

For whom the bridge tolls

by Sabine Eiche

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What unites the different communities of Metro Vancouver nowadays? Language? No. Congestion? Yes. The congested state of our roads can literally tie us together, from south to north, east to west. But when I was a little girl, congested (from the Latin “congere,” heap up) described a head or chest cold.

Road congestion was unimaginable when my Mother and I arrived from Germany in October 1956. My Father (who’d arrived in May) picked us up at the train station downtown in Vancouver and brought us to our new home in Burkeville on Sea Island. There were then two bridges from Vancouver to Richmond over the North Arm of the river, the Fraser Street Bridge and the Marpole Bridge. Before we got our own car, a VW beetle, we often walked from Burkeville to South Vancouver over the wooden Marpole Bridge. Up river, we saw the Oak Street Bridge under construction. To those of us who knew only the humble but serviceable wooden bridges, it looked futuristic.

The Oak Street Bridge opened in the summer of 1957. It was the first toll bridge and the first modern bridge I ever crossed. The toll (applied until 1959) was 25 cents, the same amount it cost to see a movie, so in those days, 25 cents wasn’t exactly peanuts. My Father bought multiple-trip tickets. I still see them in my mind’s eye – pink and about the size of a pre-computer library due-date card. A tollbooth attendant clipped the ticket each time we crossed the bridge. As a child I thought the word toll was funny because in German there’s a word with the same spelling that means crazy. The toll we paid on the bridge is an Old English word for tax. It comes, like the German “Zoll”

(customs, tax), from the Latin “telonium,” toll house, which derives from the Greek “telos” (duty, tax, expense).

Abolishing tolls on the Port Mann and Golden Ears bridges was one of our new NDP provincial government’s campaign promises. The NDP has also halted the previous government’s project for a \$3.5 billion ten-lane bridge to replace the four-lane Massey Tunnel between Delta and Richmond. The monster bridge was supposed to ease traffic congestion, but all it would have done is shove the congestion further north along Highway 99 to the older and smaller bridges (such as the Oak Street Bridge) between Richmond and Vancouver. Before long, they too would have had to be replaced by bridges with ten, fourteen, or maybe even twenty lanes.

Will traffic congestion go away if we build more roads and bigger bridges? Evidently not. If the ancient philosopher Aristotle were rambling through Metro Vancouver today, he’d change his tune from “Nature abhors a vacuum” to “Traffic abhors a vacuum.” Build for increased traffic, and traffic will increase until congestion is reached again.

Our dire traffic malaise needs a decongestant. One cure would be to stop putting more cars on the road and start developing rapid transit systems connecting all of Metro Vancouver. Let’s put congestion back in the nose, where we know how to handle it with hankies and spray.