

## B.C. Transport Minister rules out TransLink reform

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British Columbia's Transportation Minister has ruled out any reforms to the controversial Vancouver region transit authority to help mayors and their allies win a plebiscite on a new tax to finance transit expansion, dismissing concerns about the issue as a "red herring."

Todd Stone's comments Tuesday come amid polls and public comment that suggest anger over TransLink is driving some voters to oppose the proposal to add 0.5 per cent in the Lower Mainland to the 7-per-cent provincial sales tax, to raise money for such new projects as a new Vancouver subway and light rail in Surrey.

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"At this point in time, the province has no plans to make any further improvements to governance at TransLink. This particular issue, we believe, is a red herring in this campaign and we believe it's a distraction," Mr. Stone told reporters during a news conference in Stanley Park.

He was answering a question about whether he might help out the mayors, who have largely drawn together to campaign for a Yes vote, making their case in news conferences, telephone town halls and interviews.

This week, more than 1.5 million ballots have been mailed to voters across the Lower Mainland. The deadline for returning them to Elections BC by mail or at agency offices is the end of May. The mayors and a wide-ranging Yes coalition argue the tax is key to generating funds for \$7.5-billion in projects to clear congestion and facilitate movement of current and future residents.

The referendum has come about because Premier Christy Clark, facing an uphill battle for re-election in the 2013 provincial election, promised voters they would have a say on spending options for new transit if her Liberals were re-elected. The Liberals won the election.

George Heyman, the TransLink critic for the provincial NDP, said Tuesday that Mr. Stone's comments helped reinforce the view that while the minister and Ms. Clark publicly say they hope for a Yes vote, their political behaviour suggests otherwise.

"To call people's concerns about TransLink a red herring when it has become a vote-determining issue is misguided at best," Mr. Heyman said. "It's obvious people considering how to vote are seriously concerned about the accountability of the TransLink board and the transparency of its decision-making."

Last month, TransLink demoted its CEO to an adviser's post and appointed an interim leader to run the organization while a search was launched for a permanent CEO – a move cheered by the mayors, who have said that reform was necessary. The mayors, attentive to public skepticism about getting value for the new tax, have also recruited billionaire Jim Pattison to lead a public-accountability committee that would police spending if the tax is approved.

The province basically holds the reins over TransLink. In 2007, the province stripped the mayors of their ability to control the agency and gave that power to an appointed board.

Mr. Stone – unveiling a \$2.5-billion transportation plan called B.C. on the Move during a speech to the Vancouver Board of Trade on Tuesday – said he and Ms. Clark are hoping for a Yes vote. In remarks to reporters later, he added that he has delivered speeches making the case for Yes, but he said he is leaving the heavy lifting to the mayors and their allies in the Yes coalition.

“The Premier and I have said, very consistently, that this campaign is for the mayors council and the Yes coalition to lead,” he said. “It’s fundamentally up to the mayors and their coalition to get out there and sell their plan.”

Mr. Stone dismissed polls suggesting the Yes side is heading for defeat, recalling the Liberals came from behind to win another term in 2013 despite negative polls. “Has it been that long since the lessons we learned in the last provincial campaign?” he asked rhetorically. “It’s far too premature to suggest that one side has this in the bag over the other.”

Also Tuesday, the minister restated a provincial government commitment to fund one-third of the cost of new rapid-transit projects and the Pattullo Bridge as long as they be accommodated within the province’s fiscal plan and are supported by a business case. The province and mayors are hoping for another third from the federal government and other funds would come from local sources.

Mr. Stone said there are only three options ahead: the tax at the centre of the plebiscite, “alternate sources of funding” or the status quo. “It’s very much in the best interest of most people who live in this region to support a Yes vote,” he said.

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On Tuesday, B.C. Transportation Minister Todd Stone announced B.C. on the Move, a 10-year transportation plan that will cost \$2.5 billion. Components of the plan include:

- \$800 million over three years for existing infrastructure and \$1-billion to expand major highways and the province’s road network. The province will annually resurface 1,000 kilometres of provincial highway.

- A provincial trucking strategy to increase the economic efficiency and safety of the commercial trucking sector.

- \$18-million over three years to build new bike lanes and trails, plus such cycle-friendly measures as widening highway shoulders for bikes.

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