

Rationality lost in TransLink debate

**Stop shouting:
Getting lost in
the ranting are
the real facts —
that Vancouver's
transit service
is excellent,
well-used
and reliable**



**Pete
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The stalled SkyTrain above is a rare occurrence. In the last five years, of 1,272,371 trips, just 25 were delayed by more than an hour.

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Go ahead. Vote No. Nothing I might write, or anyone else might write, has dented the conviction of the No side voters who, according to my overflowing email inbox, see the plebiscite as an opportunity to pull the trigger not just against TransLink but against a wide range of targets, including unions (bad), ferry fares (too high) and, I kid you not, the fact that buses carry only two bikes (not enough).

Well, OK. If people prefer the shotgun to the more discriminating rifle, that's their business. Fire away, and if it brings down the transit plan in the blast, so be it. This is a democracy. We have the right to bear harms.

More troubling has been the tone of the debate. Civil it has not been, and that incivility speaks to a bigger problem. Shouting has replaced rational discourse, with the result that the social fabric — and that's what we're really talking about when we're talking about transit — has been flecked with spittle.

Yet so much of that anger is based on misinformation and, sometimes, just plain lies. Rather than consider facts and corroborating studies, many members of the public continue to insist that TransLink is inefficient, bloated beyond repair and in need of complete restructuring. They refuse to look at what TransLink is doing right.

So here for their consideration are a few facts about TransLink. None of them, I am sure, will change any minds on the No side.

1. It's a hugely successful and well-used system.

In the past 15 years, passenger trips have grown by 127 million. Ridership is up 56 per cent since 1999 (while car use has continued to fall). Except for Toronto and Montreal, whose systems are much older and more established than Metro Vancouver's, TransLink has the highest per capita ridership among North America's major urban transit systems. Twenty per cent of commuters in Metro Vancouver use public transit to get to work, a percentage bested only slightly by, again, Toronto and Montreal. If Metro Vancouver were to fall to, say, Calgary's per capita level of ridership of 16 per cent, it would mean an additional 117,000 cars on the road. Meanwhile, Metro Vancouver households spend less on transport than any other Canadian city.

2. Contrary to the accepted wisdom that TransLink's spending has been on a runaway trajectory, it has been getting leaner as an organization.

Between 2012 and 2014, it realized \$240 million in efficiencies, including trimming its executive staff from 33 to 17, doing away with the executive bonus program, rescheduling bus service from under-performing routes to high-demand routes and centralizing procurement of equipment. More bus service is now delivered with fewer staff than five years ago. In that period, cost-per-passenger-boarding dropped by 30 per cent. It has done this in what is by far the largest service area of all transit companies in Canada, bigger than Toronto's, bigger than Montreal's and, farther afield, bigger even than Chicago's.

3. TransLink is the only transit service in the country to finance its investments through the bond market. It retains a Double A rating. Bankers have faith in TransLink even if the No side doesn't.

4. Despite images of SkyTrain passengers routinely being late for work because of breakdowns, those breakdowns, while making for good TV footage, are rare.

In the last five years, a grand total of 25 trips were delayed more than an hour, and another 57 were delayed between a half-hour to an hour. That figure includes not only mechanical

failures but customer-related problems like medical emergencies, suicides, police-related incidents, etc. So far this year, there have been no delays over an hour or between a half-hour and an hour. The total number of scheduled trips in those five years: 1,272,371.

5. TransLink well serves those who need it most, and does so at an efficient cost for those who need it least.

TransLink's user profile is divided sharply along age and income lines. Over 70 per cent are between the ages of 15 and 45, mirroring a trend of falling

car use among the young. In contrast, only one in 10 baby boomers use transit to commute. As for income, 54 per cent of all transit-reliant commuters earn

less than \$30,000. As for those non-transit users who believe TransLink is inefficient and a tax burden to them, according to the Canadian Transit Factbook, TransLink's operating costs, subsidy-per-passenger-kilometre costs and fare box recovery rate are either average or better compared with all of Canada's transit systems, and light years better than systems in the U.S. or overseas.

May any of the above help you sharpen your aim.