



Olympic follies

"The Olympics is only worth about \$600 million, but 2010 was the spark that lit the investment flame in B.C.," said Keith Sashaw, president of the Vancouver Regional Construction Association, in the Summer 2007 issue of *Western Construction News*. Well, thank heavens B.C. isn't counting on the Olympics to keep our economy moving or our reputations intact!

Our challenging terrain and climate drive Vancouverites to be innovative, but in some ways we are still like a frontier town.

Out-of-province contractors express frustration about working here, owners' estimates are often too low (e.g., the convention centre) and the average age of a tower crane—until recently—was about 30 years old.

A few years ago, an industry watcher commented that, following Expo '86, Vancouver didn't do a thing to build or plan for future infrastructure needs. Since the Olympic bid was won, "We've been scrambling to squeeze 20 years of work into ten. And mark my words," she continued, "after the Olympics is over, we won't do anything for another 20!"

This winter, the rest of Canada must have been laughing at Vancouver as we struggled with our near-metre of snow in December—double, I'm told, what we normally get in an entire west-coast winter. Well, the 120-plus-mm of rain on snow with rising temperatures was no joke—as we know from the landslides, flooding and unstable snow packs (15 deaths so far).

How we have been dealing with our worst winter 14 months before the 2010 games, though, is a joke. Between the 16,000-m. rockslide that closed the Sea-to-Sky Highway for a week in July, ice falling onto a vehicle injuring two tourists in December in roughly the same area, the chairlift tower failure at Whistler that stranded—but thankfully didn't kill—skiers and boarders just days before Christmas, and the shameful, flip-flop conduct of the Vancouver airport, we are so not-ready for the Olympics.

The landslides and ice jacking on the highway are arguably "unpredictable" events arising from a natural hazard (I don't fully agree) but the chairlift tower failure at Whistler was really disturbing—so I did some digging.

I hope that what was reported in the mainstream media was a dumbed-down version of the manufacturer's recommendations—they were aware of the problem. For example, is it adequate to instruct owners to tap on the structure with a mallet and listen for water, and if there was water (how much), to drill a hole (how big)? If I were charging people big money to ride a chair that's being supported by a steel pole, maybe I'd take a close look at it once in while. We all know that metal properties

change with the temperature extremes that are reasonable to expect at a ski resort, and that regular inspections—even visual inspections under good conditions (say, in summer) could catch developing problems long before the device kills someone. This incident is a sad reminder of the 1995 accident at Whistler that killed two people.

In the wake of mass displacements during the city's preparations for Expo '86, an engineer described stumbling into someone's cardboard home while taking measurements under a viaduct around False Creek. The homeless situation hasn't changed much since then. It's all but confirmed that the fire causing a shutdown of the Pattullo Bridge was caused by homeless people trying to warm food. What if that happens in January 2010? Homeless people don't disappear, they just move.

I won't even get into how afraid I've become to show discontent at the airport lest I be tasered, or the fact that funding for the Olympic village is now officially a scandal. I'm not buying the argument that the Olympics will be great for Vancouverites either; 30 to 70 per cent of event tickets were reserved.

Like it or not, next winter we're expecting thousands of visitors and Canada is counting on us to put on a good show. We've all got to put our shoulder to the wheel—or at least keep the airport and major transportation routes working and our sidewalks safe! ♦



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