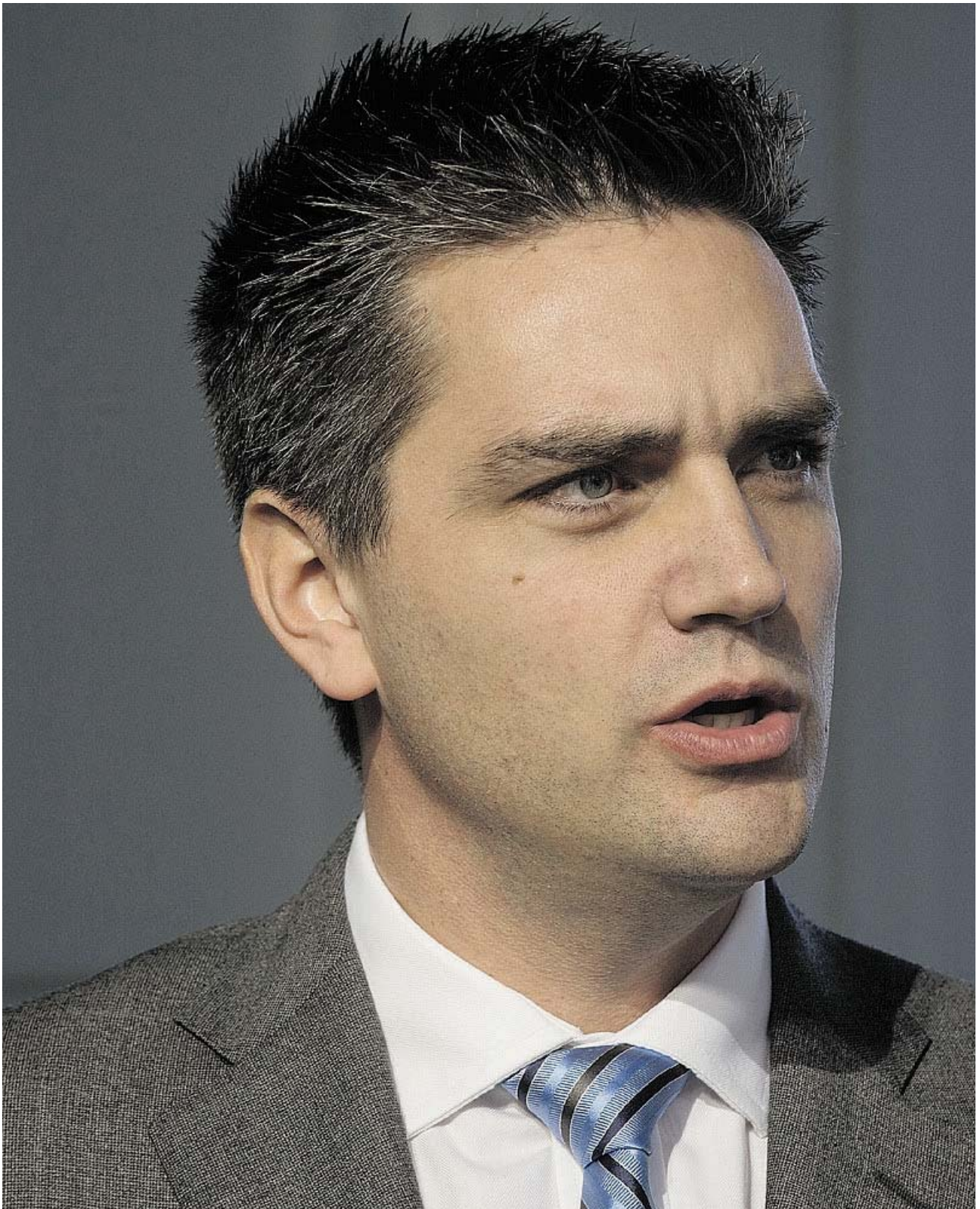


## Of local elections , long shots and B.C. Liberals' intrusive scheme

**TransLink funding: Provincial party's last attempt at a referendum on municipal election day flopped**

BY VAUGHN PALMER, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 15, 2014



Transportation Minister Todd Stone says successful referendums need a yes-no question, while Premier Christy Clark is in favour of including a number of possible re

**Photograph by:** Steve Bosch, PNG Files, Vancouver Sun

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Last time the B.C. Liberals wanted to schedule a referendum on municipal election day, the proposal was not long in going off the rails.

The year was 2005. There had been an exceptionally close result in the referendum on electoral reform, held in tandem with that year's provincial election.

Premier Gordon Campbell, having been re-elected himself, decided a rerun of the referendum was needed to give voters a chance to express a clearer verdict on the proposed switch to a system known as single transferable vote, or STV.

"A binding provincewide vote will be held at the same time as the November 2008 municipal elections," he announced in the postelection election speech from the throne, delivered in September 2005.

Immediately, concerns were raised about the proposed schedule.

Elections BC pointed out that local elections and provincial referendums were conducted under separate pieces of legislation, with different rules, registration and oversight.

Municipalities, particularly the many smaller ones, had neither the resources nor the means of adminfurther administering a provincial referendum.

Instead, the province would have to stage the referendum itself, shelling out an estimated \$25 million to \$30 million for the equivalent of a full-blown election. Presuming the electorate were to approve the switch, Elections BC cautioned that there would be little time to change over to the new system before the fixed-in-law date for the next provincial election in May 2009.

Local government leaders had their own objections. Municipal elections are there for voters to choose mayors and councils based on local issues, they argued. No way did they want a provincial issue skewing the campaign dynamic and voter turnout. Campbell, a stubborn premier if ever there was one, took several months to digest the objections. But he finally came around, citing concerns about timing and cost for abandoning his plan to hold the vote on municipal election day.

Instead, the second referendum on electoral reform was held at the same time as the 2009 provincial election, and the STV option was rejected by a decisive (60/40) margin.

Fast forward to the 2013 provincial election. The Liberals, under new premier Christy Clark, again proposed to intrude on municipal election space, this time with a referendum on new funding sources for transit improvements in Metro Vancouver.

"In order for these solutions to have legitimacy and taxpayer agreement, they need to be tested by the electorate who, ultimately, will be paying for them," said the Liberal platform, which pledged the province to work with local government leaders to identify possible sources of funding.

"Any new revenue sources would then be subject to a referendum to be held at the same time as the municipal elections in November 2014."

Having won the election, the Liberals have pressed Metro Vancouver leaders on the referendum, but with little sign of progress to date and plenty of confusion about their specific vision for the referendum.

Transportation Minister Todd Stone: "It cannot be a convoluted question with a whole bunch of boxes to tick off and so forth. The successful referendums, almost to a referendum, tend to be yes/no - one single question at the bottom."

Premier Christy Clark: "It's not going to be a yes or no option. There will be a number of options, so it will mean that people will need to do a little bit of homework, thinking about what they'd like to pay for and how they'd like to pay for it, or whether or not they'd like to just keep the status quo."

The Stone approach would provide the basis for a binding referendum: going to voters for approval to

raise a specific tax or levy to pay for a specific transit project. Clark's preference for multiple choice suggests the referendum could be more advisory than binding.

Either way, much still needs to be sorted out. Would the referendum be run by the province or local government, and under what rules? Who would pay for the cost of staging it? Would the vote be decided regionally or in each of the Metro municipalities? What if most municipalities rejected the new revenue measures only to be swamped by the electorate in a couple of the larger ones? Meanwhile, local leaders fret about time running out on any reasonable hope of securing passage for the referendum. "It's doable but it's a complex task that has to be done properly," as Richard Walton, the departing chairman of the TransLink mayor's council, put it in an interview with Vancouver Sun reporter Kelly Sinoski late last year. "There's no room for error. If people see it as a tax grab, they'll vote against it."

Speaking out this week was Richard Stewart, a former caucus colleague of Clark's who is now the mayor of Coquitlam. "If it's held during the election, there will be groups trying to make political points on both sides," he told Frances Bula of The Globe and Mail. "We need every local government official in the region focused on selling the benefits of investing in transit (but) they're just not going to have enough time."

Not surprising that local government leaders are upset. As was the case with the Liberals' last attempted intrusion into the municipal sphere, mayors and councillors have every reason to fear that their local elections will be hijacked by this halfbaked scheme.

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#### Synopsis by CJK:

The author makes an incorrect parallel between a provincial wide issue/ referendum being tied to local municipal elections vs. regional issues/ referendum tied to local municipal issues. The latter are well within the domain of municipal elections. The statement "If people see it as a tax grab, they'll vote against it" is reflective of the truth of the situation. A spade should be called a spade : it is a tax grab (or at least a tax increase). People are not stupid. The issue is whether the majority in the Metro Transit Region will agree to additional, out of pocket monies, to fund further expansion of the public transit system. This is not rocket science - and this issue deserves an honest answer by those who will fund the proposed expansion. A referendum during this years's municipal election, put to those who will pay the piper, is perfectly appropriate.