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JAMES: Transit governance is mired in conflict

[Elizabeth James](#) / North Shore News

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"I will never buy the pig in the poke; there's many a foul pig hidden behind fair cloak." – playwright John Heywood, Proverbs and Epigrammes, 1497-1580

Unlike John Heywood's pig, the problems in TransLink's pre-referendum poke are not well hidden — they've been accumulating for 16 years.

But before I launch into the issues surrounding the vote, I need to state my position: Although I wish that, collectively, municipal politicians would stand up to the provincial government, my comments here are not directed at specific individuals but at what West Vancouver Mayor Michael Smith and Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan rightly called the "dysfunctional, flawed governance model" of TransLink.

I agree we need an efficient, regionwide transit system and that, provided low-income families are protected, a small addition to the sales tax may be the fairest way to provide TransLink with more funding for its \$7.5-billion plan.

So what are my beefs?

Firstly, the mayors' council made eight commitments in return for additional revenue; Transportation Minister Todd Stone's watered-down version had only seven. In blending the mayors' references to crowded and/or deficient bus services, Stone removed their specific commitment to 11 new B-Line routes that would be faster and make connections to town centres. Why?

Secondly, the mayors referred to a "new earthquake-ready" Pattullo Bridge, the minister omitted that descriptor. Why?

Thirdly, Stone also removed the mayors' reference to light-rail transit for Surrey's planned connections to Guildford, Newton and Langley. That leaves the transit mode and routes open to Victoria's meddling fingers.

Fourthly, for Vancouver, the mayors talked of extending the Millennium Line in a tunnel along Broadway whereas, Canada Line-style, Stone just said "rapid transit along Broadway." Neither question mentioned UBC. That's because the line will end at Arbutus and students would still need to transfer to B-Line buses if they actually wanted to attend classes.

Lastly, where the mayors said they would improve safety for pedestrians and cyclists, Stone specifically mentioned extending "the region's cycling and pedestrian walkway networks." Neither side appears ready to upset the cycling vote-block by suggesting cyclists over age 19 share the cost via annual licences and insurance.

So having read the preamble and because nothin's done for nothin' I'm left with the most important questions of all for the minister: Why did you amend the mayors' references to a 0.5 per cent increase to the sales tax to read, "A new 0.5% Metro Vancouver Congestion Improvement Tax," why change "referendum" to "plebiscite" and why omit the mayors' commitment to

independent audits and public reporting?

Were the changes just a thinly disguised marketing ploy or is it that you couldn't risk any comparison with local government referendums which require dollars approved to be spent only on the projects specifically described in pre-referendum advertising?

The final point concerns the chamber of commerce: We all know efficient transportation is essential to business but it needs to be affordable. Did you survey your regional members before rushing over to the "Yes" side? If not, why not?

Now for the dysfunctional and flawed governance model: There is no more glaring example to cite than the outright conflict of interest in which the system has placed District of North Vancouver Mayor Richard Walton.

Newly elected members of council swear an oath under the Local Government Act to foster the economic, social and environmental well-being of their (own) communities. Trouble is, any of those members who are named to un-elected Metro Vancouver committees are required to remove their municipal hats when serving on a regional committee, such as the Mayors' Council on Regional Transportation (TransLink) that Walton chairs.

Implied by oath to abide by Community Charter where this is outlined. - cjk

I hope you're keeping track of the conflicts because there's a significant one yet to come:

Last September two members of the council were appointed to the TransLink board, one of whom is also Walton. So what happens to the best interests of the constituents the mayor was elected to serve when they collide with (a) the wishes of a Metro Vancouver board or committee; (b) a TransLink decision; (c) a mayors' council decision, or (d) the highly politicized and provincially manipulated TransLink board?

Apart from the five or more fiduciary conflicts created for incumbents in that system, regional taxpayers did not need more politics on the TransLink board. What they do need and have a right to hear are the voices and advice of internationally experienced transportation professionals — individuals capable of evaluating the transit needs of the region at arms-length from 16 years of political and corporate interference and influence.

Unless and until that happens and we can read the results of a pre-referendum, independent, value-for-money audit, I will never buy the pig in the poke — not as originally drafted by the mayors' council, nor the non-binding mail-in ballot written by Transportation Minister Todd Stone.

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