

Daphne Bramham: Fun's over for politicians; time to focus on regional transit and the plebiscite

Civic campaigns focused on extraneous stuff like Kinder Morgan and a proposed ban on public kissing, while transit is real issue

BY DAPHNE BRAMHAM, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 10, 2014



Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore is a key player in the region's transportation plan. He managed in the spring to get the regional mayors' consensus on a plan that contained a commitment for local government contributions.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, PNG

For all the money, the drama and (yes, finally) increased voter engagement, the biggest civic issues facing Metro Vancouver were never part of the campaign.

There was no broad, regional discussion about where the one million more people expected to move here in the next 25 years will live. And, more critically, no discussion of how their arrival will paralyze the already stressed and stretched transit and transportation networks.

Sure, Vancouver mayoral candidates sparred over details of a Broadway rapid-transit line (which is far down on the list of TransLink's priorities) and most Surrey candidates committed to building light-rail transit there with or without the help of TransLink.

But why would they talk about a regional plan? It's one of the biggest flaws in regional governance: Metro Vancouver has no single, accountable, elected body to deal with either transportation or planning.

Everyone who ran was or should have been painfully aware that whether you're mayor of Vancouver or a councillor in Anmore, the real decisions about transit and the resulting bursts of development around transit hubs are driven by the B.C. government and by appointees to TransLink's board (mayors and councillors who are chosen by their pals, not the electors).

Yet, within days of being sworn in, all the new mayors and councillors must approve details of a referendum on a 10-year, \$7.5-billion transit plan that Premier Christy Clark insists must be held before midsummer.

By Dec. 11, the regional mayors must agree not only to a plan that includes two light-rail lines for Surrey, another subway for Vancouver, a new bridge and hundreds of buses, but to a realistic funding model.

And, as importantly, they must come up with the wording of the referendum question that gives it the best chance of being approved.

So, while it was entertaining and engaging to have civic campaigns that focused on all sorts of extraneous stuff like Kinder Morgan's proposed pipeline, allegations of corruption, a proposed ban on public kissing and hand-holding, calls for livable wages, more daycare spaces, cheaper transit passes and whether to keep to cetaceans at the aquarium, it's transit that's the real issue.

And for the coming weeks and months, it must be the primary preoccupation of all of the region's council members.

Why? Without a commitment to transit, the default is more roads and bridges. It's more car-fuelled suburbs, fewer regional, urban centres given over to transit riders, cyclists and pedestrians that are attractive to younger people and families as well as retiring baby boomers.

Given Vancouver's high housing costs, who will be able to move here if they have no reasonable prospect of being able to live in one part of the region and work in another? And, what companies will want to move or stay here if they can't attract the best employees and have to worry about whether they can easily and efficiently get their goods to market?

While not everyone will be thrilled by the re-election of so many of the region's mayors, it will make this extraordinary process somewhat easier.

Among the key players re-elected was Greg Moore, the calm, competent mayor of Port Coquitlam. Business in Vancouver described him recently as "the most effective regional leader since Gordon Campbell and George Poul. Only balder and nicer."

Moore, who is heading into his third term, managed last spring to get regional mayors' consensus on a plan that accommodated not only the regional growth strategy and the City of Vancouver's 2040 transportation plan, but contained a commitment for local government contributions.

Whether he continues to serve as the mayors' primary spokesman remains to be seen.

Also key to the success of the plebiscite was Gregor Robertson's re-election in Vancouver and the landslide win of Linda Hepner, Dianne Watts' hand-picked successor in Surrey. As mayors of the two most populous cities in the region, both Watts and Robertson have been fully supportive of increased investments in transit. Hepner is expected to follow suit.

Less encouraging from a transit plebiscite point-of-view is the re-election of Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan to a fifth term. His city is one of the best-served by transit and Corrigan was the only one to vote against the regional mayors' transit plan last spring. During the campaign, however, Corrigan did say that traffic congestion is the city's biggest problem.

My prediction is that by midsummer, Saturday's winners will have had to use up a great deal of their political capital to cajole voters into paying more, a lot more, whether it's at the gas pumps, a vehicle levy, tolls, a carbon tax, a regional tax or even higher property taxes.

Because if they don't, it won't matter a jot what they promised, whether it was the greenest city, more parks or low taxes.

If the plebiscite is lost, they're all staring down the prospect of not just gridlock, but regional paralysis and even decline.

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