

Vaughn Palmer: Metro mayors get what they want from Victoria, and then some

They have five months to set transit priorities, identify funding sources and devise a referendum question

BY VAUGHN PALMER, VANCOUVER SUN FEBRUARY 6, 2014



'We agree that the current (TransLink) model does not work very well,' Transportation Minister Todd Stone said Thursday. 'I am prepared to put forward legislation that significantly increases the authority of the mayors' council.'

Photograph by: Steve Bosch, PNG

VICTORIA - On a first reading of the [announcement](#) from Transportation Minister Todd Stone Thursday, I was thinking that **Metro Vancouver mayors should have been careful what they wished for.**

They groused for weeks about the B.C. Liberal insistence on scheduling a referendum on new revenue measures for transit at the same time as the fall civic election. Not enough time to prepare.

Stone responded by agreeing the date could be moved to "no later than June 30, 2015," leaving almost a year-and-a-half of prep time for the referendum. The province would still pay full freight for staging the vote, estimated in the millions.

Metro leaders had complained repeatedly about the current TransLink structure too. Unworkable. Too much power in the appointed board. Not enough with the elected mayors.

Stone met them more than halfway on that one as well. "We agree that the current model does not work very well," the minister said. **"I am prepared to put forward legislation that significantly increases the authority of the mayors' council."**

The transfer of power will include control over long-term planning and projects, plus all of the current responsibilities of the TransLink commissioner's office for overseeing fares, customer service and control of assets.

"I believe that we are demonstrating tremendous good faith on behalf of the province," added Stone, addressing the mayors directly, "by saying we are prepared to provide you with the tools from a governance perspective, tools that you have asked for ... so that you can make the decisions that you feel you need to make as a region on future expansion. "

Not done making concessions, **Stone then announced a third move to placate the irate regional leaders. "The provincial government is prepared to commit funding one-third of major capital projects, provided funding is restricted to major new rapid transit capital and the replacement of the Pattullo**

Bridge, and that it fits within the provincial capital plan. Furthermore, we will work with local governments and advocate for matching contributions from the government of Canada."

The commitment to cover a third of the estimated \$1 billion cost of replacing the Pattullo was especially noteworthy, because the antiquated crossing has not been a provincial responsibility since the New Democrats transferred it to their version of a regional transportation authority in the 1990s.

Moving the referendum date. Transferring power to the mayor's council. Putting the province on the hook for a third of the cost of major infrastructure, including the Pattullo.

In less than half an hour, Stone had served up the elements of a major peace offering. But he threw in a couple of catches as well, the main one being a tight time line for Metro mayors to get their act together.

"We are asking the mayors' council to define a regional expansion plan by June 30, 2014," Stone explained. "This will allow time for the mayors to build a clear and articulate plan, identify the costs, funding sources and, indeed, finalize the question to support a regional campaign leading to the referendum."

The need to identify funding sources is central. If the mayors are prepared to rely exclusively on existing funding sources — the fare box and property taxes — they can proceed without further approval from the province.

Should they seek a new funding source, the Liberals intend to keep their election promise that the new levy would first have to be approved by regional referendum.

"It's any new funding source that requires provincial consent," explained Stone. "If new funding sources are identified and proposed, they must be generated within the region, and not subsidized by taxpayers in the rest of the province. In addition, the provincial government will not permit new funding to be collected from the provincial transportation system situated in the region."

So in the next five months, the regional mayors will have to complete an effort that has eluded them to date. Fix priorities: SkyTrain to UBC? Light rail through Surrey? Determine the means to pay for them: Road pricing? Regional sales tax? Then turn all that into a referendum question.

"A lot of good work has already gone into determining options in the region for expansion," said Stone, voicing optimism that the mayors can pull it off. "TransLink has been working really hard on a number of expansion scenarios. They're working hard on tightening the costs. All of that information will be made available very, very expeditiously to the mayors' council so that they have the information and have the ability in this interim period to make the tough decisions around putting a plan together with costs and priorities and phasing."

And if it doesn't all come together?

"If a vision is not ready by June 30, 2014, the next date the provincial government is willing to consider a referendum is in conjunction with the subsequent local government election." Meaning in November 2017, after that year's provincial election.

"This later date would require the mayors' council to use existing funding sources if it wishes to expand transit in the interim period."

So the squeeze is on, with the next move in this high stakes exercise in brinksmanship up to the mayors.

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