

OPINION

Yes vote will help Metro's most vulnerable citizens

Social investment: Expanded transit will allow low-income workers get to their jobs, give seniors freedom

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Imagine if you could give back some time to a low-income working mom who must commute two to three hours every day, leaving little time to spend with her young children. Perhaps you can give the gift of increased mobility to an older gentleman who thrives by getting together every couple of days with his pals at bridge club.

If you vote yes to the half-per cent increase to the PST in the transit plebiscite, you'll be doing just that.

Increased transit service will help low-income working families and seniors. Here's how:

High housing costs mean lower-income families are on the move from Vancouver and inner Metro Vancouver to outer Metro Vancouver. For many, this means being further from work or school locations, resulting in longer commuting times

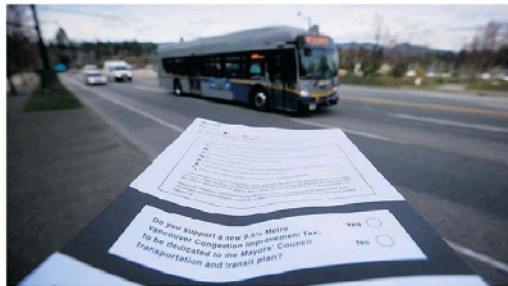
and increased transportation costs. This has been called "the suburbanization of poverty" by UBC professor and urban geographer, David Ley.

For families with children, low-wage earners often must work more than full-time hours by taking on several jobs, or shift work, to earn enough to support their families. Low-wage earners are heavy transit users: 32 per cent of trips made by low-income earners are by transit, more than double the regional average of 14 per cent.

With fewer transportation options, the end result is that parents are facing time poverty, with less time to spend with their children and less time to participate in community life outside work.

Why is this important? Because when parents do better, their children do better. A child's well-being and chance of success depends in large part on the environment in which they are raised: The love, attention and care they receive from their parents/caregivers, the extent of stimulation they receive every day and their nutrition.

That extra half-per cent sales



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Both the mayors council on regional transportation and United Way want our communities more livable, through better public transit.

tax will result in new and more rapid transit service, 11 new B-Line rapid bus routes, a 25-per-cent overall increase in bus service across the region and an 80-per-cent increase in night bus service. The faster and more frequent transit options this plan delivers will save low-income workers 20-30 minutes each day on their commute, giving them more quality time with their families. This investment today will show returns in the future by giving kids the best possible start in life.

Here's another vulnerable group to consider: seniors.

For seniors, there are many barriers to moving around. Many people have mobility limitations

as they grow older. Statistics show more than half of people over age 75 have a problem simply walking. Older people often lose their driver's licence. As is the case with low-income earners, for the elderly living in municipalities such as Surrey, travel distances are often greater. A better transit system gives seniors more freedom and mobility.

Aside from the overall 25 per cent increase in transit service, the half-per cent tax increase would provide a 30 per cent increase in HandyDart services, helping among others, seniors with mobility issues. Not only that, the tax would allow for transit stations and bus loops to

be improved with accessibility features such as more entrances and exits, and additional elevators and escalators.

Why is this important? In the Lower Mainland, about one in four seniors lives alone. With limited transportation options, seniors risk becoming shut-ins and socially isolated.

The toll social isolation takes on older people is severe. People who experience long periods of loneliness have been found to develop serious health problems including cardiovascular disease, dementia, and further decreased mobility. Loneliness has been shown to be as dangerous as smoking.

For many seniors, transit is a lifeline.

United Way believes every person who lives here should have access to the same opportunities to build a better life for themselves. Both the mayors' council on regional transportation and United Way are committed to making our communities more livable, through a better, more equitable transportation system that builds stronger, fairer, more inclusive communities for all.

Make the smart choice. Vote Yes and help our most vulnerable.

Michael McKnight is president and CEO of United Way of the Lower Mainland.

On the contrary - sales taxes are regressive taxes - hurting the poor proportionally more than the rich. - cjk