

Calgary airport-downtown-Banff passenger rail link step closer to reality

Reducing congestion and environmental impacts in Banff was a motivator for her family to launch the project six years ago, said managing partner Jan Waterous

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Artist's rendition of Calgary Airport-Banff Rail at Banff train station. Courtesy Liricon Capital

A proposed hydrogen-fuelled passenger rail line linking Calgary's airport with downtown and Banff has reached the design phase — a major step towards becoming reality, say its developers.

Liricon Capital Inc. and Plenary America, which are spearheading the Calgary Airport-Banff Rail (CABR) project, say they've submitted a proposal to Alberta Transportation, Invest Alberta

and the Canada Infrastructure Bank to push forward the concept they hope to have completed in 2025.

“This advancement positions the project for success in the fifth and final phase, construction and implementation,” Liricon Capital said in a statement Wednesday.

The preliminary blueprint envisions a 150-kilometre rail line running from the airport southward, parallel to the existing CP tracks along the west side of Deerfoot Trail before crossing the Bow River on an existing bridge.

Proposed stations would be located at the airport, downtown, near Stoney Trail at the TransCanada Highway, Cochrane, Morley, Canmore and Banff. Its newly built tracks would follow the existing CP freight corridor, providing 10 trains a day to the Rocky Mountain terminus.

Family business Liricon Capital owns the Mount Norquay ski area and holds a long-term lease of the existing Banff train station, which would be an integral part of a project that’s on the brink of proceeding, said managing partner Jan Waterous.

“The capital cost is not an issue; this is in place,” she said.

The project hinges on the provincial government committing \$10 million, or 10 per cent of the design cost and an annual \$30 million to help pay down its mortgage, said Waterous.

“The province has to make that decision by early February and we’re really hopeful. . . It’s very good value for the province and it’s doable.”

A spokesman for Alberta Transportation said he couldn’t say much about the proposal.

“The government of Alberta has received this proposal for a Calgary to Banff passenger service and is reviewing the submission,” Rob Williams said in an email.

Liricon/Plenary said the proposal is based on the rail line “capturing less than 25 per cent of visitors to Banff National Park,” which hosts more than four million people a year, by far the busiest of Canada’s national parks.

They estimate a one-way ticket on the train — with anticipated discounts in the national park — would cost Alberta travellers \$20 with a premium for out-of-province users that would double that.

Perhaps most importantly for Calgarians’ visitors to the city, the line would provide an express service every 15 minutes between the airport and the downtown core.

With its hydrogen propulsion system, the CABR will be both environmentally and economically beneficial, said Mayor Jyoti Gondek.

“The Calgary Airport to Banff Rail project will put Calgary on track to help meet our climate targets through sustainable transit, boost our economy, and provide a connection for Calgarians to access the airport from downtown,” Gondek said in a statement.

“The low-carbon rail line will be a game-changer for the tourism sector, bringing visitors downtown to enjoy all that Calgary has to offer, adding Banff as a bonus addition to their travel.”

CABR’s proponents say the \$1.5-billion line would expose the city’s downtown to the more than two million visitors a year who land in the city and go directly to Banff by the highway.

Much of the work in the coming design phase will involve consulting those along its route, said project developers Liricon/Plenary.

It would also determine where a downtown Calgary station would be located with one option being in the East Village and another dusting off the old VIA Rail station beneath the Calgary Tower, said Waterous.

“You could just put some paint on that station and it would be ready to go and it would also make sense to tie it into the (LRT) Green Line,” she said.

The public-private partnership (P3), expected to be funded 50 per cent by the Canada Infrastructure Bank, is hoping to see construction begin next year.

The plan would resurrect passenger rail service from Calgary through the mountains, which ended in January 1990 after Ottawa scrapped the southern line — due to deep budget cuts — in favour of a northern route through Edmonton and Jasper.

Reducing congestion and environmental impacts in Banff was a motivator for her family to launch the project six years ago, said Waterous.

“It’s really about getting people to change their mobility habits and to do that, you make a price point (for riders) that’s reasonable,” she said.

A rail advocacy group said they’re confident the developers’ announcement means the concept will come to fruition — one badly needed as the impacts of climate change worsen.

“With the growing concerns surrounding climate change, I think we need to take a very hard look at our transportation system that is geared towards the private automobile,” said Justin Simaluk, president of the Rail for Alberta Society.

“Rail travel is sustainable and will need to be a key component of any government’s action towards reducing emissions.”

He echoed other proponents by saying a rail link would also benefit workers commuting along the Bow corridor and to the airport. BKaufmann@postmedia.com