

Opinion: Transit tax won't ease congestion

Plebiscite: Boston and Miami should serve as cautionary examples for Vancouver voters

BY BRADY YAUCH, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 7, 2015



Miami voters in 2002 approved a half-cent sales tax to fund new transit and help ease congestion. A review of the program 10 years later found many promised improvements have yet to be fully realized and traffic congestion remains largely unchanged.

Vancouverites should think twice before voting Yes in the TransLink plebiscite. They should think twice not because of a predetermined no-to-all-taxes mentality, but because other cities that have enacted similar policies have neither tamed congestion nor built a modern, self-sustaining transit network.

Instead, the money from a sales tax was used to either fund un-economic expansions that acted as a further drain on a transit agency's finances, leaving it with little money to perform routine maintenance and keep the lights on, or it was used to offset budget deficits and prop up money-losing transit agencies. In either case, traffic jams have only become more severe.

Take Boston as an example, whose transit agency, the MBTA, has received 20 per cent of all of Massachusetts sales taxes since 2000. This past winter, the aging and rundown transit agency collapsed. At the height of its troubles, its 1.3 million daily customers were warned it could take as many as 30 days to get everything working in proper order — leaving commuters stranded in the bitter cold. The breakdown came after years of putting off the kind of maintenance needed to keep the transit system in a state of good repair.

Since the sales tax was first introduced, it has delivered billions in revenue to the MBTA, but hasn't been enough to offset the cost of the agency's dramatic expansion plans. The MBTA kicked off a two-decade-long expansion plan beginning in the 1990s and has, over that time, grown more than any other American city.

The push to expand the MBTA at all costs left it unable to maintain its system to a high standard and saw it having to issue debt to pay for its maintenance and modernization programs. The more than \$2.2 billion in debt that the agency has incurred to pay for routine maintenance has failed to keep its trains and buses in good working order.

The most recent official estimate of the maintenance backlog as part of the agency's State of Good Repair policy is \$3 billion, but some estimates say that figure has more than doubled to \$6 billion. This

year's brutal winter will only add to it.

The sales tax proposal was supposed to give the agency a firm, reliable source of revenue that would ultimately see it produce an operating surplus. But since that time, the MBTA's deficits have only increased and it has failed to maintain its system to a high standard. Transit customers have literally been left out in the cold.

Meanwhile, congestion in Boston is nearly as bad as it ever was. Commuters currently spend 53 hours a year stuck in traffic jams — up from 33 in 1990.

Boston is not alone. In Miami, voters in 2002 approved a half-cent sales tax that would fund new transit and help ease congestion in the growing city. The proposal promised voters 88 new miles of Metrorail, 635 new buses and an independent body to make sure the money was spent wisely.

A review of the program done 10 years later showed the agency had only built one 2.4-mile rail extension to the airport, and its current bus fleet is actually smaller than it was a decade ago. Transit officials and political leaders now admit that they over-promised. One critic called the sales tax a classic bait and switch, pointing out that much of the sales tax money has been used to fund existing operations.

The transit funding has done little to alter the commuting landscape. The percentage of commuters across Miami-Dade County who use transit has remained the same since 2005 and has actually declined within Miami itself. Congestion in the city is no better.

Both Boston and Miami provide ample warning to Vancouverites before they mail in their ballots. If residents are looking for real solutions to ease congestion and build sustainable transit, a sales tax is not the answer.

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