

OPINION

Voting No sends a clear message

**Transit plebiscite:
Mayors may
want to claim
confusion,
but people are
overtaxed and
have had enough**



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Ordinary folks do not often get the chance to collectively stand up and tell politicians what they think.

They did four years ago, voting No in a referendum to a harmonized sales tax. Now, for a second time, they are having their say, casting ballots on a congestion improvement tax meant to finance regional transportation infrastructure and services.

Polls suggest a majority of citizens are poised, yet again, to turn thumbs down.

Coming after the HST No, there certainly is a message here — even though the mayors

recently told a Vancouver Sun editorial board that they will have difficulty interpreting a No result.

Here's one good guess about what a No might mean: Governments are already taking enough of my money. No more taxes.

That sentiment will be reinforced by a report that was released Monday by the B.C. branch of the Canadian Federation of Independent Business, asserting public-sector workers are paid excessively.

And urban transit in B.C., it says, has one of the biggest gaps

in the country, with workers earning 25.6 per cent more in salaries than their private-sector counterparts, 36.7 per cent more in salaries and benefits.

Many No votes will be based on a general belief, not restricted to B.C. and not entirely new, that the public sector consumes quite enough of people's incomes and cannot be trusted to spend money in the careful way individuals spend their own money.

There is a generalized distrust around public spending that, initially, probably arose in reaction to government debt and deficit budgets, then was reinforced by tales of politicians paying \$16 for a glass of orange juice, or \$100,000 for a gazebo.

It was perhaps naive of Christy Clark and Transportation Minister Todd Stone to think they could tap taxpayers for more cash by strong-arming Greater Vancouver mayors into a plebiscite process.

Make no mistake. Almost everyone wants the transit improvements, to cope with projected population increases. The No side simply wants governments to find the necessary money within the existing avalanche of revenue that derives

from an endless array of federal, provincial and municipal levies and taxes, and even tax on taxes, that flow into public coffers.

That's not an unreasonable expectation. Politicians in Toronto and Montreal — where provinces run deficits — have rejected the option of hiking taxes to address their own respective multibillion-dollar transit needs.

Vancouver-area mayors say another \$250 million in revenue is needed. Well, B.C.'s government ran a surplus this past fiscal year of nearly \$1 billion.

The province chose to repay debt with the \$1 billion. So be it. But a No vote will bat the ball right back into the provincial court.

It will be absurd for Christy Clark to cry poor. B.C. is expected to lead all provinces in economic growth this year. That translates into more robust government revenues.

Alternatively, B.C. can work with Vancouver-area municipalities — repeatedly accused of excessive spending — to find the \$250 million required annually by reallocating spending. Yes, some planned items will have

to go, but that's how family budgeting works too.

What politicians cannot do is ignore popular will, shrug and say there's no Plan B.

Nor can they dare hike taxes elsewhere to generate the revenues, because taxpayers will have been clear in not one, but two consecutive B.C. referendum votes: They do not want to pony up more cash.

Remember, discretionary income for many in the Vancouver area is at a premium given the area's onerous housing costs.

People are having difficulty coping financially. Medical Services Plan premiums are going up this year. So are BC Hydro rates, ICBC coverage and ferry fares. Property taxes are also going up.

A new congestion improvement tax was never going to fly for a large number of folks who rely on a single, fairly stagnant, income.

Politicians looking to finance new projects through fresh tax measures must start hearing voters, who are saying clearly: Read my ballot — no new taxes!

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