

Premier willing to delay TransLink funding referendum if necessary

BY KELLY SINOSKI AND ROB SHAW, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 27, 2014



Premier Christy Clark said she's willing to talk to Metro Vancouver mayors about delaying a November referendum on TransLink funding if the mayors need more time.

Photograph by: CHAD HIPOLITO, THE CANADIAN PRESS

Premier Christy Clark says she is willing to delay a November referendum on TransLink funding if Metro Vancouver mayors need more time to prepare.

The concession, delivered during a media scrum following a mining conference on Monday, comes after Metro Vancouver last week voted to oppose the referendum intended to coincide with the Nov. 14 municipal elections.

Clark, who had campaigned on a promise to hold a referendum on new funding sources for transit in Metro Vancouver, still insists that it makes sense to twin the initiative with the November elections because transit is one of the main issues in local politics, and would not only save costs but could boost voter turnout.

Although the B.C. government said last week it plans to introduce legislation this spring mandating the referendum question, Clark said Monday she is willing to talk about timing.

"I appreciate referenda can be complicated and these have been complicated in other jurisdictions, and sometimes they need a little more time," Clark told reporters. "That's what the mayors have been

saying. (Transportation Minister) Todd Stone has been continuing to talk to them about that. So will I."

Mayors have long argued that a referendum on transportation funding is doomed to fail, mainly because the province has yet to come up with a referendum question, and will provoke a number of anti-tax municipal candidates and make it difficult to debate new funding sources for transit expansion. Clark and Stone have also contradicted each other on whether it should be a yes-or-no question.

Richard Walton, chairman of the mayors' council on regional transportation, said he was pleased to hear Clark was considering delaying the referendum, noting if it was held during the civic elections it would "pre-empt discussions" on a road-pricing strategy. Mayors argue it take years to plan a referendum, which must have extensive public consultation and support, yet the civic elections are just 10 months away.

The public also has a lot of anger toward TransLink and doesn't understand what value they would get from road pricing, which could include a vehicle levy, sales tax, tolls on every bridge and tunnel, or charging drivers a fee per kilometre driven. A road pricing policy in Oregon, for instance, took years of public education.

"We're just asking for the right context," said Walton, who is also mayor of North Vancouver District. "We're all trying to get the same message out and get transportation for the region. We simply want to sit around the table and make things work. It's a chance to re-engage and that's positive."

Walton, who spoke with Stone over the weekend, said it appeared the government was trying to regroup on the referendum question. The province was also expected to come out Monday with changes to the TransLink governance structure, which would likely give mayors more control of the transit authority, but that too has likely been delayed.

Stone attempted to downplay the premier's remarks, saying they aren't necessarily different from what he has told Metro mayors in recent conversations. Holding the referendum in conjunction with municipal elections would reduce cost and improve voter turnout, he said.

"We're not convinced that changing the timeframe from November to a later date really makes sense, but if the mayors want to talk to us about that, we're prepared to talk," Stone said in an interview. "None of this is new. I have been having exactly the same conversation with the mayor's council chair."

But before conversations about timing can begin, Stone said the mayors need to unite on a vision for transit expansion that includes priorities and new funding sources.

"As things stand today, there will be a referendum concurrent with the November 2014 municipal elections," said Stone. "If the mayors believe that date should change, we're certainly prepared to continue to discuss that with them. But we're going to need the mayors to pull together and get behind a common vision and determine what the priorities are, sign off amongst themselves on a total cost for expansion and funding options, and then we'll talk."

But that doesn't make sense, said Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts. There is already a long-term transit vision in place, developed by TransLink and the independent transit board, who are legislated by the province to plan for the future, she said. "Is he asking us to go against the legislation?" she asked.

Nonetheless, Watts said she would welcome a delay on the referendum date. "Moving it off the municipal election, to allow time for information to be given to the general public, I think is a good idea," she said.

Mayors have argued that the province should focus on changing the governance structure at TransLink to give the regional directors more control over spending and transit priorities.

"They should give the public more control over TransLink," Coquitlam Mayor Richard Stewart said. "Right now, we have none. It's a private board not run by the mayors, although I get blamed for it."

Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan said he expects Clark and Stone may have realized the referendum will fail, likely because none of the mayors, including Surrey's Watts or Vancouver's Gregor Robertson — who helm B.C.'s biggest cities — are willing to step up to the plate.

"What they're discovering is there isn't much hope of passing this referendum to begin with, and in this short timeframe, it's impossible, so what you're doing is setting this referendum up for failure," Corrigan said. "There's no win for (Clark) in this."

"In some instances, it can be good for politicians to back off from something you said was going to be part of your platform. She wouldn't be the first premier who's had a sober second look."

Both Watts and Robertson have said transportation funding is critical to the economy, while Corrigan noted the business community is also "out there rattling her cage."

"They're not happy about this situation because for many of them they've identified transportation funding as critical to their future growth," he said. "They like the fact there's a lot of money going into public transportation. There's a lot of businesses out there, and unions too, who see benefits of construction work in the future and potential to make money off mega-projects."

Anita Huberman, CEO of the Surrey Board of Trade, said the referendum will "have far-reaching and even unforeseen impacts" and shouldn't be politicized because "businesses — in terms of the efficient movement of goods and people — are at risk."

Coquitlam's Stewart, meanwhile, said he hopes the province will scrap the referendum altogether, noting the livability of the region is at stake.

"I want the public to help us determine the future. But a referendum is the most divisive way across the region," he said. "There are regions very well served by public transit and regions that have almost no public transit, and you want them both to vote yes to expanding. I think it's very very difficult."

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