

František Knapík: how to set sail on the Košice wind

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As Košice's Lord Mayor, František Knapík especially emphasizes long-term economic growth of Slovakia's second largest city and deeper participation of its population in the decision-making process regarding its future. The huge investments into logistics parks and the construction of shopping centres and new residential complexes prove that Košice do not lag behind as far as construction development is concerned, either.

Commencement of Aupark in the centre, completion of Optima II and the final stage of Cassovar are large projects that imply interest among big investors. What specific investments will the near future bring for Košice?

I will only mention some bigger investments. The southwestern part of the broader centre is dominated by the completion of Business Centre Košice, while the construction of the second stage of the Galéria shopping centre is underway. In addition to Aupark on the Námestí Osloboditeľov Square, which already has its zoning decision, there are other construction projects for multi-purpose facilities under preparation south of the square, specifically the Superior Hotel and the Verona complex. Likewise, the volume of multi-purpose projects on the former parking lot on the Továrenská Street has been also negotiated. There is an interesting plan to rebuild the railway station, in cooperation with Slovak Railways, to connect the centre to the area along the Hornád River. It is yet another challenge to use the area that has not been fully appreciated so far. From a zoning point of view, the multifunctional zone Za Hornádom is also prepared, as another link along the Alžbetina - Dóm Sv. Alžbety, Mlynská, railway station - Hornád axis. Multiple sites are also available for the construction of apartment houses, for example the residential zone Ťahanovce IV, V, the residential district in Heringeš, with a panoramic view of the city, and the new location Kopa-Girbeš in the west of the city.

The new construction sites require new ways to solve traffic in the centre as well as at the estates. The biggest problems have been already solved by the biggest transport project - the Prešovská - Sečovská intersection. Are there any other solutions to alleviate traffic in the centre?

The city's zoning plan defines several road connections to distribute the traffic load along the east-north and west-south axes, which especially intersect the Palackého Street south of the centre. These new connections cross the Hornád River and the railway tracks in three places. The first of them is a connection between the Masarykova Street and the Prešovská Street across Hornád and the railway area, extended to the Dargovských Hrdinov housing estate; the second is a connection between the estate and the town of Ťahanovce to the Kostolianska Street across the Hornád River and the railway tracks. The third is a proposed connection of the Južné Nábregie embankment and the Jantárová Street, as a continuation of the access road from the R2 expressway across Vyšné Opátske. The superser road system includes the eastern bypass of the city, formed by the R2 expressway in the direction from the northern border with Poland, through Prešov and Košice to Rožňava and Bratislava and the southern R4 arm from R2 at Šebastovce at the border with Hungary.

In March 2009, a workshop took place in the city hall for working teams involved in the project of the Košice Integrated Transport System. Could you talk about the some of the tasks and deadlines for activities in 2009?

Of the tasks planned for 2009, the feasibility study of the Integrated Transport System in passenger rail transport in Košice is already being prepared, covering the regions of Eastern Slovakia. It deals with 6 construction projects within the Integrated Railway Transport (IKD): electrification of the Haniska - Veľká Ida - Moldava City line, Terminal North, section of the Integrated Railway Transport from Terminal North to the Staničné Square with a connection to the Slovak Railways line, Integrated Railway Transport line from Terminal North to the Ťahanovce housing estate, Integrated Railway Transport line from the Staničné Square to PP Pereš and Košice Airport and connection between PZ Bočiar and PP Kechnec. At the same time, the Technical and Economic Study of Integrated Railway Transport projects is also being conducted to confirm their economic efficiency. Both studies are prepared to meet the conditions for using financial aid from EU funds.

What extensive capital expenditures are included in the 2009 budget and to what extent do the city's investments depend on credits?

In 2009, the city's budget includes capital expenditures in the total amount of €15.6 million. Of this sum, the highest amount should go into the reconstruction of roads and the renewal of DPMK's car fleet. The remaining amount of about €9 million constitutes capital expenditures divided into the existing 9 programmes, of which the most money flows into Family City, Healthy City, Services for Citizens and Schools. As regards specific investments, I would like to mention the reconstruction of flats and revitalization of estates, the construction of a practice hall at the winter stadium and the reconstruction and renewal of the city's schools and educational facilities. The budget also includes credit resources in the amount of €4.2 million, which cover about 27% of the total capital expenditures. The city will cover the rest from its own resources.

The impulses that instigate new investments are the upcoming World Ice Hockey Championship in 2011 and the recently awarded title Košice - European Capital of Culture (EHMK) in 2013. You are a member of the steering committee of the Košice - EHMK 2013 programme. Huge challenges, huge responsibility...

The crucial activities connected with the city's development are not directed to specific projects because the outcome of the city's development project is not the successful organization of one or two major competitions. Of course, the World Ice Hockey Championship in 2011 and EHMK 2013 are important for Košice, but our goal is to make sure that the quality of living of its citizens keeps growing even after these events. Talking about the modern life of our city, this means, in the short run, to deal especially with the central city zone in terms of infrastructure, aesthetics and cleanliness. We still have a lot to improve in the maintenance of public precincts, their aesthetics, landscaping and cleanliness. We have to refresh all of the necessary mechanisms and set them at a standard level. The goal is to make the city a pleasant and safe environment with functional infrastructure.

The media have brought information about the concerns among environmentalists in connection with the planned construction activities and the felling of trees and the continued talks about the sale of 50 hectare of municipal forests. In this respect, you initiated a series of working meetings, separately on each topic. Are their dates known already?

I consider the activities of environmental organizations as a very important segment for the administration and management of matters of public interest. I appreciate the activities of the third sector in the environmental area. We are in contact with non-governmental organizations and are currently discussing dates as well as the sequence of topics and other organizational issues, to make sure the working meetings could take place as soon as possible. We will try to organize everything so that the first meeting could take place in the second half of June at the latest. I think the topics that the environmentalists want to discuss with the city's representatives are crucial and I will treat them accordingly.

Košice and Prešov constitute the identified growth poles in terms of direction of future investments.

The cooperation of the regional cities is well justified historically and geographically. Is a Košice - Prešov conurbation a long-term vision or a close reality, in your opinion?

The relative proximity of the two cities, major cities in their respective regions, inspires people to verify their relationships. Košice 2013 supports the common initiative of the Austrian architects from Explicit Architecture and the Faculty of Arts of the Technical University in Košice. As its part, a study of impacts of the potential conurbation should be prepared in the form of an international programme. The project should be set up in cooperation between the universities of both cities, using the potential needed to analyze this broad territory. The cooperation includes the areas of geography, demography, sociology, urban planning and transport, but also economic and development analyses. The Košice - Prešov conurbation is a long-term process dependent on the development of infrastructure, but it is very important to learn about the opportunities that the potential common growth of the cities could bring to the region. The topic of a conurbation is also one of the common points of cooperation between Košice and Prešov within the EHMK project.

At the end, I would like to mention briefly the recent declaration of 7 Wonders of Košice, which were joined, interestingly, by an Eighth Wonder - Košice's wind. Do you think it attracts or discourages investors?

I think it is always a matter of how you look at it. Košice's wind is a typical feature of this city. For someone it can be attractive as it plays with women's skirts, can be an obstacle for them, or destroys their hairdo. I perceive it as a positive element - it expresses motion, brings fresh air and, at any rate, contains much real and symbolic energy. We could also look at this whole thing so that when the wind blows in our city so often, this environment is probably suitable for it and we should only use the right sails to be able to take advantage of it for our real lives.

Photo - Košice City Hall
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