

Saanich wants answers before approving berm at new McKenzie interchange

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A 500-metre-long berm along the Trans-Canada Highway, near the McKenzie interchange, is being proposed as a way to reduce highway noise in adjacent Cuthbert Holmes Park.

Photograph By DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

Buttressed by community opposition, Saanich councillors are demanding more information from the province before they give the green light to a controversial berm which will separate the McKenzie interchange from a park.

Officials from the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure addressed Saanich council Monday night about the 500-metre-long berm which is being proposed to block highway noise and the sight of vehicles from adjacent Cuthbert Holmes Park.

Councillors were frustrated by a long list of unanswered questions, such as the height of the berm, responsibility for long-term maintenance and the environmental impacts on the salmon-bearing Colquitz River.

“I am challenged by the fact that we don’t even have clarity on how tall it is,” said Coun. Colin Plant.

“We all like the idea of a berm but the devil is in the details.”

The municipality will not give up park land so that the ministry can dump unwanted soil from the interchange construction, Plant said, which garnered applause from some in the public gallery.

Coun. Judy Brownoff said she was disappointed the ministry did not come prepared with more specific details.

The province is spending \$85 million on the McKenzie interchange project to alleviate bottlenecks during peak traffic times.

The quarter cloverleaf ramp will take a 1.4-hectare bite out of the adjacent 25.6-hectare Cuthbert Holmes Park.

Part of the berm, to be built using soil removed as the Trans-Canada Highway is lowered, will be on land leased from Saanich and the rest of the berm on ministry right-of-way.

Councillors voted in favour of getting more information from the ministry before approving the berm.

Saanich Parks staff had recommended that council give the project the green light, despite concerns from environmental advocates and area residents that the berm would be too high and could threaten marine life in the nearby Colquitz River.

Julian Anderson, lead steward of the Friends of Cuthbert Holmes Park, said the staff report doesn't seem to have taken into account the environmental impact on the salmon-bearing river.

Coun. Fred Haynes expressed concerns that parts of the river and its side channel are within 30 metres of the berm, which violates the ministry's promise that the berm and other parts of the interchange will be at least 30 metres away.

He said there's a risk a heavy rain could wash sediment from the berm into the river.

Anderson said the berm is too steep, which will make it difficult for maintenance crews to remove invasive species.

The province has committed to planting trees and greenery, removing invasive species, providing new trails and paying Saanich \$450,000 for use of the land.

"[The ministry] is proposing new paths and lookouts but I think it's just window dressing," Anderson said. "They're just trying to dump fill that they don't know how to get rid of. I don't think the park should be a dumping ground for their problems."

The majority of speakers at council were against current plans for the berm, but a handful of people approved of it.

Saanich resident David Farmer said the ministry is taking a poorly maintained park and turning it into an urban forest that will be safer for area residents.

"It should be looked at as an opportunity," he said.

The berm is to be constructed in the summer of 2018.

If council decides to reject the ministry's plans, a smaller berm with fewer public pathways and less noise abatement for the park would be constructed within the province's existing highway right-of-way.

Construction on the interchange began in fall 2016 and is expected to wrap up by summer 2019, several months later than the original projected completion date.

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