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BALDRY: Great transit plan, mayors - who's paying?

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As far as wish lists go, the one put together by Metro Vancouver's mayors when it comes to future transit and transportation improvements is indeed an impressive one.

It's got something for everyone, pretty much no matter where they live.

Take the SeaBus all the time? No problem, they'll increase the number of sailings. Need to travel down West Broadway in Vancouver? Why, here's a subway for you, at least part of the way. Whether you need to cross the Fraser River, take buses anywhere or get from A to B in Surrey, the plan has something for you.

But what it doesn't have, and what may be its Achilles Heel, is any certainty when it comes to how to pay for all this stuff. And it's expensive stuff: \$7.5 billion.

Oh, the mayors have come up with some ideas on the funding front: bridge tolls, road "pricing" (which can be interpreted in different ways), property taxes and, oh yes, a massive cash injection from "senior" governments might fund everything.

But one idea - getting \$250 million from the provincial government's carbon tax revenue - was quickly shot down by the

provincial transportation minister. This was entirely predictable and in fact mayors were signalled that tapping into the provincial carbon tax was a non-starter, so why it was included in the revenue grab bag is mystifying.

Of course, the provincial government will have to help fund some part of whatever transportation infrastructure plan ultimately comes to fruition in Metro Vancouver, but what that translates to remains to be seen (although, it will be funding a new Massey Bridge to the tune of about \$2 billion, hardly chump change).

After all, improving transportation is vital to economic growth. The movement of goods and services around the metro region is critical to the local

economy, and it's in the provincial government's own interest to help fund those improvements.

Still, the mayors deserve credit for being able to recognize which projects and needs have priority in the region. Their plan is a long-term one - stretching out for 30 years - and is based on a huge spike in population size.

Getting them to agree on a grand plan is no small feat. For so long, parochial interests have prevented them from seeing the need to accommodate each other's interests.

But the mayors' plan raises two key questions: is everything in it actually needed, and is it all affordable? On what's needed, I suppose one can argue all kinds of significant transportation and transit improvements and investments will be "needed" over a long period of time.

However, Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan seems to be the only one to grasp the key political reality - voters (those who keep these mayors in or out of office) will surely bristle at a plan that threatens to reach deep into their wallets, and getting provincial and federal governments to fork over

huge amounts of cash is a pipe dream.

I've written before about the conundrum facing the mayors: everyone wants more service, and everyone wants someone else - that guy over there in that car, that person on the bus - to pay for it all.

People feel taxed-out, and it will be interesting to see if the mayors aggressively push for their constituents to pay for tolls, road pricing and higher property taxes to pay for enormously expensive infrastructure.

All this is leading to a referendum, which presumably will give voters the chance to say yes or no to a host of taxation and revenue measures. Am I the only one to think the no side will crush the yes side? Reason doesn't enter into this debate. Most people cannot comprehend the sheer financial enormity of what the mayors are proposing, and cling to a belief that a magical solution does indeed exist, one that sees things built without costing them a nickel more.

Last week's Ontario election result, like the last B.C. election, serves as a reminder that some old assumptions about elections have to be challenged.

First, political polling may be a sunset industry. A series of polls in the last couple of days suggested a statistical dead heat between the Liberals and the Conservatives, and a surge in NDP support. Instead, the Liberals romped to an easy majority win.

Secondly, calling a government "scandalplagued" doesn't seem to hurt its re-election chances. Instead, voters these days seem to be wary of change, no matter how many so-called scandals dog an incumbent government.

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