

TRANSLINK

Mayors to have more control over transit

B.C. government open to delaying public referendum on transportation until June 2015 or later

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VANCOUVER SUN

The B.C. government says it is willing to delay a public referendum on transportation until June 2015 and will give regional mayors more power over TransLink's long-term plans and priorities.

Transportation Minister Todd Stone said Thursday he will introduce legislation this spring that would give the mayors' council more control over TransLink's 30-year plans and priorities — a job now in the hands of TransLink's unelected board of directors.

Under the reform, the mayors' council would also be allowed to set compensation for the TransLink board and approve fare adjustments and the sale of major assets.

The TransLink board, meanwhile, would be expected to prepare budgets, oversee operations and implement the mayors' council's plans.

The proposed changes follow years of frustration from mayors, who argue they have little control over TransLink funding decisions or priorities, and have often seen their priorities scuttled by the province. This includes the province's decision to push SkyTrain over light rail, and its rejection of funding sources, such as a vehicle levy, to generate funds for transit expansion.

TransLink now has three primary funding sources: property taxes, gas taxes and fares.

But the province insists any new funding sources, including a vehicle levy, must go to a public referendum. Stone says the province is now willing to delay the referendum, originally scheduled for this November's civic elections, to June 2015, but only if the mayors' council can come up with a vision that outlines transportation priorities and costs, by June 30 this year.

Otherwise, the next date the province is willing to consider for a referendum would be the civic elections in 2017.

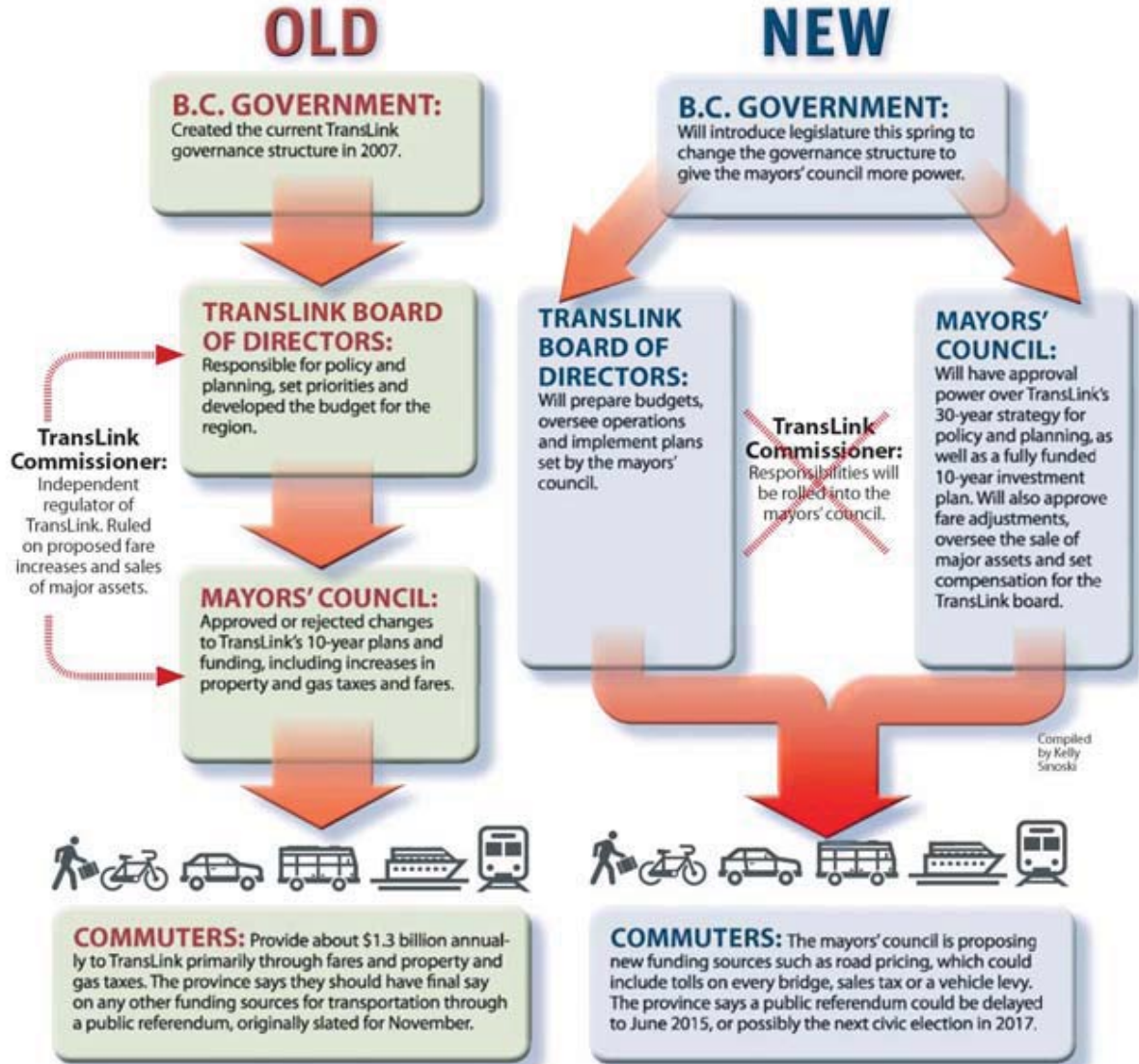
"If the people of Metro Vancouver are being asked to pay new taxes or fees for new services put forward by the mayors' council then taxpayers must have a say," Stone said.

Stone did add, however, that the province would pay a third of the capital costs for rapid transit projects or the Pattullo Bridge replacement.

WHAT'S NEXT:

Governance: Stone, who will meet with the mayors' council on Feb. 14, said the province will offer resources to the mayors' council before the governance changes take effect, likely in May.

Referendum: The mayors' council must decide when they want to hold the referendum: this November, next June, or potentially in 2017 and come up with a vision for regional transportation.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN:

Governance: Mayors are still analyzing the changes, but at first blush it looks like they can plan and prioritize projects while TransLink keeps hold of the budget strings.

Referendum: If mayors wait until 2017 for a referendum, this means there will be no new funding for transportation expansion until then. Consider this: it takes two years to requisition a bus fleet.

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING:

Governance:

Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan:

"They keep telling us they want us to do planning for the system but we have no resources. If we don't control the budget then what do we control?"

Todd Stone: "This is a real change that places more authority in the hands of the mayors' council."

NDP critic George Heyman: "What we

can tell is there will be no real increase in the authority of mayors to approve transit planning or transit decision-making."

Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts: "We have to do an analysis. The devil's in the details. To come out and fully respond is premature at this point in time."

Referendum:

Mayors' chairman Richard Walton:

"They want to know what projects are going ahead and on what timeline. But the funding sources have to be known

to model it properly. If the province provides parameters that only a vehicle levy and property tax are available, you've wasted two years and you're at the bottom of horseshoe canyon again."

Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie: "I still think it's a terrible idea regardless of when it will be held."

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