

Photo by Lucy Come with thanks to Michael Schwartz

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# Behind closed tolls

**Despite being involved in the transport industry for well over 20 years, I had never previously attended one of ASECAP’s Annual Study and Information Days.**

While in the *Thinking Highways* office I had often heard many good things about last year’s event, held in Marrakech, Morocco but far too seldom has a conference lived up to its billing so I approached this year’s event in the less exotic but equally beautiful and historic Polish city of Krakow, with a certain degree of (what turned out to be entirely misplaced) trepidation.

As it turned out, I feel compelled to describe this event as one of the best kept secrets in the European highways industry. The quality of the conference content, speakers and organization is a credit to ASECAP. With Krakow providing a breathtakingly historic setting, this year’s event turned out to be one of the most memorable conferences I’ve attended over the years. It may not be the biggest in terms of numbers of delegates, but quality not quantity is definitely the maxim here.

### Crisis talks

The conference was opened by Poland’s Minister of Infrastructure Cezary Grabarczyk, president of co-host Autostrada Wielkopolska, Andrzej Patalas, and outgoing ASECAP president Fabrizio Palenzona.

The theme for the first day of the conference was: ‘How are ASECAP Members Facing the Economic Crisis’. Speakers from national associations of toll concessionaires described the challenges faced in the current climate both for operators of existing roads and for constructors of new roads. Traffic levels have dropped in most countries, mirroring the downturn in economic activity. At the same time, finance is less available from the markets and fewer lenders are willing to participate in infrastructure projects where the returns can be over long periods. In this climate speakers emphasized the increased need for partnership approach between public and private sectors. In particular, the importance of not losing sight of the considerable social and economic benefits of the motorway network due to short-term pressures.

ASECAP’s Secretary General, Kallistratos Dionelis, commented that to increase the chance of projects

being successful, the public and private stakeholders need to get around the table at an early stage. He cited the importance of a project to understand objectives on both sides. Grammatiki Papadopetrou-Tsingou, Director General of the European Investment Bank, emphasised the importance to lenders of good quality projects with clear objectives.

### A delicate operation

The second day of the conference saw the focus of discussions shift from policy and financial matters to operations and technical topics. One session was entitled ‘ITS From Research to Deployment’ and focused on examples of where operators from around Europe are already actively integrating ITS technologies into their operations to achieve real operational objectives.

For example, BRISA from Portugal, described their innovation ecosystem and innovation model process that is driving the deployment of new products and solutions with its partners and delivering measurable benefits. BRISA’s methodology is allowing them to demonstrate a positive net present value within their business for the €11.2m they have invested in R&D projects.

We also heard about how Croatia has – even though it is not in the EU yet – adopted the European directive comprehensively and thoroughly, resulting in some of the best-equipped and operationally prepared tunnels in Europe.

There was also an update from the European Commission on the Easyway project. ASFINAG, in their presentation entitled ‘towards the connected traveller’, described their traffic information services masterplan – covering internet, navigation and TV – and how by 2015 Austria will achieve one of the most comprehensive and advanced traffic information services architectures in Europe.

Other presentations included results from CESARE IV project on interoperability, as well as up-dates on national tolling schemes under preparation in the Netherlands, Germany, France and the Czech Republic.

We will be bringing you the detailed stories behind these headlines in future issues of *Thinking Highways* and *ETC*, etc. ■

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**A pleasantly surprised and fulfilled MIKE HAYWARD reports from the 37th Annual ASECAP Study and Information Days in Krakow, Poland**

