

TransLink often leaves one lost in transportation

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I have spent the past week pretty much immersed in the debate over the Metro Vancouver transportation plebiscite.

I've spoken with mayors representing both sides. I've spoken with experts and transportation planners from Washington, D.C., to Auckland, New Zealand. I've heard from public health officials and academics. I've read reports, budget documents and scholarly articles. And I've heard from dozens of citizens from municipalities across the region who have detailed the reasons they'll vote Yes or No when their ballots arrive in the mail.

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At the end of it all, I have arrived at this conclusion: I am depressed. Hopelessly, deeply depressed.

I should make it clear that the route to depression was not a direct one. My journey began at hopeful, continued through concerned, and then took a detour through incredulous before I spent some time at angry and then arrived at my final destination of depressed.

I'm depressed that the province announces multibillion-dollar road and bridge projects without the need for a referendum, and that when a project primarily serves car drivers like the new Port Mann Bridge or the George Massey Tunnel replacement project, the province has no trouble taking the reins and distributing the cost among all of the taxpayers of B.C. But when it comes to paying for transit and transportation in Metro Vancouver, it becomes an issue to be decided by a plebiscite and paid for by residents of the Lower Mainland.

I'm depressed that by forcing the region's mayors to agree on a plan, craft a question and identify a possible funding source, the Premier and the minister have created the perfect scapegoat, when in reality the mayors have little control over what the TransLink board decides, or what the province deems a priority.

I'm depressed that the people who have decided that this is about TransLink are partly right. They have the Compass Card fiasco to point to with each non-functional turnstile standing like a tiny idle monument to ineptitude. Yes, I know — fare gates were foisted on TransLink by senior government and the system is being phased in as we speak, but the first fare gates were installed two and a half years ago. Maybe TransLink should have gone with a different system.

I'm depressed by the number of people who say they are in favour of expanded transit but have decided that their vote is a way to punish TransLink for the service that they haven't been getting.

I'm depressed that the board of TransLink thought that firing their CEO and hiring an interim chief executive and paying both of them about 10 times what an average worker earns in B.C. was a good idea.

I'm depressed that the Yes campaign thought that just saying the words "Jimmy Pattison" would magically put to rest the fears of those who worry their tax dollars might not be spent wisely.

I'm depressed that I was right about just how divisive an exercise like this one would be.

I'm depressed about what the future of Metro Vancouver might look like if we don't find a smarter way to move people around.

I'm depressed that people who already ride transit might vote against their own interests.

This is new to me, this feeling. Until now, I've been able to find something to poke fun at – something to mock or ridicule. But this has gone beyond satire.

Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to go put my head down.

Stephen Quinn is the host of On the Coast on CBC Radio One, 88.1 FM and 690 AM in Vancouver.

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