

People spoke in 2009 - did anybody listen?

Transit feedback: Road user fees, carbon pricing top options for more than 9,000 Metro residents

BY VAUGHN PALMER, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 25, 2014

Last time Metro Vancouver residents were consulted in depth, they gave strong indications about what they would and would not support in terms of new revenue sources to pay for transit expansion.

"The majority of comments and feedback recommended funding sources that can positively impact behavioural change - reduce emissions and the use of single-occupant vehicles - and are relevant to transportation," was the key finding of the lengthy consultation.

"The following revenue sources were preferred: gas tax, parking sales tax, carbon pricing and road pricing."

On the other hand, "people felt that increasing transit fares would be a detriment to the goal of increasing ridership and also identified affordability for low-income tified workers as a major concern.

Moreover "participants indicated that TransLink already received a sufficient share of property taxes: while it may be a stable funding source, it was not directly connected to transportation.

"The quotes are from the July 2009 summary report on a consultation that Trans-Link had commenced in the fall of the previous year and conducted through multiple phases over a period of 10 months.

Included in the process were some 60 presentations at the community level, where 2,700 participants provided feedback. An online consultation drew thousands more participants, and two professionally conducted surveys of public opinion between them tapped more than 9,000 Metro Vancouver residents.

If that seems inadequate alongside the B.C. Liberal government's vow to hold a fullfledged referendum on public support for "new sources of revenue for transit," the TransLink consultation was far more extensive than the one the Liberals themselves conducted in advance of the decision to put a toll on the Port Mann Bridge.

That decision was validated by the response to a single question on a feedback form distributed at public meetings and online in 2006. Some 2,300 people responded in person, by mail or online, with about 1,300 endorsing a toll of \$2.50 in then current dollars and about 1,000 rejecting the idea. On that meagre outpouring (and allowing for inflation) the Liberals went ahead and imposed the current \$3 toll.

One should note as well that the consultation quoted here was ordered by the Liberals themselves, via the enabling legislation for TransLink.

The results of the consultation provided the basis for subsequent recommendations by the Trans-Link mayor's council. But in light of the current debate on possible new revenue sources for transit, the findings are well worth revisiting.

"Participants consistently indicated that carbon pricing and road user fees should be considered as the top two options. These were preferred because people understood the relationship between the impact on the environment and the transportation network and the need to pay for sustainable alternatives.

"Some people were confused about the carbon tax: they did not realize that the levy was offset by cuts in other taxes, hence it did not generate a net increase in provincial revenues. Others were unclear about which bridges are controlled by the province (like the Port Mann) and which by Trans-Link (like the Pattullo) - points of confusion that persist today.

Still, the public offered reasonably clear support for a broad-based system of road-pricing:

"Discussions on road user fees tended to focus on tolls and congestion pricing. There was some mention of high-occupancy toll lanes. The general theme was that revenues would be generated through decisions individuals made on their transportation choices. The idea of tolling all bridges (seen as somewhat equitable) but charging a nominal fee was identified throughout the consultation process."

Measures that drew general support included parking stall fees ("overall support for an increase between 14 and 21 per cent") a vehicle levy (variable, between \$65 and \$200) and continued reliance on the fuel tax.

Other revenue-raising possibilities to emerge from the consultations, some creative, others nonstarters:

"Lotteries, carbon cap and trade system, developer tax, bicycle registration fee, real estate development, bunker fuel tax, airport and port tax, tire tax, hotel and car rental tax, luxury tax, cigarettes/liquor, public-private partnerships, municipal bonds, twocent gas tax for TransLink from everyone in the province, income tax over \$100,000/year, distancebased insurance, regional sales tax, cellphone tax, debt-financing, more advertising revenue, station naming rights."

Not to say the public wasn't conflicted here and there: "Most people had a problem balancing investment priorities with revenue. It should be noted that many of the people that said "no" to current funding sources still supported moderate or significant investment levels."

Still, to recap, the survey found "strong support for funding sources that influence behavioural change for example, kilometres travelled, fuel tax, tolls, efficiency of vehicles, etc." On that basis, the report provides a starting point for framing any referendum question on funding sources for transit.

Instead of grouching about the lack of input from TransLink and Metro Vancouver on this issue, the Liberals should recognize that it has already been provided - and at their behest, no less.

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