

OPINION

The alternative to a sales tax hike

Gridlock: Notes while parked on a California freeway where public spending on roads has turned out to be a bad investment



Don Cayo

You could pay many hundreds of TransLink CEOs' salaries with the money Californians have spent on the motionless masses of metal that dominate the landscape as far as my eye can see. Not to mention the megabucks they've invested to build and maintain the dense spiderweb of freeways, expressways, interstates, designated federal and state highways — lanes totalling almost 620,000 kilometres — that were intended to whisk them about their business, but in fact frequently trap them on what have become high-priced parking lots.

It is mid-morning on a sunny Saturday, and my wife and I are stuck in yet another of a tedious series of traffic jams on the drive between Los Angeles and San Diego. But no matter, traffic has been much worse at busier times of busier days during my family's weeklong visit to this part of the state. Besides, for most of the time it takes for today's journey, we're not actually stopped — we are able, at least, to crawl.

Crawling in an automobile is, of course, inefficient. The average cost per commuter of wasted gasoline and lost time in the Greater Los Angeles area works out to \$1,300 US a year — and that in a place where gasoline is much cheaper than in B.C. and the dollar buys a lot more.

Metro Vancouver commuters are no strangers to traffic jams, but they aren't in as bad a place as those in Los Angeles — at least not yet. But with frequent traffic tie-ups, more difficult geography when it comes to providing alternative routes, and a population expected to grow by at least 30,000 a year for the foreseeable future, we could well be on our way down this road.

As I sat drumming my fingers on the steering wheel during frequent involuntary stops on the freeway, I wondered what the public reaction would be



Despite a vast network of highways in the Greater Los Angeles area, motorists are frequently stuck in traffic jams that cost the average commuter \$1,300 US year in wasted time and gasoline.

back home if TransLink were to preside over not a handful of service interruptions a year, but rather dozens and dozens and dozens of grind-to-a-halt incidents every single day? How would we assess the competence of the millions of Southern California decision-makers — all the folks who buy all those cars and trucks — who have sunk countless billions into private vehicles that can only rarely travel at the speeds they are built for?

And if we bequeath Metro Vancouver's future generations a transportation system as expensive yet inefficient as the one in Southern California, how will they judge us?

My colleague Kelly Sinoski reported Monday on a C.D. Howe forecast of \$500 million to

\$1.2 billion a year in higher costs if — as polls suggest — voters in the upcoming TransLink plebiscite scuttle the only plan on the table to improve this region's transportation network.

These costs include the obvious ones — things such as \$163 million a year in time savings if future congestion can be reduced by a third. The author, Ben Dachis, also calculates business cost savings of \$140 million a year if congestion is reduced. And he reckons the hidden savings are even greater — \$693 million a year if/when skilled workers have better access to better jobs.

"Reducing the hidden costs alone would enable broader agglomeration economies, and new job opportunities, that could raise incomes by up to \$950 per

worker per year," he writes.

In other words, the consequences won't just affect doctors who aren't doctoring, nurses who aren't nursing and construction workers who aren't constructing while they are stuck in traffic. It will also be moms who accept a bad job because they can't afford the time it takes to commute to a good one, students who can't manage both a long and costly commute and part-time work, and workers of all ages who will have to choose between promotion and fewer hours on the road.

These are the thoughts that will be running through my head when my plebiscite ballot arrives in the mail.

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