



TransLink's 2012 Supplemental Plan and Outlook imparts intentional inaccuracy

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TransLink's recently released draft 2012 Supplemental Plan and Outlook includes a startling misrepresentation: the claim that building more and wider roads will reduce greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions. The document states: "Analysis indicates that restored funding levels for the Major Road Network Minor Capital Program is beneficial for the reduction of GHG emissions in the region."

Basically, TransLink's draft report says that it can build its way out of congestion and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions by widening roads, something that has never been achieved in a growing urban area.

Most of TransLink's highly trained planners and engineers know that this is misleading, to say the least; they know full well that the cliché "you can't build your way out of congestion" is well supported by numerous studies and long experience. They are also well aware that roadway expansion is one of the main drivers of increasing carbon emissions, and that a shift to public transit is essential. But the TransLink bureaucracy has been pushing the idea of "balanced transportation"—more freeways and more transit—since the organization was created.

The Golden Ears Bridge, which will cost TransLink about \$33 million in 2011, is the prime example of this misguided policy. And it is hard to quickly shift a big organization off its established trajectory without strong pressure from the public.

Oxford University's Bent Flyvbjerg, who pioneered the study of "strategic misrepresentation", quoted an unnamed traffic forecaster in a 2003 column explaining how studies get cooked: "The minister leans on his advisors, the advisors lean on the feasibility consultants and the forecasts get 'talked up'." The process results in employees and consultants being pressured to manufacture data to support dubious spending priorities.

The provincial government, which controls the governance of TransLink, has been misrepresenting the effect of road-building for some time. Its 2008 Climate Action Plan claims that the Gateway freeways will "reduce congestion and associated GHGs from idling vehicles". This is a prime example of strategic misrepresentation, and a message carefully crafted to deceive. It conveys the impression of a clear and authoritative claim but actually is so vague as to be meaningless. Idling emissions might be reduced on some road segments, but idling emissions are only a small proportion of overall GHG emissions, and overall idling emissions across the region increase with traffic volume. With this ambiguity, a skilled public-relations specialist can bamboozle a busy reporter or concerned citizen without technically telling an outright lie. Strategic misrepresentation is more dangerous than simple lying because it makes misrepresentation a normal part of the job and a valued professional skill.

It takes some digging to find out that Environment Canada's response to the Port Mann /Highway 1 environmental-assessment submission found that roadway expansion leads to a "deterioration of air quality and an increase in GHG emissions". Health Canada responded to the province's convoluted assertions by stating that "the misdirected focus of this assessment is inappropriate and may be misleading to the general reader."

Some public pressure could make a big difference at TransLink right now. Recently there was a significant shift in TransLink policy after intense pressure from New Westminster residents who forced the cancellation of the proposed North Fraser Perimeter Road (NFPR) part of the Gateway Program. New Westminster residents have proved a force to be reckoned with; Mayor Wayne Wright referred to the first NFPR open house as a “donnybrook”—slang for a mass brawl.

It was this outspoken opposition that forced TransLink to back off on the United Boulevard Extension (UBE), the first phase of the NFPR in New Westminster. If it had proceeded, it would have cost us about \$175 million for a short stub of freeway that would feed more traffic onto already congested New Westminster streets.

The cancellation of the full NFPR project likely saved us between \$500 million and \$1 billion, money that can now be used to fund transit. A second indication of the gradual change of direction at TransLink is the July cancellation of a smaller roadway widening: the \$69-million Murray-Clark Connector.

But now TransLink proposes to double the budget for the Major Road Network Minor Capital Program from \$10 million to \$20 million per year, the level it was at before TransLink's recent financial squeeze and the NFPR and Murray-Clark Connector projects were cancelled. As discussed above, this increase is justified with the strategic misrepresentation that wider roads will result in lower emissions.

Although \$10 million a year may not seem like much compared to the billions being spent on the provincial Gateway Program freeways such as the South Fraser Perimeter Road, it would be enough to build washroom facilities at every major transit hub or to more than double the cycling budget from \$6 million to \$16 million.

TransLink needs to keep its major road network in good repair but should not be spending public funds to widen roads and worsen the climate crisis. Transit, walking, and cycling are the future, and there is no point spending to prepare for a past that no longer exists. Dealing with our present challenges, such as the end of cheap oil and the heating of the global environment, requires clear, honest information. Strategic misrepresentation about energy and climate issues must not be tolerated any longer.

You can comment on TransLink's use of strategic misrepresentation, its proposal to double the roads budget, and what you would like to see the \$10 million spent on by [submitting feedback](#).

You can also contact Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Blair Lekstrom at blair.lekstrom.mla@leg.bc.ca and the TransLink Mayors' Council (ask for your correspondence to be sent to all members) c/o shirley.shankar@translink.ca

Eric Doherty is a member of the Council of Canadians' Vancouver-Burnaby chapter and [StopThePave.org](#). TransLink will hold a public meeting tonight (September 8) at 6:30 p.m. at the Holiday Inn Metrotown, followed by meetings on Wednesday (September 14) at the Guildford Recreation Centre in Surrey and Thursday (September 15) at the Evergreen Cultural Centre in Coquitlam.

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