



Somehow simple municipal elections, involving far more complex issues, are ok!? - cjk

## Transit issues too complex for simple referendum

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BY VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 24, 2014

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The last referendum that British Columbians voted on, in 2011, resulted in the demise of the Harmonized Sales Tax.

Is this not true? The author implies that we do not pay sufficient taxes... - cjk

People can get ornery when asked to contribute more money for special public sector initiatives, believing they already pay sufficient taxes to bankroll services like transportation infrastructure.

Lower Mainlanders in particular tend not to have a lot of spare cash floating around, given the region's exorbitant housing costs.

When a South Surrey Park-and-Ride lot recently began charging cars a \$2 fee, suddenly the lot - crowded before the fee took effect - began sitting empty.

Mayor Gregor Robertson has already predicted a TransLink referendum will go down to defeat.

B.C.'s Transportation Minister Todd Stone says the province is holding one, coinciding with civic elections in the fall, to help the region's mayors who have been unable themselves to devise a funding plan.

Should not growth pay for this? - cjk

The region requires transit and infrastructure upgrades estimated to cost between \$5 billion and \$15 billion, to address congestion and population growth over the next 20 to 30 years.

Surrey says it is in need of three rapid transit lines and Vancouver wants a subway to connect the Millennium Line to the University of B.C. Then there's the Massey Tunnel which is crying out for an upgrade as is the Pattullo Bridge, where safety nets have had to be installed because chunks of debris were falling from it.

So, how to fund such projects? It's complicated since the Massey Tunnel is a provincial responsibility while rapid transit is the purview of TransLink.

And the range of funding options runs from diverting gas tax money to boosting property or sales taxes; imposing higher transit fares to introducing a vehicle levy; or creating a system of road pricing - bridge tolls and the like.

"It's a mishmash of nonsense," says Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts. "There has to be a master plan that brings together all the plans in a comprehensive way forward, for infrastructure, and sustainable

funding for it."

Of course there does. No single referendum question can address all the permutations and options that might have to be deployed to address the region's infrastructure and transit needs.

And if Stone thinks it's possible to devise a clear question, let him bring it forward.

This obviously is a complex policy matter on which politicians must show leadership, keeping in mind that Lower Mainland taxpayers are pretty tapped out financially.

While some would argue the pending referendum exercise is a worthy initiative, a way of letting people have their say, others might opine that the referendum tool is naught but a bid by provincial, regional and civil governments to avoid what is sure to be a political hailstorm.

What the politicians need to do in the next short while is to earmark precisely which projects are most pressing, then lay out clear options. Once that is done, they must attempt to justify any fees or levies to their constituents.

The real issue is - should growth pay it's own way? -cjk

That is the first step, before any referendum is scheduled or political decisions taken.

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