

OPINION

Taking its toll, but not as planned

Port Mann Bridge: It's better at racking up debt than carrying commuters



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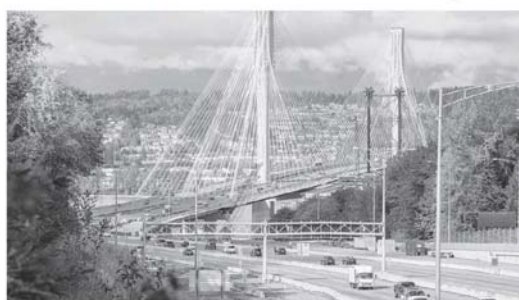
Ops. Another shiny new tolled multibillion-dollar bridge, another fiduciary horror story. The twinned Port Mann is better at racking up debt than traffic.

Traffic numbers are in decline. Projections are proving to be works of fiction. Rather than pay the \$3 toll — \$6 for the day if you expect to get home that night to take the kids to soccer practice — commuters have gone looking for a free ride, as they feel is their right. The Pattullo, decrepit but toll-less, has done a booming trade.

Not only are traffic numbers headed in the wrong direction, so is the Port Mann's indebtedness. The Transportation Investment Corp., the Crown corporation responsible for the bridge's construction, is projecting a debt of \$3.61 billion. That single, singular sum is equivalent to 48 per cent of TransLink's entire panoply of transit initiatives that Metro Vancouverites will consider in the upcoming plebiscite.

Gordon Price, urban planner and director of The City Program at Simon Fraser University, was interested in the public reaction to this news, and so he searched the comments on this paper's website. Price, posting on his blog PriceTags (which can be accessed at <https://pricetags.wordpress.com/>), wrote:

"I wondered if in the comments to the story, Sun readers would be indicting TI Corp and the provincial government for their incompetence and mismanagement, calling for accountability, if not resignations. Imagine my complete lack of surprise to find nothing of the sort: that's reserved for transit agencies. TI Corp



The tolling of the Port Mann is a stopgap measure. What we need is a comprehensive plan.

will likely go on to finance the Massey bridge."

In his post, Price also identified one of the leading proponents who campaigned for the construction of the new Port Mann Bridge. (For the record, both Price and I were against it.) It was none other than Jordan Bateman, the self-appointed leader of the No side in the transit plebiscite. He was on the advisory board of a group called Get Moving BC, which made twinning the Port Mann its Number 1 priority. It got B.C. moving all right, though I'm sure Bateman hoped at the time it would be to somewhere other than the Pattullo Bridge.

There are some instructive lessons here to be learned. Some of them can be applied to the plebiscite, which, as I have stated repeatedly, I support. These are:

1. Stuff costs money. Making life easier for cars especially

costs money. That's why the bridge was tolled. But drivers still expect a free ride, as if driving a car was somehow different than any other public utility. Those days are over, or soon will be.

2. We need a comprehensive plan, not stopgap measures like the Port Mann. Tolling, of the pick-and-choose variety we have here in Metro Vancouver, does not work. A more comprehensive strategy, like universal road-pricing, will come eventually, but not in the immediate future.

3. Comprehensive road-pricing is, at the very least, a decade out, and probably more because of the reluctance of our provincial government to embrace it, and because of the costs of mega-projects like the Port Mann, which have to be recovered. That takes time.

4. In the meantime, the TransLink plan is the best

alternative to get us from here to there — that, or we can face growing gridlock as our population explodes in the Metro area. To vote no out of anger with the TransLink executive or on the misinformed notion that there's nothing in it for your part of the city or because British Columbians are taxed to death (we aren't) will only end up costing taxpayers more, not less.

5. The entire predicament we are in, transit-wise, has been engineered by the provincial government, although it likes to pretend it's had nothing to do with it. It wrestled local control of TransLink away from the municipalities and installed the present governance model; it insisted upon a plebiscite before OKing the TransLink plan; it set the terms of the plebiscite and set the ridiculously short time limit for Metro mayors to come up with a comprehensive

10-year plan; it restricted the forms of revenue production TransLink could use to fund its plan, refusing to consider road-pricing or other forms of revenue that trespassed on its bottom line; it has refused to campaign for the plan so as to distance itself from a popular tax revolt, à la the HST.

Meanwhile, our premier wants *her* bridge built to replace the Massey tunnel, without going to plebiscite because, well, she can. Cost? A rumoured \$3 billion. Reasoning? Purportedly, to relieve traffic congestion, though, incidentally of course, a bridge will do away with that pesky tunnel, which, once gone, will allow deep-draught ocean-going freighters and tankers up the river for the first time, which will lead to the industrialization of the lower Fraser, which is quite the coincidence, don't you think? Where will all that uncontested traffic go once it hits the Oak Street Bridge? Good question.

Will it be tolled? Without doubt, since one study showed — and stop me if you've heard this one before — an untolled bridge would attract too many commuters looking for a free ride.

A belated apology to Brad Cavanagh, whose blog rebutting the No side position I cited in a previous column. In said column, I failed to follow the first rule of journalism, which is: Spell The Person's Name Right. His last name is "Cavanagh" not "Cavanaugh," as I had it. I would suggest Mr. Cavanagh add the extra "u" to his name to avoid future mistakes.

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