

B.C.'s refusal to reform TransLink raises mayor's ire

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The B.C. Transportation Minister's declaration this week that he won't reform the Vancouver-region transportation authority has complicated efforts to win voter approval for a new tax to pay for transit expansion, says a Vancouver-area mayor.

"I think it makes it a bit more difficult for us and we have to work harder," North Vancouver Mayor Darrell Mussatto said Wednesday in an interview.

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Mr. Mussatto said the region needs the new transit, including a Vancouver subway and light rail in Surrey, that would come with plebiscite approval of a proposed regional 0.5 per cent addition to the 7 per cent regional sales tax.

But he added that TransLink, the regional transportation authority, has to be reformed so it's more accountable – an issue that has come to dominate the campaign in the mail-in plebiscite. The B.C. Liberals promised in the 2013 provincial election that voters would get to approve new funding tools for transit.

Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson also says TransLink reform is a necessity.

"As chair of the Mayors' Council and a new member of the Translink board, I've been clear that I will be advocating strongly to the province for meaningful reform and improvements to governance," he said.

This week, Transportation Minister Todd Stone told reporters the B.C. Liberal government won't consider any changes to TransLink even though allegations the agency is not prudent with public dollars have emerged as a key issue in the campaign.

On Wednesday, Mr. Stone's office made it clear reforming TransLink governance is off the table – not just during the plebiscite voting period between March and May, but beyond that.

In a statement, the minister's office noted that the province passed legislation enacting a new governance structure for TransLink in June, 2014, and that the structure addressed the recommendations of a 2013 review of TransLink governance commissioned by the Mayors' Council on Regional Transportation.

TransLink once had a board of elected officials, but in 2007 the province replaced them with an unelected board of directors. There is also a mayors' council, but mayors have said they have little influence.

Elections BC has mailed more than 1.5 million ballots to voters across the Lower Mainland, launching the voting period in the long-awaited plebiscite.

The campaign urging voters to oppose the proposed levy, dubbed the congestion improvement tax, said Mr. Stone's comments are a gift to their campaign.

"When you're being outspent by \$7-million and had to deal with every rule skewed against a no vote, it's hard to look at anything as a gift from the yes side," Jordan Bateman, leader of the B.C. wing of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, and a vocal No campaigner, said in an e-mail exchange on Wednesday.

"But Mr. Stone's comments do reinforce how out-of-touch our political leadership is when it comes to the public's concerns about TransLink – and how we need to vote No to show them we're serious about changing the wasteful culture there.

The Mayors' Council on Regional Transportation saw some good news in Mr. Stone's comments, which came as he presented a \$2.5-billion decade-long transportation plan for the province that included a reminder that the province will pay one-third of the cost for new Lower Mainland transit. In a statement, the council said a No vote won't reform TransLink but a Yes vote may help improve transportation and transit.

But Mr. Mussatto wasn't the only mayor uneasy about Mr. Stone's remarks.

Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie said there is an "urgent" need for reform once the plebiscite campaign is concluded because the status quo is "dysfunctional" and there's a need for the mayors to have more of a role running the agency.

But Mr. Brodie also said in an interview that there's a larger issue of concern, suggesting that Premier Christy Clark has not done enough to help the Yes side.

"The Premier has not put her weight behind [Yes] in a substantial sense," he said. "The indication that the premier is voting Yes is not accompanied by words to express how important and critical a Yes vote is for the region."

Ms. Clark, who lives in both Vancouver and Kelowna where she represents one of the community's ridings, has said she will vote Yes in the referendum on several occasions.

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