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**OPINION**

**True costs, benefits of RAV lost in smoke**

By Allen Garr

Wildfires raging across south-central B.C weren't the only source of smoke this summer. The folks pushing the RAV line managed to generate a fair amount of particulate matter themselves.

As I headed off for holidays, premier Gordon Campbell's deputy minister and father of the RAV project, Ken Dobell, was attempting to squeeze another \$150 million out of Ottawa for a total of \$450 million. Without it, we were told, the transit line would certainly die.

Dobell, with the full support of Campbell, had already managed to bring all the other parties into line. He used his supporters with the RAV project office and in regional and municipal government, along with a cleverly coercive legislative deadline. A majority was convinced that if they didn't approve RAV, the \$450-million federal contribution would simply disappear. They were also told that this project would be a showpiece for a public-private partnership, or P3.

Federal bureaucrats had some serious reservations about the RAV project. Herb Dhaliwal, the lead federal minister on the file at the time, said Ottawa was only prepared to match the province's contribution of \$300 million.

A mighty kvetch went out. B.C. needed that dough and was not going to change the scope of the project. Our glass was clearly half-empty.

What a difference a summer made. Ottawa, no slouch in cutting deals with provincial arm-twisters, said it could only put more in the RAV pot if B.C. was willing to take less for what it had repeatedly declared was its infrastructure priority, upgrading the Kicking Horse Pass.

Say no more. Three hundred million it was. The scope of the project could be reduced by knocking out a station here and reducing some tunneling there. No mention was made of what this would do to the ridership numbers. The project would be done on time and on budget, although exactly what the budget was has never been made clear. And the glass now miraculously appeared half full.

For those of you trying to make your way through the smoke, an article that appeared in the June 2003 issue of EuroBusiness called "The Lying Game" would be useful. The author, Bent Flyvbjerg, a Danish professor of planning, is also one of the major contributors to the book Megaprojects and Risk: An Anatomy of Ambition.

Flyvbjerg and his pals surveyed several hundred projects in more than 20 countries over the past 70 years to see which projects got built and whether they delivered what they promised. They concluded that regardless of country or the politics of the government involved, a formula seemed to be at work. The projects that got approved underestimated costs, overestimated revenues, undervalued the environmental impact and overvalued the economic development effects.

Serious questions have already been raised about the ridership estimates for the RAV line, which Flyvbjerg says is a common bit of deception for transit projects. Those peddling our Millennium line did the same thing.

Not every project, Flyvbjerg says, underestimates the costs and overestimated the benefits, but most do. He found that nine times out of 10, costs begin to soar after projects have been approved, leaving taxpayers or investors to pick up bills. Think fast ferries or Coquitlam highway.

In all of this, Flyvbjerg found a "culture of covert lying" and "deliberate delusion."

It's not that there are no successful projects, he says. In fact, he is a fan of public-private partnerships as a way of containing costs.

But, given what we've seen so far with the RAV line, long before the



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first shovel of dirt has been dug, the smoke will continue to obscure the true costs and benefits until it's too late. "The lying game has long historical roots and is deeply ingrained in professional and institutional practices," Flyvbjerg says.

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