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BALDREY: 'Yes' vote on transit tax would be epic

[Keith Baldrey](#) / North Shore News

December 19, 2014 12:00 AM

Not our local governments! - cjk

If a majority of Metro Vancouver voters endorse TransLink's proposed half-point increase in the sales tax to fund transportation projects, the ramifications could go well beyond the region and the specific issue being voted on.

A successful Yes vote will have meant people actually voted for a tax increase, which has been an unheard of proposition for a decade now. Governments of all stripes have tried to outpace each other in cutting taxes, not raising them, the theory being give the people what they want. But if people actually support a tax increase because they equate it with clearly outlined service improvements, it may embolden governments to at least revisit some tax policies. Revenue streams of various sorts have been drying up for years, and money has to come from somewhere if government services are to be maintained or expanded. Of course, getting that majority Yes vote to materialize is going to take some doing.

Even though it can be argued that Metro Vancouver mayors opted for the cheapest, if not most timid, option to raise money for projects, the idea of even a tiny tax increase is going to rankle many. Voters have long seemed cranky when it comes to tax hikes. They feel they already pay enough in taxes (and user fees) and don't get enough of a return on what they pay right now. When taxes are imposed on people in the way property taxes or income taxes are, voters can take out their resentment in an election and penalize the politicians who imposed those taxes, should they choose to do so. But in this case people are being asked beforehand to accept a tax hike, and that is a considerably different situation.

The reasons to vote yes will no doubt strike many as sound and sensible, but that can matter little in a referendum. And it has been clear for some time that while many, many people want more and better transportation options, they see no inconsistency in their view that someone other than themselves should pay for them.

Potentially even more problematic for the Yes side is that this referendum may actually become, for many people, a referendum on TransLink itself. The organization is every transit user or stuck-in-traffic motorist's favourite whipping boy, and even the mayors who run it aren't exactly keen fans

of the company either.

Leading the No side will be the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, which tends to paint almost all public spending and taxation as questionable and don't really provide alternatives to what they are criticizing (other than simplistically saying stop spending or stop taxing).

Nevertheless, the organization is good at getting its message out through effective media campaigns, and already it has dubbed its referendum campaign the "No TransLink Tax Campaign."

Funding transit through referendums is fairly common in many cities in the United States, but it's a new concept here. The successful referendums in the U.S. (which have resulted in funding hikes) usually occur after lengthy campaigns - sometimes lasting more than a year - to shape public opinion accordingly.

But in TransLink's case, the Yes side will only have several months to make their sales pitch.

A broad-based coalition is forming to support the Yes side, and it includes politicians of all stripes as well as business leaders and several key unions. But it's unclear whether they can convince the people they purport to represent to actually mail in a ballot marked Yes.

More than 20 years ago, we saw another broad coalition of strange political bedfellows band together to ensure the Yes side won in a referendum. That would be the Charlottetown Accord, a proposed change to the Canadian constitution, which went down to defeat despite the fact the "establishment" insisted it was a worthy endeavor.

We may be about to witness the same thing again, with a situation where the "leaders" insist they know best, while a suspicious public feels otherwise. But if the Yes side beats the odds and actually pulls off a victory, perhaps the days of tax revolts may finally be nearing an end and governments will stop being leery about even talking about tax hikes.

It's a long shot, I know, but a majority vote for a tax increase - no matter how small - may well prove to be groundbreaking.

Keith Baldrey is chief political reporter for Global BC.

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