

Opinion: Fighting climate change where the rubber meets the road

Referendum: Improving transit and getting private vehicles off streets a great way to protect the environment

BY PETER ROBINSON, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 10, 2015



A Yes vote in the current transit referendum would add 300 new buses to area roads, making them a more attractive alternative for residents.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, PNG

Metro Vancouver residents understand that our region's high quality of life depends on a healthy environment. Our challenge is to plan for the future in a way that maintains or enhances this quality of life while preventing degradation of the environment that supports us all. Planning for such a future is also at the heart of why we should vote Yes in Metro Vancouver's transit and transportation plebiscite. It is one of the most important decisions we can make to improve our environment.

Setting aside the fact that better transit and transportation infrastructure will benefit our regional economy, here are three environmental reasons to vote Yes in the current referendum: climate change, clean air and the creation of well-designed communities with balanced transportation systems.

We are already feeling the effects of climate change, but the severity of impacts is not a matter of

chance. Our future will be determined by the choices we make now, and investments in transit are among the most effective ways to ensure it will be a brighter future. We need to prioritize our public transportation systems, especially in fast-growing areas like Surrey and the Tri-Cities.

Private vehicle use in Metro Vancouver produces 31 per cent of our total emissions. Giving people good alternatives to move through our region will take a significant bite out of that figure, even as one million new residents move here over the next 30 years. A single city bus can take 40 cars off the road, leading to less congestion and keeping 168 tonnes of pollutants out of the air each year. Voting Yes would add 400 new buses to our roads, among other dramatic transportation improvements.

Carbon dioxide is not the only thing that comes out of our tailpipes. They also release carbon monoxide, sulphur and nitrogen compounds, and tiny particles of metal and soot into the air we breathe. The result is that the prevalence of asthma has dramatically increased in the span of a single human lifetime.

On top of that, Health Canada reports that air pollution contributes to 680 deaths a year in Metro Vancouver. Voting Yes to the Mayors' Council Transportation and Transit Plan will mean that 70 per cent of the people in our region will live within walking distance of reliable transit. That means buses every 7.5 minutes, and up to 30 fewer minutes commuting each day. Every time one of us makes the choice to leave a car at home, our air gets a little bit cleaner.

Finally, expanding transit options throughout our region helps promote better connected and greener communities, and better land use overall. For example, in 2003 the city of Los Angeles added a light rail extension — the same kind being proposed for Surrey and Langley — connecting its city centre to outlying Pasadena and East Los Angeles. Over the past decade investment in “smart growth” communities in the region has skyrocketed. People are living in areas that offer shopping, dining and entertainment options, but also have access to rapid transit into adjacent urban areas. Pasadena won the 2006 University of Southern California Spirit of Urbanism award for its increased focus on livable communities with a reduced environmental footprint — all made possible by a transit extension through the city.

Voting Yes in the referendum will ensure our region grows in a way that is in everyone's best interest. For drivers, fewer cars on the road means fewer congestion delays. For transit riders, it means better service and the option to go without a car. For cyclists and pedestrians, it means sidewalk and street improvements and 2,700 kilometres of bike lanes. For our region, a Yes vote will create more vibrant communities and a cleaner environment. Traffic congestion is clogging our streets and our lungs. It's time we took action to make it quicker, easier and healthier to get around.

Peter Robinson is CEO of the David Suzuki Foundation.

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