

Evening debate: How should we fund infrastructure?

On May 17, 2017 we held our first engineering bar debate at the Accent Inns in Burnaby. There were 17 attendees, ranging from student engineers, to senior and also well retired professional engineers. We debated **how public infrastructure should be funded**; a topical subject considering we sit in the fallout of a provincial election that has yet to give us a government.



Matthew Walton-Knight kicked-off the debate with a background on the who owns public infrastructure and the role of government, he posed several questions including: Is the role of government to provide public infrastructure, or to ensure it is provided? Can the government be both the referee of infrastructure development, and a player in the delivery of infrastructure development? He went on to discuss the options for infrastructure funding; that is who pays for infrastructure and how. Although getting non-users of an asset to pay through general taxation shares the cost of

development, he made a passionate case for those who benefit most from an infrastructure asset should pay most for that asset through targeted user fees.

The funding of Translink was used as a case study with a discussion on its many funding sources for the provision of transit services including property and electrical taxes. The effectiveness of Translink in reducing congestion in Vancouver was considered as opposed to having a straight user paid congestion charge for those accessing the city in cars during the day – as used in London, England. A motion was then proposed on changing Translink's funding to be more direct user fees and linking it with a user-paid congestion charge.



Initially replies were directly related to the motion, but soon they switched to the challenges of the four-year term government election cycle and whether a hypothetical national infrastructure committee would be an improvement. There was discussion on whether such a committee should be advisory or given funding and delivering authority. With passions rising, the economic viability of several key infrastructure projects was discussed including the new Port Mann Bridge, the proposed George Massey Tunnel Replacement, the BC Hydro Site-C facility and the twining of the Trans Mountain



Pipeline. Many key insights were shared on these projects benefiting all participants.

After 90 minutes, the debate was brought to a close, though discussion continued in smaller groups long afterwards. Discussion was polite and professional, even as views diverged greatly. The evening was highly enjoyable: 15 people spoke, often many times. The consensus was that the evening needed to be repeated, that discussing engineering issues was good and it is something that we need to do.

