

Don Cayo: The case for the mayors' transit plan -- 10 reasons to vote Yes

For one thing, the tax increase of about \$200 per household would finance savings of \$1,000

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST MARCH 21, 2015



Reason No. 1 to vote Yes in the transit plebiscite: Transit is safer than automobile travel.

Photograph by: Ric Ernst, PNG

Do you think you can't afford to pay the proposed 0.5-per-cent regional premium on the seven-per-cent provincial sales tax to fund transportation and transit in the Lower Mainland?

It's more likely that you can't afford not to, suggests a new report from Todd Litman, the founder of Victoria Transport Policy Institute, who makes his living analyzing transportation issues around the world.

The tax increase, which would cost an average of about \$200 a year per household, would result in families saving, on average \$1,000-plus a year, his analysis concludes.

The amount would vary from family to family, but the savings would be particularly significant for poor people, who tend to rely heavily on transit, he notes. Plus — although his report doesn't mention this — if voters in the plebiscite now underway endorse the tax increase, it will cost poor families substantially less than average because most of their income goes to non-taxable necessities and they don't have much left to spend on taxable goods.

Compared to residents of other major Canadian cities, Vancouverites already spend the lowest portion of their income — 12.4 per cent, or an average of \$9,506 per household — on transportation, he said. He attributed this in part to the relatively high transit use here, equalled only by Toronto and Montreal, and in part to diminishing car ownership, which he sees as a consequence of recent public investments in walking and cycling options.

In a separate email to me, he noted automobile travel is peaking in B.C., while increasingly popular walking and cycling options now represent 10 to 15 per cent of all trips.

For those who haven't voted yet in the plebiscite on the proposed tax increase — ballots have been arriving in the mail this week, and can be mailed back any time until late May — Litman's report lists 10 more reasons to vote Yes:

1. It's safer than automobile travel. Metro Vancouver, with relatively high transit use, already has one of the lowest rates of traffic deaths among North American cities — 3.9 per 100,000 residents — and that performance is worth protecting.
2. It means less congestion. As this column recently noted, C.D. Howe researcher Ben Dachis pegged the savings if the mayors' plan for transportation improvements receives funding approval at \$950 per worker per year, and similarly detailed analyses by Litman and others confirms that big bucks are at stake.
3. It reduces the need to create parking spots, which can cost anywhere between \$5,000 on the surface and \$50,000 in structures or underground, and which are paid for by everybody through user fees, housing costs and municipal taxes.
4. It improves mobility for the 20-40 per cent of citizens who cannot or should not drive.
5. It reduces the chauffeuring burden — driving kids and maybe their grandparents, too — which eats up hours for many drivers and costs hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars year in direct and hidden costs.
6. It improves public health by encouraging walking and cycling to and from transit stops.
7. It supports economic development by improving access and reducing costs.
8. It cuts energy consumption and reduces pollution by as much as 20-60 per cent when transit-oriented communities are compared to car-dependent ones.
9. It reduces sprawl by fostering more compact and livable neighbourhoods, and these, in turn, foster more efficient transit.
10. It prepares the city and the people who live in it for an unknowable future when some of us will, due to disability or reduced income or some other constraint, need good travel options other than a car.

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