

Vote Yes, anyway

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A popular Victorian poem, recited to countless graduating classes over the last century, advises the importance of keeping one's head in the midst of turmoil. The calm application of reason trumps reckless emotion, however satisfying the latter might be in the moment.

This advice is worth remembering as Metro residents cast ballots in a plebiscite purporting to instruct municipal governments how to fund — or in the case of the “No” lobby, not to fund — \$7.5 billion in infrastructure improvements for public transit. Significant support has mobilized around the “No” argument in what's become a deeply divisive process which, in our view, was inappropriate to a representative democracy.

Nevertheless, the vehemence of those opposed to TransLink's proposed funding infrastructure — one most planning experts agree is necessary to address demands created by rapid population growth that shows little sign of abating — does show a profound disconnect between many voters and their elected representatives.

And there's some validity to this. Yes, there are issues with TransLink governance. Yes, public consultation was insufficient, a flaw the mayors must wear. Yes, the province has played the Artful Dodger, attempting to evade accountability by foisting political downside onto TransLink and municipal governments. Yes, there's been an abdication of stewardship on the part of federal and provincial governments that failed to pledge secure funding sources. And yes, it's concerning that there's no sunset clause to curb project creep and future tax burdens. But this is not the time to indulge in the emotional satisfaction of thwarting politicians and bureaucrats attempting to manage inevitable changes that are not of their making but which promise profound negative impacts upon the city if not addressed.

Now is a time to keep our heads. We need a decision based on facts, not emotion manipulated by spin, talking points or frustration.

Return on investment of 1.48 is low, compared to about 7 for monies put into health care. - cjk

Some of the big facts: Great cities cannot function without effective public transit systems shuttling workers in and out of increasingly congested urban cores. Indeed, many studies show efficient public transit is a crucial economic engine. One study released earlier this week notes every dollar invested in transit yields \$1.48 in benefits. By contrast, road congestion is a growing economic burden for Metro taxpayers. Unaddressed it will double current annual congestion costs of \$1 billion. Gridlock devours valuable personal time, is a drag on commerce and amplifies the tax footprint imposed by health and environmental charges.

Before marking and mailing their ballots, voters should review the plan, particularly details related to planned road and transit improvements in their own communities. There are benefits for all — drivers, transit users, cyclists and business owners. And because we all rely on the timely, and cost-effective delivery of goods to local shops and restaurants — combating congestion is important to our pocketbook.

Certainly, improving transit infrastructure has a cost, but there's also a direct economic benefit. A new study says TransLink's plan would generate 43,800 person years of new employment in Metro, would inject \$2.96 billion in wages and \$4.48 billion in GDP, all while reducing congestion costs by 41.3 per cent. These numbers are comparable with the economic impact of the 2010 Olympics. They are greater than forecast for the Site C hydroelectric megaproject proposed for B.C.'s north.

Considered in that context, voting Yes for TransLink's proposal, even with its acknowledged warts, is a vote for jobs, economic growth and a better quality of life for Metro.