

Ahhhh

My magical day on the new Johnson Street Bridge.

The new Johnson Street Bridge has been a controversial topic in Victoria for many years. Its many delays in construction have had the effect of turning a five-year complaint into a nine-year complaint! And Victorians love to have something to complain about.

Just over a year ago I moved into a new apartment in the Janion Building, and my apartment is right on the end and at the top of the building, looking right down at the new bridge. It has the best view in Victoria of the new Johnson Street Bridge. As a result, whenever there was a significant stage in the construction of the bridge that was worthy of the television cameras of CHEK TV, they would come to my apartment and interview me, just so they could have that view. I always managed to get a plug in about *Music by the Sea*, my own organization, but I knew that they were not there to interview me, *really*. I just had the best view of the bridge. BUT, I was unapologetically positive about the bridge and I thought it was going to be beautiful. And, of course, City Hall and the Mayor's office were always pleased about that.

So for over the last year and half I have watched everything that went on in the latter stages of the construction. It was an unbelievable amount of complex work and fascinating engineering.

SO:

On the day that the bridge was to finally officially open to the public, the City put on a tremendous picnic party on the approach to the New Bridge and the Old Bridge was set for a disco dance later that evening. There was a stage and bandstand and many food trucks etc. Thousands of people were there all day. It was March 31st, a full moon. In fact, a *blue* moon, (the second full moon in a calendar month). So, all day I was telling people that magic was going to happen. It just *had* to.

But I had had two thoughts in mind the during full month leading up to this day. First, I wanted my red '57 Chev to be the first car across the bridge when it opened. And secondly, I wanted to have a chance meeting with the Mayor at the just right moment. That was because I had spent a year in frustration at the intersection of Pandora and Store streets (where my building is). This intersection is the intersection on the Victoria side of the bridge. It is a dysfunctional intersection and is maddening to all who have the misfortune to have to navigate it by foot, vehicle, or bicycle. In low periods of traffic all participants at all corners, either pedestrians, bicycles, or motor vehicles, always seem to be stranded, looking at each other across red lights, with no one moving, and for no good reason. Then at peak periods of traffic it is an absolute gridlock of motor vehicles on Store street back to Capital Iron, Pandora up to Blanshard, and Wharf Street back to the Empress. So it is not working at *any* time of the day. Tempers flare and accidents are lining up in a future world, just waiting to actualize.

But one day about two months ago I figured out the solution to this intersection. And I so wanted to the get the idea to the right people that could do something about it. But I also knew that if a 'musician' wandered off the street into City Hall with such an idea, no one would pay any attention. It would have to be just the right chance encounter with someone such as the Mayor, in just the right circumstances, in order for an idea such as mine to actually be heard, never mind acted upon. If the Mayor liked it, there was a chance.

So all day long while the events were unfolding beneath my balcony (which functioned as a sort of "King of Id" balcony looking down at the celebrations below), I was imagining how to have that chance meeting with the Mayor who was there, giving speeches, cutting the ribbon to open the bridge and mingling with the crowd. So periodically I left my apartment to go down to the party on the bridge to try and meet her. Every time I tried she had disappeared into a new part of the crowd before I could find her.

As I was doing this I was talking to city officials and the Police trying to figure out how to get my car to be the first across the bridge. They told me that the

city would not play any favourites, but they did let me know what the sequence would be. At 9:00 pm the bridge (which was in the vertical position) would light up blue and white and would come down. Then the guard-rails would go up and the light at Pandora would turn green. Whichever car happened to be at the intersection at that moment would be the first to cross.

When I was back in the apartment I would play the piano periodically, which is a very visible grand piano right at the end of the building in the rounded glass "bow" of the building. That end of the building has been likened to the bow of a ship and it is rounded and all glass. Everyone below could see me playing, but not hear me, as there was a band playing and much noise. Later in the day when the band had finished the piano was audible, which I only later found out!

My friend Gianfranco and I enjoyed a nice bottle of red wine throughout all of this and eventually he went home and I made supper for myself. But by about 8:30, I thought, "Why not? I am going to try and get my car to be the first across". So, I went back down to the intersection which was by now all cleared of the party picnic tables, benches, tents, stage and food trucks etc., and they were preparing for it to be opened to the public traffic. I talked to Sean the flagman at the intersection and he was in agreement (when he saw the car), that it should be the first to cross. It looked sparkling red. Like a BRAND new '57 Chevrolet Bel Air. Sean was now an ally.

I took the car out of the garage under the Janion Building and drove around the block and came down Pandora Street and parked it as close as I could to the intersection at a meter. It was a Smart Car meter right in front of the Drake Pub, meant to be used for only those tiny cars. Of course, almost immediately, a city traffic enforcement vehicle showed up. As he was lowering his window to talk to me, and before he had a chance to say anything, I said, "I suppose you are wondering why I have parked that huge '57 Chev at a Smart Car parking meter". He said, "Yes, and I was thinking I was going to have to write you a ticket and have you move away." I said, "Well, you see, I am only here temporarily because the new bridge is *just* about to open to the public, and I thought my car should be the first to cross." He turned around to look at it. It

looked amazing in the street lamp. He just nodded and said, "I agree. You stay there. Good luck!". By now it was dark outside and the *old* bridge was all lit in blue light and there was a mirror ball above it, with hundreds of citizens dancing on the old bridge to disco music under the mirror ball. The new bridge was not yet lit up.

So now my task was to pick the right moment to leave that parking space and proceed to the intersection. When the light at the intersection was red all the traffic would fill up the intersection. Then when it would turn green the cars would have to turn either to the left or right onto Store Street, since going straight ahead was not an option until the bridge opened at 9:00 PM. I would have to pick the right sequence. If I picked one too soon, I would be forced out of the intersection and have to turn right or left. If I waited too long, I would miss the opening of the bridge.

At three minutes to 9:00 pm the intersection light turned green and all the cars emptied the intersection, turning right and left. Then the light turned red and the intersection was empty. This was the moment. So, I zipped into the intersection and parked right in front at the red light, just outside the windows at Swan's pub.

At 9:00 pm the *new* bridge lit up all blue right on time and started to come down. But the lights at the intersection turned green and the guard-rails at the entrance to the bridge had not yet gone up! However! I was not about to leave the intersection, so I just started to inch forward ever-so-slowly toward the bridge! The flagman, Sean, who had been making eye-contact with me for the moments leading up to this, decided to help out and 'officially' direct me slowly through the intersection toward the bridge! Then the guard-rails went up and all the lights turned green and I was off! Racing across the bridge! The first to cross!

The crowd dancing on the bridge had also been waiting for this moment and as I crossed they let out a huge cheer and I waved to the crowd! And the CHEK TV cameras were there to record it all for the news!

I was ecstatic. What had seemed like an almost impossible mission had been successful! So I could not wait to start bragging about this to my friends at my old pub in Cadboro Bay! I drove back over the bridge, with all of the regular traffic now, and parked the car underneath my building. I was going to take a cab to the pub in Cadboro Bay. As I walked out of my building, the CHEK TV cameras were there again, and this time they wanted to interview me as the first motorist to cross the bridge! Of course, I obliged.

At the pub in Cadboro Bay I discovered the news coverage would not be on the News until the next day, Sunday. So, at 10:30, I hitched a ride with Michelle the bartender, back downtown. She wanted to drive across the new bridge, so she drove down Pandora and let me off right at the bottom of Pandora — in front of Swan's at exactly where I had been waiting in the intersection in the red '57 Chev for the bridge to open. I got out of her car and she drove across the bridge.

As I walked around the corner, there, in the glassed-in 'terrace' of Swan's, was the Mayor's table. They all noticed me and said, "It's Chris! The first to cross the bridge!" and motioned me in! So, I went in and sat at their table!

Here was the *precise* chance meeting I had wanted — with all the right people there in the best possible mood. It was a joyous Celebration of the new Bridge. And they all saw me as a "friend" of the project, having only given positive interviews on the topic. So, on my left is the Mayor and on my right is the Director of Traffic Engineering! Someone named Brad. Who better to hear my idea about the intersection? And across the table is Ryan, who is the Director of Communications and had been in my apartment accompanying the CHEK TV Crew on one of their recent "bridge-interviews" with me in my apartment. He was a fan of mine because I had given him my recipe for lobster linguine which had apparently been met with favour by his girlfriend!

So after about 15 minutes of us all engaged in mutual congratulations and admiration of the bridge, I picked my moment. I said, " You know we ALL LOVE the new bridge. It is a great bridge. But there is something I think we all know and are not saying out loud. That is, that it would not matter if the new bridge was ten lanes wide. It is because the *intersection* is not working. I live on this

intersection and I know". And I describe how maddening it is and how dangerous it is. There is a tacit solemn acknowledgement that seems to go around the table. I had burst the celebratory bubble with the elephant in the room.

But then I said to the Mayor, "But you know, sometimes there is a solution to a problem that is SO simple that no one has thought of it!". She says, "What is it?"

Then I describe the solution. The intersection is essentially two intersections joined by at the hip and being treated as one massive intersection. One is Store Street and Pandora Street where my building and Swans are, and the other is Johnson Street and Wharf Street. That is the where traffic coming off the bridge from the Esquimalt side enters the city. But traffic going on to the bridge from the Victoria side can enter from either Wharf, Pandora, or Store streets.

I go on to explain, "The trouble is that this is a 'double-hip' intersection. The instant I use that term I have the attention of Brad, the Director of traffic engineering. I continue, "And because the new bridge is north of where the old bridge was, the hip has become much wider. And, with the addition of the new bicycle lane coming down Pandora and onto the bridge which has its own light sequence so as to prevent cyclists being run over by cars turning right at the bottom of Pandora — this has all added up to an unwieldy and dysfunctional set of light sequences that are way too long." And, as stated before, "The intersection does not work in either periods of low or peak traffic."

I now have their undivided attention — everyone at the table. I continue, "But I'll bet no one has thought of *this*. Maybe it should be two intersections, not one huge one, and that we should just give up on the idea that Wharf Street and Store Street should be connected at all. Maybe there should be no through-traffic between Store and Wharf. Maybe this waterfront drive in the old town should not be considered as a major north-south artery, but instead be for local traffic to Wharf or Store Streets and bridge traffic only. Then all of

that pavement being used for the connection between Store and Wharf could be part of a larger green space —a park!”

Without getting into all of the details of how this new plan would work, let me say that everyone at the table had their jaws drop. And to his credit, Brad, the Director of Traffic Engineering said, "Chris, we have been looking at this intersection for decades and no one has ever thought of this. It solves everything.”

They all loved the idea and wanted to implement it immediately. Then they got into a debate as to whether or not they could do it immediately without a vote in council! But they realized soon that they would have to do that. So now we have a great idea that might have to succumb to the sclerotic ways of civic governance! However, Ryan, the Director of Communications at the end of the table says, "Chris! And if we make it a park we will have to name it after you!" I did not object!

So — in one magical day, a series of seemingly next to impossible sequence of events had been conjured. I was on a golden conveyor belt. I got the red '57 Chev to be first across the bridge, I got just the perfect meeting with all of the right people in the right mood, to hear of my solution to the intersection, and maybe got a park made and perhaps even to be named after me. *Parc Donison?* Not bad for one day!

But the magic did not stop. The hard part would be getting an idea like this to get any traction. Well, while walking across the new bridge only two days later, I met up with an old grade-school chum who had worked for the city as an architect and urban planner for decades. He LOVED the idea. He offered to help.

Then a week later at a fundraiser for my organization (*Music by the Sea*) that I hosted — I discovered that one of our attendees is a traffic consultant! HE loved the idea and invited me to attend the next CITE Luncheon (Canadian Institute of Transportation Engineers) which was to be all about the new bridge. So, then I needed some documentation with which I could present the

idea to those at the luncheon. Lo and behold Peter de Hoog, also at my fundraiser, who is the past President of *Music by the Sea* (of which I am the founding Artistic Director), is an architect and founding partner of the architectural firm *de Hoog and Kierulf*. He *also* liked the idea and agreed to have one of his junior employees work with me to create a "before and after" set of architectural drawings of the of the old and new proposed intersection. That is now already finished, and I will have a document to present the idea with next week! This has all happened in less than a month.

So — I have gone from composer to urban planner? ... YIKES. I don't think I will pursue that career path, but, I AM interested in how magical things can happen!

And the day which started with the opening of the new Johnson Street Bridge is as good a proof of *magic* as any — magic which can place you on *a golden conveyor belt...*

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