

Pete McMartin: The transit referendum — a stop-gap fix for long-term need

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 13, 2014



Richard Walton is mayor of the District of North Vancouver and chair of the Mayor's Council on Regional Transportation.

Photograph by: Jason Payne, PNG

I'm not sure why we're even having a referendum on transit, given the obvious need out there, but...

If the transit referendum fails this spring (and initial polling has not been encouraging), the earliest that Metro Vancouver could possibly see an increase in the carrying capacity of its transit and road systems would not be for another six to seven years.

Any future referendum, according to the legislation, could not be held until the next municipal elections four years from now, and it would take two to three years after that to build any improvements we might agree upon.

That would take us to 2020-21. Metro Vancouver's population is projected to grow by 465,000 people by that time — or more than the equivalent of adding another Burnaby and Richmond. That's a lot of people with cars. It's going to get ugly out there.

Wrong - projected growth is 1million people in 30 years. So by 2021 (6 yrs) it would be only 200,000 - cjk

But getting to that yes vote?

Hard going. It has big impediments to overcome.

For instance, that one-half percentage point raise in the provincial sales tax for Metro Vancouver that the mayors and TransLink want is meant to run for 10 years.

But can they guarantee that at the end of that 10-year period the tax will be rescinded?

No, admitted North Vancouver District Mayor Richard Walton, they can't.

In the U.S., where dedicated sales taxes to fund transit initiatives are common, those add-on taxes are often capped by a time limit.

But here, the proposal is open-ended. It could continue after the 10-year period.

Walton and the other mayors would prefer a time limit, because they consider the PST increase a

stop-gap measure. What they want, and hope to see in place within four or five years, is some form of mobility pricing.

“There’s no question,” said Walton, one of the main architects of the referendum, “that the Holy Grail and long-term solution would be a mobility pricing approach that would be jointly engineered by the provincial government and Metro Vancouver, and that would be flexible enough to possibly see several of the existing funding sources either diminished or gotten rid of.”

What form that mobility pricing would take is an unknown, and would take years of consultation to formulate. It would also have to be sensitive, Walton said, to the local geography and culture.

For instance, the congestion pricing used in the city centres of London and Stockholm wouldn’t work here because Metro Vancouver’s physical make-up isn’t as concentric as those cities. And a billing system using GPS to measure distances travelled by a car might contravene privacy laws here, at least for motorists, although Walton said it could possibly work for trucking.

But would the public wait for mobility pricing to be introduced, or embrace it once it is proposed?

Many motorists south of the Fraser will argue (and have to me in emails) that they already pay a crude form of mobility pricing in the form of bridge tolls. Why would they want to saddle themselves with a further tax on top of the tolls they already pay? And why would they vote for a raise in the sales tax when the ultimate goal of TransLink is to install mobility pricing four or five years down the road?

Yes, Walton admitted, those perceptions were “a challenge,” but he felt that, in the meantime, the benefits the new plan would bring to communities south of the Fraser in the form of light rapid transit and increased bus services would prove their worth. Many Surrey and Langley voters, he felt, will see the value in them and vote accordingly.

I hope so, because I think the referendum has to pass if Metro Vancouver is to keep up with its transit needs.

But if we are to get to mobility pricing — and that is a very big if — Metro first has to deal with the provincial government. As Walton said above, the “long-term solution would be a mobility pricing approach that would be jointly engineered by the provincial government and Metro Vancouver.”

The operative word is “jointly.” The road, bridge and freeway system in Metro Vancouver is a mish-mash of jealously guarded assets. How can Metro Vancouver, for example, install mobility pricing on freeways when they are owned by the province?

It will take months of formal negotiations to come up with a jointly operated mobility pricing scheme, something the provincial government has previously indicated it has been loathe to do — although Watson said Transport Minister Todd Stone in private meetings with him has lately been more open to the idea.

In the meantime, the clock’s ticking.

- A last word: My apologies to Mayor Greg Moore for incorrectly identifying him in Friday’s column as mayor of Coquitlam. He is not. He is mayor of Port Coquitlam, which I am assured are two completely different communities. Mayor Moore informed me by email, however, that he will be invading Coquitlam and should be incorporating it into Port Coquitlam by spring.

Finally, a Metro politician in favour of amalgamation.

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