

Critic protests unlimited spending limits in transit referendum campaign



By Surrey Leader

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Opponents of a new sales tax to expand transit are accusing the provincial government of failing to set any spending limits in the referendum campaign.

No campaigner Jordan Bateman claims the Yes side is poised to spend \$4 million in taxpayers' money without restriction and he's now urging the Auditor General for Local Government to intervene.

"You have a premier, minister, a ministry, TransLink, the mayors and the NDP – they're all in the Yes camp and they're all willing turn a blind eye to this effort to use taxpayers' money to buy votes to get another tax," Bateman said. "It's banana republic politics."

Bateman argues no public money from TransLink, any local cities or the Metro Vancouver regional district be spent to influence the outcome of the vote and that any "educational" advertising first be vetted for neutrality and bias.

He said spending is just one facet of the referendum rules that remain unresolved as the campaign gears up on the plebiscite to create a 0.5 per cent Congestion Improvement Tax that would apply only in Metro Vancouver.

Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore said the \$4-million estimate was discussed in December but the regional mayors' council has not yet set any specific budget for the planned information campaign, nor has it determined the source of the money.

He said Vancouver, Surrey and New Westminister councils have already voted to provide either cash or in-kind contributions.

The mayors' council itself may also have some room in its \$1-million annual budget that isn't otherwise spent on meetings, mayors' pay and consultants.

"For any other public money required we would probably be looking to TransLink," Moore said, adding TransLink has an annual communications budget for consultation and advertising initiatives such as route changes.

"They've indicated it would come out of that budget not an operational budget."

He defended the decision to spend public money promoting the tax and the plan to expand service.

Polling indicates residents don't have enough knowledge of the transit expansion plan and what it will do for each part of the region, he said.

"It's a requirement of someone – and I think it's the mayors of this region – to get out there and let people know what's in this plan

and what they're being asked to pay for," Moore said, adding it's his understanding that there are no spending limits set by the province.

He said Bateman is "grasping at straws" in trying to block public spending.

The municipal auditor-general examines cities' spending after the fact and has no authority to intervene in a referendum campaign, Moore said.

A separate pro-Yes campaign is expected to be funded by various groups that have joined forces under the banner of the Better Transit and Transportation Coalition.

Moore said the mayors' council is also checking to see if it can "piggy back" off local cities to save money – potentially by including information in utility bill notices going out in the weeks ahead instead of a separate mail-out.

Bateman said all the Yes funding should come from the coalition members instead of local government.

"Surely if you have this many big business and big union groups involved they can raise money to fund the Yes side of this campaign."

A spokesman at Elections BC said he had no information to provide on spending limits or financing rules until the transportation ministry finishes writing the plebiscite regulation.

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