

# Prairie Sky Gondola: The Downtown Station and the Future of Edmonton's Urban Gondola

**Shayna Giles**

(Media provided by Prairie Sky Gondola)

When you think of a gondola, maybe you think of a snow-covered mountain and a day of winter sports, or maybe you think of Venice, the canal tours by boat and a romantic evening on the water.

You probably weren't thinking about an urban gondola, connecting both sides of Edmonton's river valley, but based on a recent business feasibility study conducted by the Steer Group, Edmonton's Prairie Sky Gondola is looking more and more like a reality, and one that has the potential to enrich Edmonton's downtown core while providing accessible transportation across the river valley.

This privately-funded project was first introduced into the public eye after becoming the winning pitch for the Edmonton Project in March of 2018. [The Edmonton Project was a contest focused on introducing a new landmark to the city.](#) due in part to the possibilities of increasing transit opportunities between Edmonton's Downtown core and Whyte Avenue.

Prairie Sky initially estimated a yearly ridership of 1.7 million, and the Steer Group's recent feasibility study estimates that ridership will be around 1.5 million a year, although the data is not publicly viewable at this time.

Claire MacDonald is the manager of project development for Prairie Sky Gondola. She got involved in the project after speaking in its favour as a member of the public during a city council meeting about the project in early 2020 and was drawn to the idea of connecting both sides of the river while enriching the experience of Downtown life. MacDonald has began heading Prairie Sky's Public and Indigenous Engagement Committee in October of 2020, and became the group's manager of project development in August of 2021.

## **Prairie Sky Gondola Future Route Flyover**

(Source: Prairie Sky Gondola)

When it comes to the future of the Prairie Sky Gondola, MacDonald and the rest of the team have high hopes for its potential benefits to the Downtown scene, as well as making the commute to Whyte Ave more interesting and accessible while also being climate-resilient and focused on reconciliation. Of the five potential stations, The Downtown Station, expected to be located on the

hillside next to the Fairmont Hotel Macdonald, especially brings with it some interesting challenges.

“That area, that slope over there is actually quite disturbed,” MacDonald says, referring to the hill next to the Hotel MacDonald. “We did some preliminary environmental research studies as well as a geophysics study, and there used to be a few mines in that area.”

That means that before the station itself is built, more testing will need to be done to determine the depth and strength of the supports needed.

“So that there's that challenge from the past of the history of that area where there were a lot of mines.”

Beyond that, the Downtown Station is expected to add much-needed functionality in the area without sacrificing views of the River Valley. With hopes to have the Station level with the LRT station under TELUS Plaza, there's the hope that the street-level Station will have a rooftop vantage point for photos and sightseeing. There's also the potential for a pedestrian bridge to connect the Downtown Station to the nearby [100 Street Funicular](#), MacDonald says, making it easier for those using bike lanes to cross through the area without having to detour around the Hotel Macdonald, as well as provide easier access to Churchill Square and 104th Street.

“Having that connectivity point and also some amenities that would allow people to do something there, I think we're really rejuvenating an area of the town that could become a jewel, a place where people like to go and hang out and create memories,” MacDonald says. “That's a bit of the hope for the Downtown Station.”

The Prairie Sky gondola stations are being thought of more as hubs than commuter destinations, MacDonald explains, with a focus on creating spaces for experiences for those that live and work Downtown. The stations are expected to be accessible, with amenities like bathrooms and cafés and spaces for art and activity, and increase access to transit for those with disabilities and those who don't drive, while also attracting businesses and rejuvenating the Downtown core as it attempts to return to normal after a hard-hitting pandemic.

“I think all of us need to do our part to make (Downtown) stronger and more resilient, but also to make it more fun,” MacDonald says. “I think we all struggle for mental health these days-- myself, I'm an urbanite, I like to socialize, but for a long time, we weren't able to do all these things, and so the gondola for me is really that representation of life, of activity, of being able to connect again.”

“We are a community connecting with each other, and we need it, not just as humans but as a community.”

As it currently stands, the Prairie Sky Gondola is hoping to begin construction in 2023, with the gondola completed in 2025. Before that though, a master agreement needs to be penned, and many meetings with the City Council and community members will need to take place. Public engagement sessions are expected to begin after public health restrictions are lifted. Until then, updates on the project's status are being posted to the [Prairie Sky website](#) and sent through a monthly newsletter, with updates posted to the project's [Twitter account](#) as well.

Those with other questions and inquiries related to the Prairie Sky project can also reach out to MacDonald at [claire@prairieskygondola.com](mailto:claire@prairieskygondola.com), or the team at [hello@prairieskygondola.com](mailto:hello@prairieskygondola.com).