

Cardownie in pledge to poll axe city trams

Deputy council leader plans referendum on scrapping project

■ CHRIS MARSHALL
Transport Reporter

DEPUTY council leader Steve Cardownie is set to demand a referendum on whether to scrap Edinburgh's embattled tram scheme – and has pledged to campaign for it to go.

The move comes after the *Evening News* revealed how the city council was beginning moves to kick its main contractor off the project in a step likely to lead to a lengthy court battle, further delaying the scheme.

Cllr Cardownie, who as SNP leader on the city council is a long-standing critic of the trams, said that he would call for a public vote should a breakthrough not be made by the time of an update report to councillors at the end of this month.

He said: "Should the situation warrant it, we will put down a motion calling for a referendum on whether we should continue with the trams, and the SNP group will campaign to scrap it. People deserve to have their say."

His intervention came as Audit Scotland said it had plans to probe the running of the project – but only once it is finished.

That seems some way off after city transport leader Cllr Gordon Mackenzie's comments that he was set to "call time" on the contract with German construction giant Bilfinger Berger. A potentially costly legal battle would stop all work in the city for the next few years.

Today a source close to the consortium, of which Bilfinger is part, said the firm was being used as a "scapegoat". He said: "We now have the threat of a tram which isn't going anywhere while we sit in the High Court. And on the basis of the adjudications so far, TIE and the council are not going to win."

Reports have already suggested that the construction firm is currently owed more than £10 million for work it has carried out. And sources close to the project said TIE had "lost" two more adjudications by independent assessors relating to work on retaining walls next to the railway in the west of the city.

Audit Scotland said it had included the tram project in a list of potential audits under review. A spokesman said it had identified the tram scheme in a list of "poten-

tial reports" but would begin once the project was complete.

Asked about plans for a referendum, Cllr Mackenzie said: "I'd rather not comment on what Councillor Cardownie is saying. We will wait to see the outcome of the council report."

Gordon Burgess, chairman of Leith Business Association, described the current impasse as being like a "Mexican stand-off".

"TIE want Bilfinger Burger to get on with it but we are not getting anywhere. There may be a reason why the German firm is not getting on with it but we are only getting TIE's side of the story."

On the call for a referendum, Mr Burgess said he felt it was "too little too late".

He said: "If we had been asked before all this, I'm sure we would have found that the people of Edinburgh would have voted against the trams. It's pretty widely recognised that Edinburgh people didn't want this in the first place. It's a huge embarrassment for Edinburgh and ill-managed."

He added: "It would be interesting to see how the public felt about the trams at this stage."

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YOUR SAY Inter@ctive

Should there be a referendum held on the tram project?

Lyle Brennan, 21, student,

Rose Street: "Although I know where my vote would go, I think it would be a waste of public funds, especially considering the council cuts."

Stuart Skea, 30, bar manager,

Leith: "I think people would

just vote to scrap it and then we'd be left with half a tram line and a lot of money wasted."

Lynsey Crerar, 24, energy

analyst, Bruntsfield: "They might as well finish the project rather than give people the chance to derail it halfway through."

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