

Transit planning needs more consistent approach

It's the kind of news only Lyle Lanley could love.

The fast-talking mountebank from *The Simpsons* would surely be rubbing his hands with glee — if it hadn't been for that unfortunate stop in North Haverbrook — at what came out of city council last week.

Ald. Bob Hawkesworth's motion to pull together financing for the long-overdue southeast LRT from provincial GreenTRIP funding was carried unanimously.

The decision almost flew under the radar with the commotion over the police budget.

When council has trouble agreeing on what to order for dinner, it is amazing seeing aldermen race to a consen-

sus that raiding the provincial vault to the tune of \$800 million to build light rail to Douglas Glen in five to seven years would be a good thing.

There's just one small issue. Throwing GreenTRIP money at the southeast LRT isn't as easy as it looks.

Sure, \$800 million is a big chunk of change to be able to drop on rails, bricks, and mortar for mass transit, but the provincial GreenTRIP funding comes with enough strings to hogtie a herd of Holsteins.

The province only pays out after the transit projects are built, or at least well under way. The money is meant not just for Calgary, but also for nearby towns and counties as far away as High River and Strathmore.

GreenTRIP may be a windfall, but it isn't free money, either: For every two dollars the province contributes to a GreenTRIP transit project, the city is expected to ante up a loonie — and that loonie has to come from somewhere.

Also, the SlapChop Rule applies. The province, because you know it can't do this all day, set a deadline of Nov. 30 for cities and towns to submit their GreenTRIP plans — and back them up with numbers.

It's not that the southeast LRT is the only contender for a piece of the action, either.

The Calgary Regional Partnership filed its \$153-million bid for inter-city express buses, passenger hubs, and local transit for places like Airdrie and Cochrane last



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November. The first stage of the Beltline Communities' streetcar proposal would give inner-city residents some movement for \$110 million.

And Ald. Andre Chabot was quick last Monday to seize on the southeast 17 corridor through Forest Lawn as a GreenTRIP candidate with estimates for that project reaching \$250 million.

So, what is the asking price for the southeast LRT?

Based on research from 2008 that's been propping up

coffee tables all over town for the past two years, council's plan would see 13 km of light rail from East Victoria Park to the Douglas Glen transit terminal, plus a total of nine stations, 37 new C-Train cars, and a carhouse similar to the Oliver Bowen facility in Calgary's northeast.

It adds up to about \$770 million.

Simple math will tell you two-thirds of all these projects yields \$855 million. Something's got to give. And someone has to find at least another \$400 million in city coffers to match the province's GreenTRIP contributions and put shovels in the ground.

That will not be an enviable job at city hall just now.

But the mad rush to lock

in GreenTRIP funding for the southeast LRT is the best argument yet for a real transit implementation strategy in Calgary.

With all the pressing mass transit needs Calgarians face, giving aldermen an \$800-million bankroll and turning them loose in the candy store promises little but sugar rushes, regrets, and a \$400-million tab.

A more consistent transit capital budget, less reliant on windfalls, would allow council to plan more effectively for the future of this city and its people.

Unless that's more of a Shelbyville idea.

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