Concerns over the structural integrity of bridges on the Airport Trail (96th Avenue) extension west of Deerfoot Trail, which was to have been completed in September, could delay the opening of the road until the end of this year or later.

Photograph by: Lorraine Hjalte, Calgary Herald

CALGARY - With so much public attention focused on the Airport Trail tunnel construction, it’s a project at the other end of the road that has quietly been beset by critical problems and delays.

The $43-million westward extension of Airport Trail (96th Avenue N.E.) from Deerfoot Trail to Harvest Hills Boulevard was supposed to open last September. But the city has flagged quality problems on all four bridges constructed over Canadian Pacific tracks and Nose Creek, and insufficient concrete covering rebar on one bridge is so worrisome that the city and contractor are still determining whether part of that crossing must be demolished and rebuilt to ensure durability and safety.
Calgary’s transportation department argues it shouldn’t have to pay extra to bring the bridge decks up to its own contract specifications, but construction giant Aecon Group appears to be digging in, disputing the city’s assertion about bridge deficiencies.

“I hope there’s no cost to the taxpayer,” Stevenson said. “The cost is just to the residents that are being made to wait to use this road.”

The city hopes to have at least two lanes of the six-lane roadway open by July. But project manager Travis Gaede said getting all bridges repaired and northwest Calgary’s new airport access fully open won’t likely occur until the end of this year or later.

Regular public updates and council inquiries in the past two years have focused on the much more complex $295-million airport tunnel project farther to the east. With steep penalties from the airport for missing deadlines, city officials have managed to keep the tunnel on time and on budget.

The Airport Trail extension toward the northwest communities, however, is facing woes similar to those experienced on another project notorious for its delays — the Peace Bridge.

On both the new 96th Avenue bridges and Santiago Calatrava’s Peace Bridge, the city’s quality assurance inspectors reported problems with the projects, only months before each was scheduled to open.

For the $24.5-million Peace Bridge, inadequate steel welds discovered in spring 2011 kept it from opening until March 2012.

Last July, inspectors hired by the city for Aecon’s project found the rebar on all four bridge decks had insufficient concrete covering. On three of the bridges, the city specifications could be met with standard crack sealing, waterproofing and paving — work the contractor had started last October but had to stop when winter came early, Gaede said.

The westbound 70-metre bridge over Nose Creek and a wildlife corridor was “significantly more deficient,” the project manager said.

“We haven’t ruled out demolition or removals might be required,” said Gaede, a city engineer. “But at the same time, we haven’t established that it is yet, either. That’s a point of investigation still.”

While Gaede said Aecon has agreed to finish three of the bridges, there’s still talk over what happens to that final bridge. Aecon — which has worked on Stoney Trail, Vancouver’s SkyTrain and Toronto’s CN Tower — is defending its work.

“We believe that the bridges have been properly built to design and have no reason to believe otherwise,” Nicole Court, a spokeswoman for the Toronto-based company,
wrote in an e-mail. "We are therefore not in a position to comment or speculate upon anything further at this time."

She declined to say Monday whether Aecon would cover cost overruns.

Gaede said: “The city’s approach, just like with the Peace Bridge, is that if deficiencies occur and remediation is required, then our position is that that’s not at the expense of the taxpayers of the City of Calgary.

“That’s still in negotiation, but that’s certainly the city’s position.”

Gaede later clarified the contract terms weren’t being renegotiated.

The bridges account for roughly $17 million of the Aecon contract, which also includes Deerfoot interchange tie-ins for Alberta Transportation, Gaede said.

Stevenson had written in the Northern Hills Community Association’s newsletter in August that he anticipated a September opening for the full roadway. The problems were spotted in late July, by which time the newsletter was already at the printers.

The city hasn’t, until now, fully disclosed to the public the nature of the bridge deck problems. Calgary.ca merely mentions “recent construction delay and the onset of winter weather condition.”

With some of the solutions in dispute, aldermen had been keeping quiet, too.

“I wasn’t able to talk about it for a couple months,” Stevenson said.

The road extension would be a convenient airport link for communities near Beddington Trail or Harvest Hills Boulevard. It’s also the future route of the city’s Route 300 airport bus, which goes straight up Centre Street and now takes 64th Avenue and the expressway to reach the terminal.

“It’s inconvenienced me personally,” said Ald. Gael MacLeod, a Sandstone resident.

“Getting to the airport would be perfect. I would love to see that open.”

The bridges that could open in time for Calgary Stampede are designed to handle three lanes of one-way traffic, but may only be big enough for one lane of temporary two-way traffic.

Gaede is far less confident about a schedule for the one bridge where the concrete raised the most durability concerns.

“We would like to get it done and open this year, which would be an aggressive timeline depending on the amount of work that needs to be done,” he said.