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Transit tax pros and cons debated

TransLink's funding tax was debated Tuesday.

[Matthew Claxton](#) / Langley Advance

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Jordan Bateman, for the no side. Photograph By Matthew Claxton/Langley Advance

The Yes and No sides in the TransLink tax referendum debate clashed Tuesday night at the monthly Greater Langley Chamber of Commerce meeting.

Jordan Bateman, former Langley Township councillor, spoke for the No TransLink Tax campaign being organized by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

Bill Tieleman of the Better Transit and Transportation Coalition spoke for the yes side.

Before they put on the gloves for a spirited verbal matchup, Mike Buda of the TransLink Mayors' Council talked about some of the specific plans for Langley transit improvements if the 0.5 per cent sales tax is approved.

New B-line buses are planned for 200th Street, Fraser Highway from Surrey to Langley City, and into Maple Ridge over the Golden Ears Bridge.

B-lines run as often as every 15 minutes, and they could be in place within two years or less of the referendum, Buda said.

Light rail extensions are planned in Surrey, including one down Fraser Highway into downtown Langley.

There would also be "significant" road upgrades, said Buda, including to busy 16th Avenue and Fraser Highway, and more road-rail grade separation overpasses. A 25 per cent increase in bus service would see more buses for neighbourhoods like Brookwood, Willoughby, and nearby areas such as Surrey's Clayton neighbourhood.

The debate between Tieleman and Bateman broke down to a couple of major issues – is the sales tax the right way to boost transit, and can TransLink be trusted with the money.

Tieleman talked about the huge population increase expected for the Langleys, about 125,000 more people.

"Are the Langleys read to handle all those people?" he asked.

Increases to everything from night buses to HandyDart are essential to moving people, he said.

"It's critical to our economy, it's critical to our environment, and it's critical to our quality of life," said Tieleman.

"A no vote is not an 'I want changes to TransLink' vote," Tieleman said.

Yet it was TransLink's track record, especially with money, that is the main reason to vote against the plan, said Bateman.

He is not anti-transit, he said, noting his own support for increases in transit while on Township council. But he slammed TransLink's management.

"TransLink wastes too much of your money to give them another nickel," he said, citing overpaid executives, strange spending such as a decorative poodle statue, and the fiasco of the behind-schedule and over-budget Compass card system.

The No TransLink Tax campaign is proposing an alternative method to raise the money, Bateman said.

"Growth should pay for growth," he said.

Their plan is based on an annual 4.8 per cent annual increase in local government revenue across municipalities, TransLink, and Metro Vancouver. Taking 0.5 per cent of that growth would leave the cities with 4.3 per cent and not require a new tax, Bateman said.

Tieleman defended the plan for a sales tax.

"We're talking about a very modest amount of tax," he said.

Studies from regions and cities in the United States that have implemented similar regional sales tax have shown only a modest impact on local retail sales.

That was a particular concern for the Greater Langley Chamber of Commerce.

Bateman noted that Aldergrove could be particularly hard hit, close to both the U.S. border and Abbotsford, two areas where there won't be that extra tax. It will just give people another reason to head east to get gas, and maybe do their shopping as well, Bateman said.

"This will drive customers out of the region," he said.

He raised concerns that if estimates on project costs are too low, plans for light rail or other projects that would benefit Langley could easily be cut before projects in Vancouver.

Tieleman defended the plan, noting it came directly from the Mayors' Council, not TransLink management. It will be audited and the money will be set aside for the specific improvements in the plan, not going into TransLink general revenue.

He also pointed to the coalition supporting the plan, which includes businesses, unions, environmentalists, the B.C. Chamber of Commerce, and the Vancouver Board of Trade.

Since the plan emerged from the mayors, of whom 19 of 22 voted in favour, an audience member asked to hear from City Mayor Ted Schaffer and Township Mayor Jack Froese.

"Personally, I believe in it," said Schaffer.

He organized the mayors from South of the Fraser to band together to ensure that there would be sufficient improvements for the long-neglected region.

"At the end of the day, the Langleys will benefit, business will benefit," Schaffer said.

Froese addressed the other options – an increased gas tax, more property tax hikes, or a vehicle levy – all of which were rejected by the mayors.

He was doubtful about the idea of setting aside revenue growth from the region.

"As there's growth, more services are required," he said. He said he doesn't know where extra money would come from other than property taxes.

A mail-in vote on the sales tax plan is to be held among Metro Vancouver residents from March 16 to May 29.