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# Outgoing boss criticizes Byzantine oversight of TransLink 5

**Governance off the track: 'Extremely complicated' structure is an obstacle, as is mayoral sniping, Doug Allen says**

When Metro Vancouver voters turned down a regional sales tax to fund transit improvements earlier this summer, TransLink boss Doug Allen made excuses for his organization because TransLink, he said, "was not on the ballot."



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**TransLink CEO Doug Allen, whose contract ends Aug. 10, says the organization needs oversight that is 'relatively simple so everyone ... knows who they're accountable to.'**

He now explains himself by saying "I was in the storm" of controversy that followed the vote. But he continues to maintain that the main factor in the defeat was "people did not want to impose a tax on themselves."

"If you're going to go to voters, I would give them choices as to how to fund it," Allen told me during an interview on Voice of B.C. on Shaw TV. "So, you want to fund it with a sales tax increase? With property tax increases? Some hybrid? But it wouldn't be a yes or no in my view."

Would "none of the above" be an option? "No, it would not." I caught up with Allen last week as he was winding up a six-month posting as interim CEO-cum-troubleshooter at the regional transportation authority (TransLink chief financial officer Cathy McLay takes over as interim CEO). Before the scheduled handoff early next month, he intends to call it as he sees it to the organization and its overseer governments.

Heading the list is advice that will echo the calls of many a TransLink critic. "The oversight of TransLink is extremely complicated," Allen said, underlining the competing roles of the province, the council of mayors and the appointed board of directors. "I like things relatively simple so everyone, not just the CEO, but everybody knows who they're accountable to."

But he rejects calls for the organization to be handed over to a board dominated by mayors or other politicians. "I don't support having elected officials on board because they're in a conflict of interest," Allen said. "I like the model where you have regions actually recommend or appoint people. You bring people on against very good criteria as to what you need. That's what BC Ferries does, by and large. And that's what the Vancouver airport Authority does and I think those particular models work."

His doubts about the mayors are partly grounded in their disappointing performance on the plebiscite. "The mayors did a very good job," he said, "of developing this 10-year investment plan. But you still have to go out publicly, in unison, saying: 'This organization is pretty good for these reasons. It can deliver. Let's get on with it.' I didn't hear enough of that."

Instead, some of the mayors have been sniping at TransLink on a regular basis. "And I think that's what has to change," Allen said.

He also put the provincial government on the spot for the contradictory structure it has imposed, such as saddling a transit authority with responsibility for the Pattullo Bridge and the regional road system.

"The core business of TransLink is transit and what we're trying to drive, in my judgment, is ridership," Allen said. "But we play a fairly

important role in bridges and roads. ... That's when you look at the mandate, you might say, 'Well, there may be a better way to organize this.'

Next item on the to-do list is a new funding formula to replace the \$250 million or so that would have been raised annually by the regional sales tax.

Road pricing? "There are many parts of the world that make this work exceedingly well," he said. Financing transit stations by direct levies on the developments around them? "I like it because at the end of the day, both the developers and the people living along the line are the ones that are going to benefit from more transit."

Those suggestions aside, Allen said it is up to the partners in the system to work out the new funding formula — "and I just hope that it's soon, or sooner, rather than later."

Then on with fixes to the biggest obstacles to system reliability and customer satisfaction, including the years-behind-schedule Compass Card system, the 30-year-old Expo line, and the growing amount of violence toward bus operators.

Whatever revisions emerge from the consultations between the provincial and regional governments, Allen emphasized the importance of them working together to accentuate the positive with customers, stakeholders and the media.

"Engagement is a big part of the agenda and it pertains to everybody in the organization," Allen said. "When people oversee your operation, they have to be supportive of what you're doing. If you had a private company selling something and their oversight committee — whatever you want to call them — was questioning the competence of the firm, sales would go down."

He's on the selection committee for the permanent CEO. I spoke to him before this week's controversy over the job posting, but Allen expects the salary will have to be "competitive" with comparable organizations in other jurisdictions.

Despite all the sniping, Allen doesn't regard the job as needing someone with major expertise in fixing troubled organizations. "It doesn't need to be turned around in how well it does in terms of being safe and a reliable and competent system," Allen said. "Be as competent as you can be, **engage extensively**, and make sure that the oversight or governance of the place is well understood and works effectively."



Not much grist there for folks who say blow up the organization one more time and start from scratch. But it strikes me that the take-it-or-leave-it advice from the departing CEO offers a plausible starting point for a makeover that would have a better chance of succeeding than the last two or three.

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