

Housing prices, public transit linked

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Housing prices will increase with increased public transit! -cjk

Housing costs in our region continue to climb. Meanwhile, policy-makers argue about the politics of decision-making, instead of making the tough but inevitable decisions that can start to reverse a trajectory in housing costs that is beyond scary.

A good example of inaction is the endless wrangling that has been going on lately between Metro Vancouver mayors and the provincial government over a ridiculous idea of a public referendum on funding public transportation infrastructure in the region.

Democracy is never ridiculous! - cjk

Mobility, the transportation infrastructure that enables it and the way we price and pay for it directly affects the cost of housing. Decisions are needed, not more debate about how to make the decisions.

That's why we need a referendum! - cjk

We know we must improve public transportation infrastructure to ensure that we can continue to move around between the places we live, work, play and learn within a region that continues to grow at a steady pace. We know building that infrastructure costs money. We know that we have to fund those costs. We know that funding comes from taxpayers, whether they pay directly on a user-pay basis or indirectly through a series of taxes, or a combination of these funding mechanisms. We know that decisions have to be made now to allow us to manage growth that is inevitable. Hopefully, most people know that delaying these decisions is risky.

Growth is NOT inevitable - much to the chagrin of those who profit from it. - cjk

Even though we are aware of these realities, we allow the decision-makers we elected to continue to argue and delay the tough decisions. A referendum won't make the ultimate decisions any easier. Deciding on what that referendum question will ask, when it will be put to voters and what the outcome will mean is simply creating further delays. Meanwhile, housing costs continue to climb.

No referendum is capable of decisively crafting good public policies that integrate transportation and growth plans. No referendum is capable of deciding the specific priorities for transportation infrastructure. These decisions need to be made in a deliberative way by the representatives we elect and the experts they hire. Delaying these important decisions while we argue about the politics of decisionmaking means we risk making bad decisions about managing growth. Those bad decisions could continue to push housing costs higher.

Let me give you an example of the direct connection between delaying the tough decisions about funding transportation infrastructure and housing costs.

Most major highway and road infrastructure planning in Metro Vancouver and the larger Lower Mainland area is not integrated with landuse planning. The decision to expand Highway 1 from downtown Vancouver out through Langley, with the expansion of the Port Mann Bridge, wasn't made by the municipal governments acting together, applying the principles of Metro Vancouver's Regional Growth Strategy. The highway and bridge expansion plan was made by the provincial government. The multi-billion-dollar funding decision wasn't made in the context of a list of regional transportation infrastructure spending options - assessing priorities for costs of various mass transit and road plans already costed. The funding decision was made in isolation by the provincial government. Paying for these costs through user-pay systems - like road pricing - was not a decision tied to regional planning, nor ever considered in the wider context of fares, tolls and other user-pay options for all modes of transportation in the region. A toll was imposed on Port Mann Bridge crossings by the provincial government.

So, while mass transit projects, like expanding SkyTrain deeper into Surrey or providing rapid bus service in areas south of the Fraser that flank major highways, await decisions on how they can be funded regionally, one form of transportation infrastructure that accommodates that automobile was directly subsidized.

That means housing prices can be relatively lower in the outlying areas, where those who travel by automobile can now reach more easily because of the new highway and bridge. That takes growth pressure off areas where settlement is already more compact and where people live closer to jobs and closer to services and amenities. It means that single-family, large-lot neighbourhoods in places like Marpole and Dunbar and Burnaby Heights and countless other first-ring suburban areas can continue to resist invisible, gentle or even moderate densification. It means that housing prices in those already developed areas will continue to rise, as land-use efficiency is ignored.

← Touche - transportation increases cost of land. - cjk

Transportation and land use are inseparable. So are home prices and the price of transportation. So, next time you feel panic set in about your monthly mortgage payments, think about the politicians who are arguing about whether or not we should have a transit referendum, what the referendum question should say and when voters should be given an opportunity to vote on the question.

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Property prices not only increase with improved public transportation, they are more resilient to economic downturns (again proving that housing prices go up when public money is used to fund transit systems). - cjk

I find it interesting that the cost per sq-ft of housing in areas served by public transportation is FAR higher than in those areas (usually low density) served only by the private car - cjk