

TransLink unaccountable: report

NDP pledges to return control of TransLink to Metro politicians

BY JANE SEYD, NORTH SHORE NEWS MARCH 24, 2013

MUNICIPAL politicians around the Lower Mainland are reminding the province they want to take back control of the region's transportation agency.

On Friday, the TransLink Mayors' Council released a consultants' report criticizing the current lack of political accountability at the transportation agency. District of North Vancouver Mayor Richard Walton, who chairs the mayors' council, said he hopes the \$74,000 report will be useful in getting the province to rethink the way TransLink is run.

The NDP's transportation critic Harry Bains said his party has committed to that if they form the next government. Transportation Minister Mary Polak stopped short of endorsing a new structure, but welcomed working towards a bigger role for the mayors.

Consultants who looked at transportation systems in major cities around the globe concluded the way TransLink operates is "unique in the world, and not in a good way." In some cities examined in the report, local politicians control transportation, in others, ministers at higher levels of government make decisions. None of the public transportation systems are run by unelected boards, however.

The report recommended restoring responsibility for policy and strategic decision-making to locally elected politicians - or another group that includes substantial municipal representation.

Following the release of the report, Bains said, if elected, his party has "already committed we would change this governance structure to bring back the locally elected mayors and councillors" to the TransLink board.

Transportation Minister Mary Polak said she'd like to define a broader role for the mayors' council, but didn't agree with turning TransLink back over to local leaders. "The old model didn't work," she said, noting mayors were frequently deadlocked on decisions.

The issue has been a long-simmering bone of contention between Lower Mainland municipal politicians and the province, ever since the transportation minister stepped in and took control of TransLink away from local mayors six years ago, appointing a board of directors who meet behind closed doors. The situation has exasperated local leaders, who point out TransLink is partly funded through property taxes, yet locally elected governments have little say in TransLink's decisions. Friday's report echoes that perspective, noting, "Accountability to the population being served . . . is almost completely missing from the present arrangements."

One big problem with the current setup is that transportation decisions are being made "at variance" with local and regional land-use planning, the report stated.

Another result has been a financial standoff, with local leaders refusing to impose more property taxes to pay for transit expansion and the province refusing to grant alternative funding sources including vehicle levies, or additional carbon or sales taxes.

Public response to the idea of an increase in the sales tax to fund TransLink has been overwhelmingly negative.

Walton said he knew that would be the case when he made the suggestion. "Nobody wants to pay more taxes," he said.

Bains said the NDP would use some of the money gained from raising the corporate tax rate to 12 per cent - an increase of one per cent - to help fund TransLink.

Polak said her government hasn't made any decisions yet on the suggestions from the mayors' council. She added she was pleased the report also pointed to what's working in TransLink.

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