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TransLink tax: North Shore's mayors take sides

Yes and No camps ramp up debate

Jane Seyd / North Shore News

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File photo Cindy Goodman

Forget the old \$64,000 question.

This spring, it's the \$2.5-billion question that will be occupying Lower Mainland voters.

That's the amount mayors across Metro Vancouver are hoping to raise over the next decade with a new tax to help fund what they describe as crucial expansions of the transportation system.

But first, voters must decide if the new half a percentage point regional sales tax is something they're willing to pay.

For the mayors' council on regional transportation, selling a new sales tax to voters and winning approval in a public referendum was never anyone's first choice to fund a transit expansion.

But transportation systems cost money, and that money has to come from somewhere, argues District of North Vancouver Mayor Richard Walton, who chaired the mayors' council until last month.

Gas taxes and carbon taxes were politically unpopular while vehicle levies had been flatly rejected by the province.

Road pricing — that would use a variety of means to toll drivers for distance travelled — remains the favoured choice of local leaders. But it requires planning and co-operation from the province to put in place.

A new sales tax emerged as the best option through a narrowing down of other choices — and political expedience.

With a million more people expected to settle in the Lower Mainland over the next 30 years, "We're at that tipping point in Vancouver right now," said Walton.

The \$7.5-billion mayors' plan assumes the new tax will provide \$250 million each year towards the plan, while the federal and provincial governments are expected to kick in \$1.5 billion and \$1.6 billion respectively. That money from senior levels of government isn't

1 million new people; \$7.5 Billion in extra cost: That's a "subsidy" of \$7,500 for every new resident moving here. - cjk

guaranteed, Walton acknowledges.

The remaining \$1.9 billion is projected to come from Pattullo bridge tolls and fares from use of the expanded transit services.

Big-ticket projects included in the transportation plan include a new light rail system for Surrey, an Arbutus corridor subway in Vancouver and a new Pattullo Bridge.

The plan also includes 11 new B-Line buses for the region, including three in North Vancouver, a 25 per cent increase in buses and a 50 per cent increase in SeaBus service.

The Yes side puts the cost of the new tax at \$125 per household each year. The No side puts it at just over \$250.

The North Vancouver Chamber of Commerce is among the business groups supporting the Yes side.

While sales taxes aren't loved by businesses, the current transit plan is "the best plan we have on the table," said Louise Ranger, chief executive officer for the chamber. "We're probably not going to get this close again for a long period of time."

Gridlock familiar to North Shore residents trying to make it over local bridges ends up costing money when employees or goods are continually stuck in traffic, said Ranger.

The mayors' plan estimates it will cut traffic congestion by 20 per cent in the region. But not everyone is convinced voting Yes will solve our transportation troubles.

West Vancouver Mayor Michael Smith is one of only three mayors in the region who has been outspoken on the No side of the debate.

Smith's main objection to the tax is that mayors will have no control over how the money is spent and can't guarantee any of its projects, because TransLink will decide that. "The mayors' caucus does not control the money that's going to be raised by this tax," he said.

Smith said while he supports expansion of the transit system, he doesn't support giving more cash to TransLink. "Right now it's a political football kicked back and forth between the province and the region," said Smith. "Where's the accountability?"

Smith added local mayors should have stuck to their guns and refused to take part in a referendum.

Jordan Bateman, spokesman for the Canadian Taxpayers Federation who is leading the No side of the debate, enthusiastically endorses Smith's arguments.

TransLink has earned its bad reputation with taxpayers, said Bateman. "I just can't trust them with any more tax dollars," said Bateman. "It's like giving a pyromaniac more matches. TransLink burns through cash."

Bateman added opening up sales taxes to new levels of government sets a bad precedent.

Like Smith, Bateman points out that "there's no sunset clause on this tax" — once it's in place, it will likely never be removed, and may even be increased, he said.

Ballots will be mailed to registered voters in the Lower Mainland starting March 16. Voters have until May 29 to mail in their ballots.