

Pete McMartin: Dislike the idea of a transit referendum? Blame Victoria

Voting no will result in more crowding on our roads

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN DECEMBER 12, 2014

Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan was among three Metro mayors who voted no for the referendum, stating concerns that TransLink may not be efficient in governing funding.

Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, PNG

The mayors' vote to OK the transit referendum question was held Thursday in New Westminster's Anvil Centre, and it was Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan who struck the first hammer blow. Corrigan, ever the contrarian, said he would vote no, in part for the fact that he, for one, was not in charge.

"The deal killer for me in this is that while we're out there making promises to the public about the transportation vision, we don't have the ability to govern TransLink. We are simply the Mayors' Council, which is a funding source ... it doesn't control the annual budget. So we don't set the priorities. I can't guarantee that the public will see that money used efficiently, and in many cases I think the public complaint has been that TransLink has not been efficient.

"So without governance, I don't think I can go to the public and tell them that if you support this referendum that this will happen."

Couple things about that:

One: Corrigan is right. TransLink's governance is a mess. It's a weird undemocratic hybrid engineered by the provincial government to make sure it has the real power while the mayors get all the heat.

Two: If any jurisdiction in Metro Vancouver has benefited from expensive rapid transit, and from provincial meddling in where that transit has gone, it's Burnaby, which has grown fat and happy from the SkyTrain lines running through it. It's odd and a little late in the day that "governance" would be a deciding factor to Corrigan.

The only others echoing his sentiments were rookie Maple Ridge Mayor Nicole Read and West Vancouver Mayor Michael Smith, who both voted no — though Smith, bizarrely, said he would personally vote yes on the referendum ballot that he would receive at home. I'm not sure what you call that kind of thinking. The courage of others' convictions?

But in the end, those three were the only nay votes, while the rest of Metro Vancouver's mayors voted yes.

They did so because they're realists. However much they dislike it, they know that to walk away from the referendum would be disastrous. While it may not be the Plan A that will get everyone on board, they know there is no Plan B.

Defeat it and the next window of opportunity for a debate on transit won't come around for another four

years with the next municipal elections. With that time lag, not only will the congestion on our roads and transit lines get worse, but the cost of doing anything about them will grow exponentially. As White Rock Mayor Wayne Baldwin said of a recent trip to Ontario he made, he has seen the future and it is Toronto's freeway gridlock. We can't, he said, play catch up.

If the referendum is approved — by no means a sure thing — the dedicated sales tax will be the first of its kind of Canada. Of all the revenue sources the mayors looked at, it seemed the most equitable to all taxpayers. The alternatives — a vehicle registration fee, an increase in the carbon tax or a combination of the two — would cost, on average, about \$230 annually per family, while the regional half-percentage point increase in the sales tax has been estimated to cost an average \$125 annually per family, with that falling to about \$50 annually for low-income families.

Will it be money well spent?

Better question: Will it be money wisely spent?

As the mayors recognized, TransLink has efficiency problems, and the public has the right to feel aggrieved. As Mayor Smith remarked, TransLink as a public body has the duty to be a lean machine, and dubious executive bonuses, generous employee car allowances, free transit passes, a lavishly paid police force and an expensive new headquarters do not demonstrate restraint. These egregious costs have to be addressed, and quickly.

But as Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie pointed out, the referendum question included a phrase that the plan's implementation would come with "independent audits and public reporting." His suggestion was, there will be more control and public scrutiny of the \$7.5 billion the mayors hope to raise than what the public has become accustomed to seeing from TransLink in the past. I hope he's right.

Will I vote yes for the plan?

I will. I think public anger with TransLink's operations is justified, but I also think that it is another conversation entirely. Voting no because of TransLink's executive bonuses may satisfy the taxpayers' need for retribution, but it will only boomerang back at them in the form of more crowding on our roads. Metro needs these improvements.

A final thought:

All the mayors should be congratulated on bringing this together in the ridiculously short time the provincial government gave them — especially North Vancouver District Mayor Richard Walton and Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore. Two pros.

Conversely, Premier Christy Clark has shown zero leadership on this issue and treated it as an exercise in deflection. If you dislike the idea of this referendum, don't blame the mayors. Blame Victoria.

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