

# Opinion: 35 cents a day a bargain for better transit, and health

## Referendum: The cost of voting No may be higher in long term than a Yes

BY SCOTT MCDONALD AND MARY COLLINS, SPECIAL TO THE SUN MARCH 31, 2015

true



The proposed 0.5 per cent increase to the PST in the Vancouver region for transit improvements is estimated to cost the average household about \$125 per year, or about 35 cents per day.

Photograph by: NICK PROCAILO, PNG

Nobody likes taxes. This might make it easy for people to vote No in the transportation plebiscite, but voting Yes may end up being cheaper for taxpayers over time.

This year, health care spending will go up another 2.9 per cent to a total of \$19.2 billion, which is 42 per cent of the provincial budget. Chronic diseases eat up a big slice of the health budget. According to the Ministry of Health, 80 per cent of the combined MSP, acute and Pharmacare budgets are spent on chronic conditions such as diabetes, cancer, and heart and lung diseases.

You may be asking yourself, "But what do health care costs have to do with transportation or the referendum?" Lots, actually — between 50 per cent and 80 per cent of chronic diseases are preventable, and a good transportation system can help.

No one ever mentions that air quality along the denser transportation routes/centres is far worse than outside those areas. - cjk

Physical inactivity and air quality are major risk factors for chronic diseases.

However, a significant body of scientific evidence shows that well-designed transportation systems can reduce the likelihood of disease.

People who take transit are more likely to get the recommended amount of physical activity. One study showed that people taking transit walk about one kilometre per day and are three times more likely to meet the recommendations for daily activity.

According to new data from Vancouver Coastal Health and Fraser Health, Metro Vancouver residents who take transit are 27 per cent less likely to report being overweight or obese, and those who bike or walk are 45 per cent less likely.

These results are encouraging in terms of disease prevention, but also instructive for where we can expect a payback from the public's investment. Consider that the treatment of illness resulting from physical inactivity is estimated to cost the B.C. health care system \$335 million per year, and excess

weight adds another \$611 million.

Members of the B.C. Healthy Living Alliance have long advocated that by investing in prevention, the province could control rising health care costs. This is going to become even more of an issue as the baby boomers age and the demand increases for medical services.

As a region, it is critical that we start building up the capacity of the public transportation system to meet the needs of aging baby boomers as well as the million additional residents expected to move here in the next 30 years.

It won't be good for anyone's health to have all these new residents sitting in cars, adding to congestion. While many people do need to drive to get places, there also need to be options for those who can't and those who don't want to drive. More congestion leads to more emissions per vehicle trip and stress for drivers stuck in traffic.

Emissions from traffic aggravate lung conditions such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, but also have a long-term effect on heart disease and lung cancer and can reduce life expectancy. There are 680 deaths each year in Metro Vancouver that can be attributed to air pollution. We would like to see that number go down, instead of up.

A Yes vote will mean 25 per cent more buses, more SkyTrain cars, light rail in Surrey and Langley, more HandyDart service, a replacement for the aging Pattullo Bridge, and more safe bike routes across the region. All this would be funded with a 0.5 per cent increase to the PST in the region, which is estimated to cost the average household about \$125 per year, or about 35 cents per day. A No vote will mean that all those transportation expansion projects will be put on hold until a new funding structure is developed and approved. To put that in perspective, it was in 2001 that the province vetoed the mayors' proposal to fund transportation infrastructure with a vehicle levy. We can't wait any longer.

It's often said that there is only one taxpayer. For taxpayers in the Lower Mainland, it seems a better value to pay up front for prevention instead of paying for treatment afterwards.

The adage "Nothing is certain but death and taxes" may be true, but 35 cents per day seems like a good deal for better air quality and the chance to live a healthier, longer life with the added bonus of a better transportation system.

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