

# Will the referendum on transit funding be a help or hindrance?

Mayors concerned vote will hijack municipal elections, to be held at same time

BY MICHAEL SMYTH, THE PROVINCE JANUARY 19, 2014

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Metro Vancouver's population is expected to swell by around one million people over the next 20 to 30 years and the region needs more transit and  
**Photograph by:** Nick Procylo, PNG, The Province

Todd Stone, the man in the middle of Metro Vancouver's eternal war over transit expansion and how to pay for it, wants to remind everyone how we got into this mess in the first place.

The province's rookie transportation minister is in charge of this fall's referendum on transit funding - a referendum that has many metro mayors worried, confused and angry.

When exactly will the referendum be held? What will be the referendum question? Will the referendum hijack and overshadow municipal elections to be held at the same time? What if the referendum fails and metro's transit logjam is never broken? These are the questions directed at Stone, who's under increasing pressure to explain exactly how the provincial government's referendum is going to work.

But Stone points out the only reason Premier Christy Clark's government is wading into this swamp is because metro mayors couldn't drain the swamp on their own.

"The mayors have been in a stalemate around that table for a long time," he said. "We're trying to help the mayors move forward." Many mayors beg to differ, and wonder if the Clark government's meddling is going to be a help or a hindrance.

Here's the issue in a nutshell: The population of Metro Vancouver is expected to swell by around one million people over the next 20 to 30 years and the region needs more transit and transportation to deal with it.

That means anywhere from \$5 billion to \$15 billion worth of improved and expanded transit and transportation infrastructure over that same period.

But how to pay for it? Increased property taxes? Higher fares? A vehicle levy? More bridge tolls? And which projects should be built first? SkyTrain to the University of B.C.? Light rail for Surrey? More buses, roads and bridges for everywhere else? Stone argues the Mayors' Council at TransLink has responsibility for transit plans and funding, but the mayors haven't got the job done.

Enter the provincial government and its referendum, which Stone insists will be held concurrently with municipal elections on Saturday, Nov. 14.

Some mayors wanted the referendum held separately, fearing one-issue candidates will hijack local elections by campaigning against any increased taxes for transit.

"Holding a referendum at all is a contentious issue. I get that," Stone said.

"But we want to maximize voter participation and minimize the cost. We want to set this thing up for success. Holding this vote in conjunction with the municipal election is the best time."

But what will the referendum question be? "We're working hard with the mayors to put a question in front of the voters as soon as possible."

Stone has said he wants a clear and simple referendum question, while Christy Clark has speculated about a "multiple choice" referendum. So which will it be? "The premier and I

are on the same page here - any suggestion that we're not has largely been exaggerated," Stone said.

"We believe the question needs to be straightforward and needs to be simple."

Surrey Mayor Dianne Watts - who has called for region-wide less-than-a-buck tolls to pay for transit expansion - suggested this referendum question last week: "Do you support the reduction in gas tax, a cap on the existing three-per-cent on property taxes for TransLink and an implementation of a fair and equitable road-pricing policy under

one dollar to fund the expansion of the transportation system?" Not clear enough, said Stone. "It's quite convoluted," he said. "I don't think most of the public would necessarily know what 'road pricing' could mean. Road pricing could mean one million different things depending on who you talk to."

But he still applauded Watts for stepping up with a proposal and suggested other metro mayors should "quit whining" and get involved, too.

Stone also held out the possibility of the government cancelling the referendum if the Mayors' Council was able to come up with a plan on its own. Stone said the council currently has statutory authority to pay for transportation improvements through increased property taxes or fares. The referendum is only required for "new levers" of funding, like tolls or a vehicle levy, he said.

"If they (the mayors) put forward a vision that involved the use of existing levers that they already have the authority to further embrace, then of course we would have to take a look at that and consider what the implications of that would mean for holding the referendum."

In other words, if the mayors want to take the political blame for hiking local property taxes, the province would consider backing off.

But if they want to spread the tax hit around to other groups - like drivers - then the referendum is on, no matter how much whining is heard.

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