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One degree of separation

BY ELIZABETH JAMES, NORTH SHORE NEWS MARCH 6, 2013 9:45 AM

"It's TransLink. It's a completely dysfunctional organization. They have a board of directors. The provincial government controls the ultimate power. They have the mayors' council that recommends and the province rejects; and they have a TransLink Commissioner who costs \$500,000 a year and nobody knows what he does."

- **Mayor Michael Smith**

IT was a beautiful day in the neighbourhood when West Vancouver Mayor Michael Smith told local Chamber of Commerce delegates what many of us had long suspected - the regional Mayors' Council on Regional Transportation is virtually powerless to effect a change for the better at TransLink.

We have waited 15 years to hear that.

On June 18, 2004, at the end of a presentation to that year's incarnation of the TransLink Board, I said that in my opinion the governance model of TransLink was dysfunctional.

No holds barred, I predicted that if board members couldn't find a way to improve the organization and decision-making, they would hand then Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon the excuse he needed to disband the semi-elected model and replace it with something more to his liking.

Although it took longer than expected, Falcon did just that in March 2007.

Ten months later, CEO Pat Jacobsen resigned. She had steered the TransLink operation for seven years.

In July 2008, her successor Tom Prendergast arrived in Vancouver with a resume that included management-level experience with both England's London Underground and the New York Transportation network. It didn't take him long to see the dysfunctional light and less than 18 months later, he accepted a position as president of New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Today, despite numerous appointments and reorganizations, TransLink remains a dysfunctional, multi-billion-dollar albatross around taxpayers' necks.

But that's not even half of the tale.

Because it was not until dawn on Feb. 25, when I read an email from light-rail advocate Malcolm Johnston, that I realized I had been so busy fact-checking other conflicts of interest, I'd missed one on TransLink that had been sitting right under my nose since the first of the month.

'My bad' as the kids say. So, better late than never, here comes the rest of the story:

Last fall, Transportation Commissioner Martin Crilly said he had set aside \$75,000 to fund an "independent analysis" of TransLink's current efficiency, performance and outlook plans.

Since Crilly himself occupies a position which is independent of TransLink, most people - even columnists like me - could be forgiven for thinking that meant the analysis would be doubly firewalled.

But engrossed in making sure I could include mention of the analysis and recommendations in time for a February column, I did not think to look for the names of the principals of Shirocca Consulting.

Independent? Well you be the judge.

On Dec. 5, 2012, in his Remarks to the mayors' council document, Crilly introduced "two colleagues": Bob Irwin, former president and CEO of BC Transit (and soon-to-be Crilly's successor) and Teresa Watts, president and sole proprietor of Shirocca.

More importantly, and as Crilly explained to the assembled mayors and members of the appointed TransLink Board, Watts was also "deputy project director for building the Millennium Line and a project manager for building the West Coast Express and Expo Line."

Qualified to express a professional opinion on regional transportation issues? Absolutely.

Independent and without bias as to TransLink's efficiency and progress?

What do you think? But it doesn't stop there, because "On (Watts') team are two other professionals," Crilly said. One of the two is her husband, "Glen Leicester, who was TransLink's VP planning before retiring five years ago."

Does Leicester's "38 years of transportation planning experience in B.C." qualify him to express an opinion on regional transportation issues? Absolutely.

Completely independent and without bias as to TransLink and its choices of technology?

What do you think? Is it reasonable for us to expect people who have spent their careers moving from one regional transportation appointment to another, to be completely divorced from that history - especially when the decisions they made in the past may still be influencing the current position of the agency they are now tasked to analyze?

Whether the news items concern less than arms-length consultations, or are emails to me that fail to disclose the writers' relevant connections - such as to the group Better Environmentally Sensitive Transportation which has benefitted from federal and TransLink funding, or to aspiring election candidates - they are all part of my overall discomfort with the lack of openness and transparency in the entire transit discussion.

Meanwhile, back at the TransLink barn, I had not even decided where to adjourn this ongoing saga when another firestorm reignited.

It seems that, since the province tweaked the rules to enable TransLink to recover \$30 million in fines for unpaid fares, the agency has recouped only \$1 million.

Not to worry, though. Be happy!

Because, instead of working with his colleagues to sort out the current fiscal mess, the mayor at the Vancouver-centric hub of TransLink's debt-servicing problems thinks it would be a great idea to dig regional taxpayers even deeper into a hole along Broadway and out to UBC.

Dysfunctional it is Mayor Smith - and then some.

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