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## Indigenous opinion split

Edmonton may be one step closer to having  
a gondola across the River Valley

By Brendan Collinge

PRAIRIE SKY GONDOLA'S AIM to connect Old Strathcona with downtown is getting a mixed reaction from local Indigenous communities.

The line would run from the South Side, with with five stops along the way to the core. Last month, City Council approved the project to proceed into the design phase.

A private company is funding this project, and the plan is to consult the general public and Indigenous communities, as the design is under way.

Prairie Sky Gondola president and CEO Jeffrey Hansen-Carlson says he believes an urban gondola will bring new life to the city.

“There are so many fringe benefits, in terms of satisfying utility of urban commuters and residents – the domestic tourism piece domestically and internationally. But ultimately what it does for long-term city building in Edmonton is that it sees the vision we all have for West Rosedale and the power plant materialize.”

West Rosedale is slated to have two stations: on the east side of the power plant and at the Ortona Armoury site, north of 97th Avenue, before its final stop on MacDonald Drive. Several pillars will be erected between those spots.

The area is considered historically and culturally important to many Indigenous communities, which have historically used the area as a meeting place and burial ground. On [multiple occasions](#), digging in these locations has uncovered [human remains](#) and signs of the original site of Fort Edmonton.

Hansen-Carlson says that formal engagement with Indigenous stakeholders is expected to begin shortly.

The city went through extensive consultation with Indigenous groups before developing its [existing plan](#) to develop West Rosssdale, which the gondola intends to complement, he adds.

"The city themselves did a wonderful job with public and Indigenous engagement on that development plan," he says. "The two gondola stations in West Rosssdale primarily exist to catalyze the development opportunity the city has already approved, in step with the city's existing plan."

Not all Indigenous groups approve of the development plan, including Papaschase Pahpahstayo First Nation Association of Alberta Band 136.

Acting Chief George Quinn says the group initially expressed interest during a meeting with the city, adding that the company should do more to consult with them about land Indigenous people consider their ancestral home.

"There hasn't been anyone to introduce himself, nothing," Quinn says. "We're the ones they should be talking to when consultation begins, specifically in that area."

While Prairie Sky Gondola Inc. is using archaeological maps provided by EPCOR, members of Papaschase First Nation believe there are many graves yet uncovered.

The group's documents estimate 1,500 individual burials in the area that could be disturbed, with 170 names of the deceased known.

Quinn says he's concerned about the path the gondola is to follow, saying every piece of land beneath it has to be removed.

He adds he would like to hear more from those heading this project, including Prairie Sky Gondola Inc. before Papaschase First Nation will lend its support.

"If they can convince us that it is beneficial to everybody, I kind of doubt it, but I am open to hearing what they have to say. If they're willing to work with us, then why wouldn't we? But right now, I don't see the value of this gondola project."

Enoch Cree Nation, the Métis Nation of Alberta, and the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations are stakeholders in the development plan. None has responded to requests for comment.

Prairie Sky Gondola's engagement process is co-chaired by an elder from Enoch Cree Nation, Irene Morin.

Morin stresses that she is speaking as an individual, not on behalf of Enoch Cree Nation, and that the project's consultation will now begin following the approval of city council.

However, she says, "without a yes or no, how do you start an engagement process?"

Morin expects to form a committee to help with the engagement process by identifying Indigenous groups and people that would be interested in the process.

"We won't leave anyone out, if anyone has anything to contribute. Whether they be for it or against it, we all want to know how they feel."

Morin adds that she accepted a role with the project because she approves of it.

"I'm involved in this because I believe in the project. Improving transit is good for any city."

Morin says the consultation process is expected to begin in April. Cities around the world with urban gondolas include Portland, Ore., Mexico City, Caracas, London and Ankara.

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[Back to The Magpie](#)