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## JAMES: Manufacturing consent in North Van

[Elizabeth James](#) / North Shore News

January 22, 2014 12:00 AM

*"Participation is essential to the core meaning of democracy and good governance as it improves information flow, accountability and due process, and gives a voice to those most directly affected by public policy."*

- Koryakov and Sisk

In Part 2 of their Guide for [Russia's] South Caucasus, authors Igor Koryakov and Timothy D. Sisk discuss participatory democracy, including the process of referendums and citizen initiatives.

Three of their "key issues" for the use of "referendums to settle community public policy questions" are relevant to us: the phrasing of the question, the intensity of (community) opinion on the issue and educating the public on the importance of the issue.

Against that backdrop, let's take a look at two local initiatives to see how they measure up: The upcoming regional referendum on TransLink funding and the City of North Vancouver counterpetition on the proposed Lower Lonsdale Business Improvement Area (LoLo BIA).

TransLink: Incredibly, this saga has been underway since before Oct. 18, 2000 when then TransLink CEO Ken Dobell presented his 10-page report, Strategic Transportation Plan Funding Options: Recommendations, to the TransLink board of directors. ([dnv.org/upload/documents/council\\_reports/205216b.pdf](http://dnv.org/upload/documents/council_reports/205216b.pdf)) Based on "the results of the public consultation and formal survey," Dobell recommended the board "give preliminary approval to the vehicle levy option based on vehicle weight." He also recommended his report be referred to the region's next Council of Councils meeting for consideration.

Unfortunately for Dobell, community opinion about both TransLink and the vehicle levy was already so intense many people had spoiled their survey returns by inserting their own polite or impolite versions of the "None of the Above" option that had been omitted from TransLink's suggested funding mechanisms.

As a result, some of the councillors at the Nov. 4, 2000 C of C meeting grilled him non-stop about the so-called results of the survey, until he finally admitted that the approval percentages had been based only on the nonspoiled returns. We will never know the ratio of spoiled to nonspoiled returns because the spoiled ballots were discarded.

Fast forward to 2014 - if you can fast forward 14 years of TransLink incarnations, studies and reports - and we're facing yet another multimilliondollar funding referendum in ignorance of the questions to be asked.

Even worse, we are still in the dark about the real state of our transportation infrastructure and finances and still have a provincial government that dictates TransLink decisions through an expensive conglomeration of boards, committees and councils, many of whom have no direct experience with transportation issues and planning.

When are we going to muster the moxie to put a stop to it all? Lower Lonsdale Business Improvement Area proposal: The story began quietly enough. After hearing only a few rumbles of concern, by majority vote City of North Vancouver council committed the proposal to the counter-petition process.

In this instance, the phrasing of the question would have been simple enough. Do you support a LoLo BIA? Yes or no? It was

only when citizens like Kerry Morris and others decided to make certain all business owners knew the cost implications if a majority of them voted for a BIA, that the intensity of local opinion was ignited.

Ignited because, as CBC Power & Politics columnist Ellen Roseman put it on March 27, 2012, "Negative option billing makes people furious. Using this tactic, companies add new charges without your consent and assume you accept them unless you decline."

Unfortunately for British Columbians, it is not just corporations that use the ruse; the Campbell Liberals enshrined it in B.C.'s 2003 Community Charter.

The Local Government Act previously required a full referendum before a municipality could commit its constituents to an agreement that extended beyond a period of five years and above a certain dollar amount. Charter provisions now allow a municipality to activate the counter-petition process and, effectively, say: this is what we plan to do unless enough of you see our advertisements in the local paper and tell us not to do it.

As Lower Lonsdale events transpired, the proponents sent an email to the city just before the Jan. 13 meeting of council asking to have the proposal withdrawn "at this time."

Perhaps they sensed the intensity of local opposition and decided to keep their powder dry until after the 2014 municipal elections.

Whether or not a Lower Lonsdale BIA would be worthwhile for all concerned, the letter suggests the proponents have no plans to disappear.

In her reply to my pre-event inquiry about the Jan. 19 Densification Wars! forum hosted by the Vancouver group City Hall Watch, Coun. Pam Bookham wrote, "Citizens' initiatives are in response to the failure of municipalities to provide meaningful public engagement opportunities. In my opinion, current practices in the City of North Van tend heavily toward manufacturing consent."

The definition of participatory democracy says it is a process that emphasizes the broad participation of constituents in the direction and operation of political systems.

The writings of Koryakov and Sisk seem to bolster that concept, so we have work to do.

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