

OPINION

Plebiscite loss is one for the books

TransLinked to failure: In Everyone But the People, the No-side point men explain how they took on the unassailable mayors' council — and won



Barbara Yaffe

So, how did two guys with barely any resources take on a Goliath of well-funded politicians and community groups to defeat last spring's transit plebiscite?

The story is now revealed, from the victors' viewpoint, in a new book out Friday, titled *Everyone But the People: How Everyday Taxpayers Overcame Vancouver's Elite and Defeated the TransLink Tax*.

Authors Jordan Bateman, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation's B.C. director who led the No forces during the plebiscite campaign, and Hamish Marshall, a former Stephen Harper operative who acted as campaign manager, describe the strategies deployed during their months-long campaign.

They wrote the book, Bateman says, to "debunk the Yes-side myth that the plebiscite was unwinnable all along," and provide tips to others taking on similar battles.

To refresh memories, the plebiscite had been a 2013 election pledge by Christy Clark that the public would get to decide how future transportation initiatives would be funded.

The mayors, always lukewarm to a plebiscite, felt they had no choice but to propose a new tax — a 0.5 percentage point hike to the PST. They pitched it to Vancouverites last year as the only way to fund an overdue expansion of the region's buses and rapid-transit lines.

The mayors' council spent nearly \$7 million on its campaign, against \$40,000 spent by Bateman and Marshall. Voters turned thumbs down by a 62 per cent margin.

Was the plebiscite really unwinnable from the start? Did the mayors' side have an impossible task, regardless of any efforts by the No-side?

Some might think so. Asking people to raise their own taxes is a long-shot proposition, especially in Vancouver where finances are stretched by housing costs.

That said, it is worth remembering that before the campaign began, Yes forces were ahead, with 57 per cent favouring the mayors' council plan, and 43 per cent opposed.

Numbers started shifting in favour of the No side in February of last year, and by July, the vote results were 62 per cent against a new tax, 38 per cent in favour.



WAYNE LEIDEN/ROSTING FILES

Jordan Bateman, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation's B.C. director and one of the few public figures to speak out against last spring's transit plebiscite, says the book *Everyone But the People* is meant to 'debunk the Yes-side myth that the plebiscite was unwinnable all along.'

It is impossible to say definitively that this was the result of the No TransLink Tax campaign. But the results suggest it had some impact, especially given that Bateman and Marshall were almost entirely alone as voices of opposition.

The authors report that they knew their side had it in the bag that February day when TransLink demoted head honcho Ian Jarvis, who was earning more than \$400,000 a year in salary, benefits and bonuses. The move was tantamount to a Yes-side endorsement of the No-side argument that TransLink was poorly run.

Bateman and Marshall believe the secret to their success was a steely focus on the message that TransLink could not be trusted to spend wisely.

And the organization may still not have learned its lesson about overspending, having just hired new CEO Kevin Desmond with a fat-cat salary of \$365,000 a year.

The No proponents exploited TransLink's poor reputation, referring to the "TransLink tax," the "TransLink plebiscite" and "the TransLink mayors."

They strategically identified the Broadway subway as the "Arbutus subway" to alert people that the proposed SkyTrain extension would not go all the way to UBC. They also cast themselves as upbeat, happy warriors.

They kept their communications simple, highlighting only two numbers: the \$25.8 per year they contended the new tax would cost households, and their finding that, if Lower Mainland

mayors earmarked 0.5 per cent of municipalities' projected annual revenue growth, they could raise the needed cash. (This gave them cover for those who accused them of irresponsibility or having no solutions.)

Bateman and Marshall could not afford advertising spreads, so they sponsored low-cost radio traffic reports, each one carrying a brief tag line encompassing their message.

The whole episode turned out to be a train wreck for the provincial government, the mayors and TransLink — which is why, since then, heads have rolled at TransLink, the cabinet minister in charge has been switched, and all eyes have turned to Ottawa as a source of infrastructure cash.

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