

Fassbender now responsible for TransLink after Clark shuffles B.C. cabinet

BY ROB SHAW AND KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 31, 2015



Premier Christy Clark shuffled her cabinet Thursday, moving Peter Fassbender from the education ministry and appointing him the minister responsible for Metro Vancouver's transit woes.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, PNG

VICTORIA — Premier Christy Clark has tapped a smooth-talking former ad executive and Lower Mainland mayor to corral disgruntled Metro Vancouver politicians toward a solution for the region's transit woes.

Clark appointed Peter Fassbender as minister responsible for TransLink on Thursday, moving him from the Education Ministry — where Fassbender presided over a bitter teachers strike — into an equally contentious issue, transit.

Todd Stone remains minister of transportation and infrastructure, which no longer includes the regional transit authority.

Fassbender said he's aware of pressure from the mayors to find a fix for TransLink, or some of them will abandon the regional system.

His immediate goals, he said, are to "restore the confidence of the people of Metro Vancouver in TransLink," most notably regarding fiscal management and governance structure.

"That is not going to be a small job," he said. "I think it requires some patience and some really strong discussions about what needs to be done in the future."

Fassbender, a former advertising executive who spent a decade as mayor of Langley City, assumes the TransLink job on top of a new portfolio as minister of community, sport and cultural development.

His appointment comes at a troubled time for the transit agency, which was battered by public criticism of mismanagement during a transportation plebiscite this year, in which voters rejected a proposed regional transit tax to fund transit.

Metro Vancouver mayors and the provincial government remain at odds over funding sources for transit projects, and how to reform TransLink's governance.

Fassbender said he's entering the job with a mandate from the premier to "roll up my sleeves" and find a solution.

He is the latest in a string of provincial ministers — including Kevin Falcon, Blair Lekstrom, Mary Polak, Shirley Bond and Todd Stone — to handle the TransLink file since 2007.

Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson echoed other mayors in describing Fassbender's appointment as a sign that government recognizes it's critical to solve the region's transit problems.

Regional mayors maintain it bodes well that Fassbender is well-versed in TransLink issues, having previously served as chairman of the mayors' council for several years. During that time, he supported raising the carbon tax and gas tax, as well as creating a vehicle levy and road pricing system, to fund transit. The Liberal government has rejected most of those ideas.

"He'll be able to jump into the file and get moving on it right away," said Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore. "I don't think this would be a steep learning curve for him."

Fassbender said Thursday some of his old solutions may still be viable, but has no pre-conceptions.

Coquitlam Mayor Richard Stewart said the ultimate solution is to change TransLink governance altogether.

"There's no question this is about jurisdiction," he said. "Either the province has jurisdiction over it or local government does. The system is broken."

North Vancouver District Mayor Richard Walton questioned what the new portfolio would mean for funding the capital projects that have been committed under the ministry of transportation, such as new Vancouver subway, light rail in Surrey and a new Pattullo Bridge.

"One of the questions right away is how do you separate funding for large capital projects for TransLink from the budget commitments made by the minister of transportation?" Walton said. "We don't want to find funding has shifted away as a result of this. I'd like some reassurance on that."

Fassbender spent the past two years as education minister, during which teachers staged one of the longest strikes in B.C.'s history before signing a new six-year contract.

"He got a deal with the teachers, which most people would have said was impossible, so you don't want to count him out in a tough situation," said Jordan Bateman, the B.C. director of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation and leader of the No side in the transit plebiscite.

"It's a tough challenge for him because right now there's a quiet civil war going on behind the scenes between the board and the mayors, where the board blames the mayors for botching the transit campaign and the mayors blame the board for mismanaging TransLink."

The cabinet shuffle Thursday also saw backbench Liberal MLA Mike Bernier appointed Education Minister. Bernier, MLA for Peace River South, called it a "great opportunity" to rebuild the relationship with teachers during labour peace.

BCTF president Jim Iker said he hopes Bernier brings "fresh eyes" to the ministry on long-held issues of class size and composition.

The premier also appointed Coralee Oakes as Minister of Small Business, Red-Tape Reduction and Minister Responsible for Liquor Distribution Branch. That relieves Justice Minister Suzanne Anton of responsibility for liquor at a time when the province is under fire from craft beer brewers for reforms that have driven up prices. The premier also moved Naomi Yamamoto from the small business portfolio to Minister of State for Emergency Preparedness.

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