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Many Players in RAV Follies

By Charlie Smith
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As expected, the 12-member TransLink board approved the prohibitively expensive Richmond/Airport/Vancouver rapid transit project on December 1. Most of the directors didn't appear to be too concerned that one of the winning bidders, SNC-Lavalin, is participating in a separate tendering process to supply 300 million to 500 million bullets per year for the U.S. military campaign in Iraq. The official cost for the partially underground, 19-kilometre line is \$1.72 billion.

The RAV line probably won't cost \$1.72 billion by the time it's completed. Danish planning professor Bent Flyvbjerg has examined hundreds of large projects in more than 20 countries. He discovered that in 90 percent of the cases, costs soared after final approval. Don't forget that TransLink is also on the hook for any ridership shortfalls.

"For rail projects, for example, half of all projects have cost overruns of 45 per cent and higher," Flyvbjerg wrote in the June 2003 issue of *Eurobusiness*. "When this is combined with patronage [ridership], which for half of all rail projects is more than 50 per cent lower than forecasted, it becomes clear why so many projects have financial problems."

If there are massive construction-cost overruns and piddling ridership on the RAV line, the citizenry will want to know who is responsible. The obvious suspects, the premier and the mayors of Surrey and Vancouver, won't have done this on their own. They had lots of help. Here are 10 underreported reasons why the project made it this far:

1. Last January, the COPE caucus on Vancouver city council bounced anti-RAV Coun. Fred Bass, a diligent transportation researcher, off the TransLink board in favour of Mayor Larry Campbell's loyal caddy, Coun. Raymond Louie. Even with five critics of RAV in the COPE caucus--Bass, David Cadman, Tim Louis, Anne Roberts, and Ellen Woodsworth--the mayor and his three caucus allies still won this power struggle. Guess what happens when you give in to a bully? He throws sand in your face. Would Bass's presence on the TransLink board have persuaded a majority to vote down the RAV project? We'll never know, thanks to the COPE caucus.

2. Progressives on the City of North Vancouver council (that's you, Darrell Mussatto and Craig Keating) chose not to try to remove Mayor Sharp as the North Shore director of TransLink before she put the RAV project back on life support in June. Other councils have punted mayors off the Greater Vancouver Regional District board. Sharp's decision to keep the RAV project alive won't help transit riders in her city, who can hop on a SeaBus and transfer onto the 98-B line to Richmond.

3. By not attempting to remove Sharp from the TransLink board earlier this year, West Vancouver and the District of North Vancouver councils

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demonstrated their great interest in the welfare of the Vancouver Board of Trade. North Shore residents already pay a disproportionate share of regional property taxes to TransLink and get very little in return. West Vancouver Coun. Victor Durman, chair of the GVRD finance committee, had a responsibility to do due diligence on the financing of RAV. He never once cited Flyvbjerg's research.

4. Langley Township residents might wonder why their mayor and council sat idly for five-and-a-half years as the hapless mayor of neighbouring Langley City, Marlene Grinnell, remained on the TransLink board, endorsing every transit-fare increase proposed by staff. Grinnell never uttered a peep of criticism about the RAV line.

5. The Canadian Taxpayers Federation claims to speak out against corporate welfare. But its omnipresent mouthpiece, B.C. director Sara MacIntyre, stayed silent as the RAV project came to a final vote at the TransLink board. Why won't she criticize Premier Gordon Campbell's grandest financial gamble? Could the upcoming election have anything to do with this?

6. The *Vancouver Sun* editorial board sank to a new low with its fawning praise of the RAV project. The next time transit fares rise, ask yourself if this would have happened had CanWest's faceless editorial board (including you, Mr. Skulsky) promoted sensible transit policies.

7. Labour leaders (CUPE excepted) targeted their criticism at the public-private-partnership aspect of RAV but scrupulously avoided condemning the entire project. Citizens shouldn't be shocked that the same folks who lobbied for fast ferries would also promote the transportation-funding proposal that made RAV possible. Why should they care about ridership forecasts when so many union dues can be created by digging a trench down Cambie Street?

8. The NDP didn't want to upset the aforementioned labour leaders prior to the next provincial election, so it confined its criticism to a few token news releases. Someone should let the NDP candidate in Vancouver-Fairview, Gregor Robertson, in on a secret: grossly overpriced transit projects that destroy neighbourhoods don't create happy constituents and they don't create a happy planet. He had better hope that the RAV line doesn't turn into the Vancouver equivalent of Boston's "Big Dig", which went billions of dollars over budget.

9. For most of 2004, environmental advocacy groups such as Better Environmentally Sound Transportation, Smart Growth BC, and the David Suzuki Foundation stayed miles away from the debate over RAV. BEST received \$224,601.25 from TransLink in 2003, so this shouldn't come as a surprise. True grassroots groups, such as the Bus Riders Union and the Rethink RAV Coalition, did most of the hard work, but they were no match for the Vancouver Board of Trade.

10. Toronto urban-affairs guru Jane Jacobs warned Vancouverites that the RAV line is a "pork barrel". Many didn't listen because they are so

thrilled with the idea of taking a train to the airport. They neglected to examine basic details, such as the additional cost of a tunnel, or the more pressing need for a light-rail line along Broadway. A surface-level project to the airport and Richmond would have left enough money for this. It's often said that the public gets the politicians it deserves. In this instance, citizens will have to look in the mirror if the RAV line becomes a massive boondoggle.

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