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## BALDREY: Transit project inequities apparent

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View from  
**THE LEDGE**  
Keith Baldrey



Timing in politics is everything, which makes the B.C. Liberal government's decision to publicize its 10-year transportation plan just as people in Metro Vancouver started receiving their transit plebiscites somewhat puzzling.

The official reason for the timing — that it was to provide certainty for project contractors and municipalities — is rather weak. Waiting a few weeks (until the end of the voting period) wouldn't have made much difference.

In any case, the transportation plan served to remind potential plebiscite voters of the stark contrast in how the government is treating their transportation needs compared to the needs of those outside Metro Vancouver.

The 10-year plan boasts of spending about \$2.5 billion but almost all of that is earmarked for projects (chiefly highway improvements) outside of Metro Vancouver. It refers to the mayors' plan in Metro but contains no hard and fast funding commitments.

There are a couple of lines where the government promises to provide one-third funding for major rapid transit projects but with two big excuses for the government to say no: if the project doesn't fit into its fiscal plan, or if it can't make a business case the province approves of.

With those caveats in place, the government is free to determine which projects fit its political agenda. So, the Massey Bridge and Surrey rapid transit rank at the top (along with a SkyTrain extension further into Surrey, perhaps even as far as Langley) while the Broadway subway line is nearer the bottom of priorities.

Even if the No side wins the plebiscite, those kinds of projects will still be built, but the timing of their construction will be in the hands of the provincial government.

Nevertheless, a number of Metro Vancouver residents have hit upon an inconsistency here: a plebiscite is being used to determine the future of transportation projects in their region, but not in any other regions.

That, plus the fact that no one else outside of Metro Vancouver is being asked to pay a higher tax for transportation

## improvements.

In fact, the juxtaposition of the 10-year transportation plan with the transit plebiscite underscores how questionable the whole plebiscite idea is in the end.

I can't see how this helps the beleaguered Yes side as it struggles to convince voters to send in ballots with an X in the Yes box, but perhaps that is by design.

As I've noted before, the Clark government has been, at best, tepid in its support for the Yes side. On paper, it insists it is firmly behind a Yes vote but there is little evidence of anyone on the government side aggressively campaigning for it.

A successful No vote will put pressure on mayors to find new funding sources, and presumably will reduce pressure on the provincial government — at least in the short-term — to fork over billions of dollars in improvements.

Hmmm. Perhaps that timing of the plan's announcement wasn't so "puzzling" after all.

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Speaking of puzzling, the sudden cancellation of the appointment of former B.C. Liberal cabinet minister George Abbott as the next B.C. Treaty Commissioner came out of the blue last week.

On the other hand, like the transportation plan announcement's timing, perhaps the decision not to ratify an earlier offer to him isn't so puzzling, when you consider the fact he ran as a candidate in that 2012 B.C. Liberal leadership race which was far from a love-in.

If you'll recall, Abbott took pointed swipes at the eventual winner, Christy Clark, for her lack of experience and her lack of support from members of the B.C. Liberal caucus. Like almost everyone else, he also dismissed her chances of re-election, so clearly there is no love lost between them.

Abbott, who was shocked by the decision not to give him the job, told me: "The knives came out for me in the cabinet room, I guess."

The government's last-second double-cross of Abbott (Aboriginal Relations Minister John Rustad had put his name forward last year) drew the ire of First Nations leaders, but that apparently didn't seem to register with some folks in cabinet, I guess.

Political leadership candidates can be like elephants, I suppose. They have very long memories.

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