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Disparity in financing plagues transit tax plebiscite 9

To ensure a fair plebiscite vote on a new congestion improvement tax, the Yes and No campaigns should battle it out on a level playing field. Unfortunately, that is not what will occur. In contrast to what transpired in the 2011 HST referendum campaign in B.C., Yes forces in the upcoming mail-in vote on a tax to finance \$7.5 billion worth of transportation projects will have an advantage in being uniquely able to access taxpayers' resources.

The No forces, meanwhile, led by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, are generating their own cash through donations, hoping to raise \$40,000 — in contrast to the \$4 million the municipal government-led Yes forces anticipate spending.

In the 2011 referendum campaign, the province appointed an arm's-length referendum financing decision-maker, Stephen Owen, tasked with equitably determining which groups and organizations would receive \$500,000 in public funds to advocate for the two responses to the referendum question. The province also funded a \$500,000 Public Dialogues Fund to finance public education events and produced a \$700,000 voter's guide sent to every household.

The system was seen as fair since neither side got a particular financial advantage. The outcome of the HST vote generated disappointment for some but the process was seen as being without bias.

That is important. If all British Columbians have to live with the result of the transportation plebiscite, they should perceive activities in the lead up to the vote as fair, with no advantage given to either side.

Which is why it is disconcerting to hear the leader of the Yes forces, Gregor Robertson, defend a decision to use "some city resources" in the Yes campaign. The Vancouver mayor said staff soon would be reporting back on the specific resources to be allocated.

Robertson is defending special financial treatment from the city for the Yes side by citing little more than desperation. "We have to see a Yes vote on this," he told reporters last week. "The consequences of not supporting the transit plan and investing in transit for the next decade would be devastating for the region."

But this is the very issue voters have been assigned to decide — that is why the plebiscite is being held. Using public resources to advance the Mayors' Council plan before voters endorse it is putting the cart before the horse, and more than a little presumptuous.

Besides, many No voters agree with Vancouver's mayor that the transportation investments are warranted. They just differ on where the cash for those investments should come from. And they do not want city resources deployed to help the mayor's cause.

Moreover, it is difficult not to concur with a view from Jordan Bateman, of the taxpayers federation: "We pay taxes to provide services, not to try to buy votes."

If Robertson has as strong a case as he contends, the mayor — like the taxpayers federation — should be able to raise money for his cause from supporters in the community. Then, if the Yes side wins, Robertson will be able to claim to have won fair and square.

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