road remains.

Today, functional planning for a final link in Calgary's Ring Road takes a much broader view of the future than is typical of most transportation planning. The City, the Province and the Tsuu T'ina First Nation, having a common interest in developing the SWCRR, have formed a partnership and have asked planners to look 50 to 70 years into the future, to identify a route and design a road system that balances citizens' and users' interests and needs. At the same time, planners are faced with considering the physical limitations between city limits and neighbouring Tsuu T'ina land, and mitigating the impacts to environmentally sensitive areas such as the Weaselhead.

This kind of broad planning makes sense for a City that anticipates a population of two million citizens in 50+ years, with a considerable percentage of that growth expected in new developments in the southwest. It is also necessary to take an extended look into the future so that the Province can determine what it ultimately needs for the ring road's right-of-way (ROW) given this one-time opportunity to acquire First Nation land.

The Calgary Ring Road is more correctly identified as a transportation and utility corridor (TUC). Along with meeting Calgary's growing population and provincial transportation needs, the route is also intended as a corridor around the city for accommodating major power lines, pipelines, municipal regional water, sanitary and storm sewer lines.

Functional planning for the SWCRR began June 2005 and will take 12 – 16 months to complete. Functional planning examines potential routes, connection points, land requirements, potential environmental factors and mitigation measures. Stakeholder consultation is also an important part of the functional planning process, and is integrated with the technical work.

Planning Considerations and Challenges

The SWCRR is the final link in the network for a Calgary Ring Road. The Stoney Trail Expansion, currently under construction and the East Freeway projects, form the other links that would complete the future Ring Road system.

At present the Ring Road is discontinuous between Highway 8 and Highway 22X. Providing a connection between Glenmore Trail, Sarcee Trail, and Highway 8 to Highway 22X (referred to as the Sarcee Trail expansion) is, generally speaking, a desired outcome of Calgary's Ring Road routing. However, creating a connection between Highway 8 and Highway 22X that goes around the Weaselhead, another desired outcome, requires routing the transportation and utility corridor across Tsuu T'ina land.

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As for city road network connections to the Ring Road, while many have been envisioned, these have yet to be determined. Planning for the roadway anticipates that connecting roadways identified in the City of Calgary road network could generally be accommodated with access via interchange connections. Connecting to the Ring Road increases the efficiency in operations of the City's road network, improves overall operations of the City transportation system and reduces travel times and congestion.

All alignment options for the SWRR examined in the past 30 years, including a Sarcee Trail extension, a 37th St. extension and a Crowchild Trail extension, had envisioned a 37th Street extension – another challenge for planners. A portion of the 37th St. ROW runs along the boundary of the City and Tsuu T'ina land, making it the most westerly ROW routing possible without disturbing homes or Tsuu T'ina lands.

Finding a Solution

Finding a solution to routing around the Weaselhead and finding a more desirable route that mitigates the impact to Calgary communities wouldn't be possible without the consideration of the Tsuu T'ina Nation to the idea of transferring their land to the Province – a unique consideration between a Province and a First Nation. While the Tsuu T'ina has agreed in principle to transferring a portion of their land, recognizing an opportunity to realize their own economic development goals, the Nation's interests and its residents' expectations are still focused on protecting and preserving their traditional land.

Working towards an agreement for a land transfer, the Province and the Tsuu T'ina Nation have signed two agreements regarding transfer of Nation lands to the Province for construction of the Ring Road. Negotiations continue toward a third and final agreement. This final agreement must be ratified by the Tsuu T'ina people through a referendum. Construction cannot start until this final agreement is ratified and all other necessary approvals are in place.

Public Feedback

Due to this project's importance, the Province, City, and Nation are undertaking an even more extensive public consultation process than usual. In July, Alberta Infrastructure and Transportation, the City of Calgary and the Tsuu T'ina First Nation, held open houses to give the public a preview of a proposed routing for the SWCRR. This was the first of a number of consultation activities planned for the project, and coincided with the beginning of the functional planning for the project.

As a result of the extensive feedback received from the initial open houses, planners identified specific issues and concerns with some of the proposed connections from the Ring Road to the Calgary Roadway Network. The City has undertaken some focused analysis on the impact of those potential connections. In particular the City is conducting analysis, including traffic volume impacts, on a number of options relating to connections at Southland Drive and 90 Ave. SW.

Presentation and discussion of the results of this impact analysis will form part of the consultation scheduled for the next phase of planning (September – December), in which the SWCRR Technical Committee is meeting with community leaders and will subsequently be conducting community focused open houses for directly affected communities. This community-focused consultation precedes a second set of Calgary general public open houses scheduled for late fall 2005.

For more information on the Southwest Calgary Ring Road, visit www.infra.gov.ab.ca, click on "Highway Construction Projects" and then "Calgary Provincial Highway Projects."