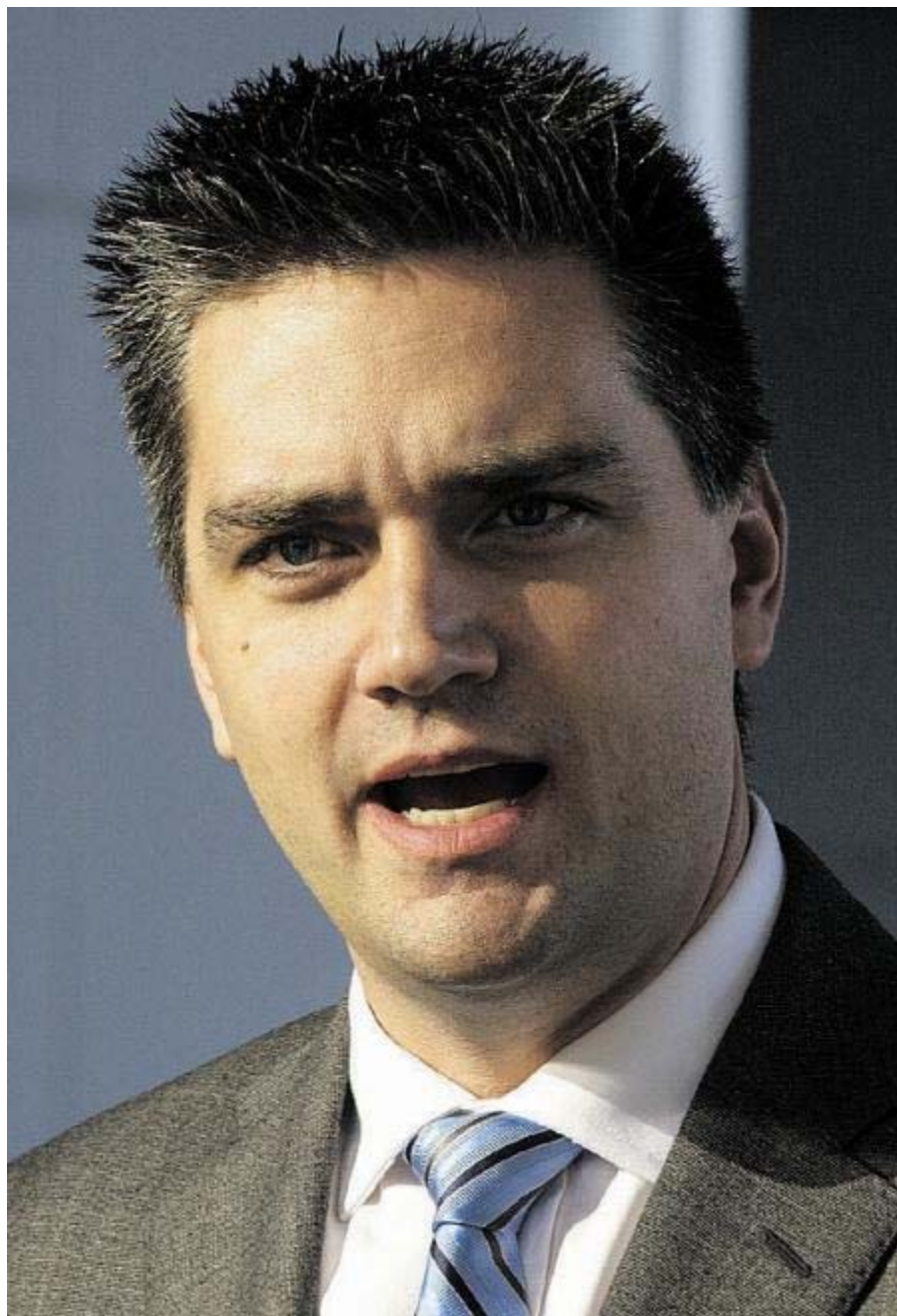




Despite mayors' opposition, transit referendum will be on November ballots: minister

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B.C.'s transportation minister chastised Metro Vancouver mayors on Thursday for not buying into his

government's transit referendum, and said he will legislate a uniform question onto municipal ballots this fall.

Todd Stone called upon the mayors to step up and put together a list of transit expansion projects, costs and possible new TransLink revenue sources, so that work can begin in crafting a transit referendum question to accompany November municipal elections.

"I certainly hope the mayors will rise to the occasion here and do what is expected of them by all the residents in the Lower Mainland," said Stone. "There's a tremendous amount riding on this."

In preparation, Stone said the Liberal government will introduce legislation this spring that will allow whatever transit referendum question is ultimately chosen to appear on election ballots throughout Metro Vancouver. That would remove the possibility each municipality drafts a different question for voters.

It will be up to chief electoral officers to administer the referendum on top of the municipal election, according to the transportation ministry. The province will pick up the tab for any extra costs incurred by local governments, said Stone.

If mayors refuse to participate, it "would be an abdication of their responsibilities," said Stone.

The provincial pushback comes amid a widening rift between the government and Metro mayors on the transit referendum. Many mayors have said the vote is unnecessary and doomed to fail.

They have also complained that the province has already rejected alternative funding sources for transit expansion, such as a vehicle levy. Stone has said mayors have the power to raise property taxes to fund transit expansion, without a referendum.

Premier Christy Clark said Thursday the only thing local mayors appear to agree on is how angry they are at her transportation minister.

"The referendum is a chance for taxpayers to give direction to mayors who haven't been able to find agreement for a long, long time," she said.

The premier called on mayors to use the referendum as a motivator to find common ground on transit. "If they don't, there will still be a question on the referendum ballot," she said.

The Liberal government should just negotiate a fair funding formula for transit improvements across the region, instead of pushing ahead with a referendum, said NDP TransLink critic George Heyman.

"The transportation minister knows this is a problem, and wants to make sure he doesn't wear it," said Heyman. "That's why he's accusing the mayors of not stepping up to the plate. They've been at the plate. He needs to throw the pitch."