

2 Feb 2016 The Vancouver Sun Mario Mario Canseco is vice-president of Insights West's public affairs division.

On transit, we just don't want to pay for anything

No easy answer: A tax increase is anathema to most residents, creating a dilemma for the region as it searches for funds

In the 15th century, John Morton, then the Archbishop of Canterbury, explained the rationale for establishing a new taxation regime for England through a statement known as Morton's Fork. For the archbishop, the rich had to pay more taxes because they could afford to live extravagantly, and the poor had to pay more taxes because they had already demonstrated the ability to save and live frugally.



PNG FILES A rendering depicts a proposal for a bridge to replace the Massey Tunnel, supported by 51 per cent of respondents to a recent poll.

The world of politics has provided many opportunities to look at more modern versions of Morton's Fork and false dichotomies. In Metro Vancouver, the failure of the Yes side in last year's transit plebiscite can be partly attributed to a campaign that appeared to pit two groups — drivers and transit users — against each other. Several news conferences and forward-looking statements outlined doom for vulnerable groups, and even health problems if residents did not consent to a tax hike. In the end, most of us chose No, including both drivers and transit riders.

When Insights West conducted an exit poll following the vote, 62 per cent of Metro Vancouver residents cited "reforming the way TransLink operates" as their main priority for the future, clearly outperforming the need to ensure provincial and federal funds for transportation and coming up with a Plan B to deliver infrastructure projects. Reforming TransLink was the top priority for both Yes voters (44 per cent) and No voters (82 per cent). There is some common ground between these two supposed enemies after all.

This month, Insights West found that half of Metro Vancouverites (51 per cent) support a proposal to replace the existing George Massey Tunnel with a new tolled bridge along the Highway 99 corridor. There are several reasons for this high number: The project is new, it is easier for people to understand why users need to pay for it, and it will not affect many residents who commute from the North Shore or from east to west.

Along with the question on the proposed Massey Bridge, we wanted to find out what the appetite from residents would be on other methods to help fund transit projects in Metro Vancouver.

Nobody expects to see people welcoming a tax hike with a smile on their faces. Still, the level of animosity toward some of the options is extremely high. At the top end of the scale are two ideas that are rejected by 71 per cent of Metro Vancouver residents: increasing property taxes (the quick-fix solution espoused by the provincial government after the plebiscite they first introduced during the 2013 campaign was defeated), and increasing fuel taxes.

A hike in transit fares is rejected by 65 per cent of residents, although drivers do not seem so upset by the idea. And while 60 per cent of us would not like to see vehicle levies (either implemented for every car on the road or based on the distance travelled throughout the year), transit riders are more likely to see them as a solution.

The most favoured idea is tolling bridges (supported by 43 per cent of Metro Vancouverites, and more than the 31 per cent who would endorse tolling specific roads). Again, the level of support is lower than what we see for a new Massey Bridge, partly because people react negatively to the notion of paying for infrastructure that they are already enjoying free of charge.

The other issue that is affecting perceptions is the state of the economy: provincial, national and global. At the time the plebiscite discussions began in November 2014, two-thirds of British Columbians (67 per cent) rated the province's economic conditions in a positive light. This month, that number has dropped to 46 per cent. Frugality has set in, with residents saying they plan to spend less on entertainment and dining out, and expecting more expensive groceries. Any proposal to take more money from our pockets is going to be controversial.

Whatever course of action provincial and municipal politicians choose, a problem will endure: Residents of Metro Vancouver are still reticent to part with their money. They fear that the provincial economy is in decline. They want other people to pay first. Homeowners will not tolerate a new hike on property taxes. It will be considerably more difficult to sell the idea of new sources of funding for transportation now than it was 14 months ago.

The last time a Morton's Fork was placed in front of Metro Vancouver voters, even with the backing of popular politicians, associations, developers, unions and millions of dollars in campaign funds, most voters saw through it. It will take a lot of policy work, which must include delivering on a long-awaited reform of TransLink and its operations, for any new source of funding to be seen as positive for both community and resident.