

Clark's transit funding referendum is risky and pointless

TransLink: A new board with power to make changes is what's needed

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 22, 2014

You would think Christy Clark, more than most, would understand that just because it was the premier's idea doesn't mean it's a good one.

Clark got her first taste of elected office serving under former premier Gordon Campbell, a man who, despite significant accomplishments during 10 years in power, knew how to dig in on a bad idea - especially if it was his own.

Perhaps the best example from their decade as colleagues was the aboriginal treaty referendum in 2002. Not only was this a dumb idea from the get-go - it was premised on asking voters to weigh in on questions that were in the purview of the judiciary, not the politicians - its results were ignored in subsequent policy decisions.

And Clark is uniquely well-positioned to understand the granddaddy of dumb political decisions in B.C. in recent years. She's the premier who inherited the fallout from Campbell's 11th-hour inspiration to impose the HST, and the mismanaged campaign to try to save what could have been a good policy if it had been done right.

Apparently she learned from Campbell's modus operandi - but the lesson seems not to be how to avoid a wing-nut decision, but how to make one. Because her intransigent insistence on a TransLink funding referendum to be held in conjunction with this fall's municipal election is on par with the worst of Campbell's clunkers.

The region's mayors, aghast at Clark's interference in an issue so central to their communities, worry that it will polarize the civic campaigns and draw in one-issue candidates. Maybe so, although it can be argued - as the premier has - that this isn't bad if it stirs interest in an election most citizens would otherwise ignore.

But the setback for regional transportation this could trigger is real and, in my judgment, likely.

Odds of a happy outcome - a question outlining the best-possible plan winning hearty endorsement - are long, and grow longer with each further delay over setting the question, and each round of sparring between the mayors and premier and her apologists.

So the best outcome I foresee is futile tokenism, as with the aboriginal rights vote, because something simply must be done to address urgent transportation needs, regardless of whether this exercise ends with a win, loss or draw. The worst case would be an HST-like fiasco because the result may tie future governments' hands on effective solutions, and leave only weak ones as the alternative.

Clark and Transportation Minister Todd Stone have a point when they diss Metro mayors for failing to

agree on priorities. But they conveniently forget the province's role in fostering this discord and dithering. The province allows them only a narrow and inadequate range of moneyraising tools. The province has overruled their priorities when the mayors do agree, building the pricey Canada Line, the new Port Mann Bridge, and South Fraser Perimeter Road regardless of what the municipalities see as priority projects. And when there was pushback from the old TransLink board - a not-very-accountable body of politicians who were elected to local councils and then appointed to regional roles - Kevin Falcon, the transportation minister of the day, replaced it with one more to his liking. But Falcon didn't fix the accountability gap when he mandated a board of unelected appointees in 2008; he worsened it.

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The mess grows even worse while the foot-dragging and finger-pointing continues. There are serious problems now with traffic backups and inadequate transit at many choke points. And these will worsen as Metro's population grows by more than a million over the next two to three decades.

What TransLink needs isn't more games and a jury-rigged referendum. What it needs is a real board, mandated by voters, with the power to make the changes it deems best, and facing the threat of members being turfed at the polls if they screw up.

Instead of this referendum, a campaign for a new TransLink board could be tied in with this fall's municipal election. It would be a far better means to address the region's transportation future. Candidates could spell out where they stand on priorities for improving the system and paying for it, and voters could choose.

Then Clark could lead her team in supporting the decisions made by the new board - and take the plaudits for finally giving TransLink a fair chance to succeed.

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It would seem that a referendum is meaningless if it does not allow for either its approval or defeat. I feel confident that any proposed referendum on the issue of funding public transportation will probe the appetite of the taxpayers who will foot the bill. Democracy is always a good choice...well, at least the better choice over the alternatives.

The real issue is who will draft the referendum question(s). Right now it seems to be that the mayors will play a key role. If so then the mayors should each consult their respective council members. I fear that they will not do so. - cjk