

The move towards a "utility" model will just result in significantly increased property taxes - something the Mayors promised not to do! - cjk

TRANSPORTATION

Mayors want more control over TransLink

Metro to consider asking staff to review alternative governance, like making it a utility

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Metro Vancouver will consider a motion next month to create a separate transit district as a utility — similar to what is done now for the region's sewer and water services.

Pitt Meadows Mayor John Becker put forward a motion to the Metro board Friday, asking staff to review alternative governance structures for TransLink — including Metro's utility model — to provide road and transit services across the region.

The move, which will be debated by the Metro board next month, could potentially give regional directors more control over TransLink operations and spending, as well as the ability to collect regional service taxes to pay for it.

"We need to reinvent how this process works," Becker said after the meeting. "It strikes me that it is the mayors who are looked to, rightly or wrongly, by the residents of the region as the ones who are responsible for transit. The only other agency with the capacity to undertake this review is the (regional district)."

The motion comes a day after regional voters crushingly defeated a proposed 0.5 per cent sales tax increase, which would have generated \$250 million annually for TransLink's 10-year, \$7.5-billion transportation expansion. Mayors argue the rejection, which was delivered by mail-in ballot as part of a region-wide plebiscite, was triggered not only by the public's distaste for a new tax but its distrust of TransLink. They say service cuts are inevitable because there will be no new money for transit or even road maintenance.

"We will face, as I've mentioned earlier, a future that is more difficult, it certainly is going to be more congested until we have this long-term funding sorted



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Interim TransLink CEO Doug Allen, seen Thursday commenting on the results of the transit plebiscite, warns that the rejection of a sales tax hike to pay for a \$7.5-billion transportation expansion will result in reduced public transit services, longer waiting times for buses and more crowding.

out," said TransLink interim CEO Doug Allen.

Without the sales tax, Allen said, TransLink will struggle to maintain the status quo, and will continue to shift buses from less-revenue-performing areas such as Port Coquitlam to crowded routes like Vancouver's Broadway. It will also contemplate reducing frequency levels in some areas, meaning a 15-minute wait could grow to as much as an hour, as well as lower frequency on low-performing routes during weekends.

The effects of the plebiscite will likely be felt more acutely two years from now, when TransLink had estimated the first new batch of B-Line express buses would hit the region's streets. The buses would have brought with them frequent all-day bus service — and peak service on busy routes — of at least every 15 minutes across the region.

Without them, TransLink warns there will be even more bus pass-ups, especially on busy routes like Vancouver's Main, Fraser and Victoria and Broadway. On the latter bus route, half the trips originate outside Vancouver, leaving students heading to the University of B.C. waiting even longer to get a bus in the morning and afternoon.

Meanwhile, fast-growing Surrey — which has registered 9,500 new cars every year over the last decade — will likely see more drivers clog the streets because it won't get the influx of B-Line express buses it had expected. (The first leg of Surrey's light rail line wasn't expected until seven years after the vote, and the rest five years later).

Surrey Mayor Linda Hepner has said she will continue to pursue private partners to build the system, but would not say how she would feed the system if

there are no additional buses to carry passengers across the city.

Allen insisted service won't be completely cut anywhere. But the mayors warn without new funding sources, the situation will worsen. Regional mayors have reiterated calls to the provincial government to "fix" TransLink's governance by giving them more control and making it more accountable and transparent, while addressing its chronic funding gap.

Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore said Becker's proposal to move to a utility model is both "feasible and practical," noting Metro Vancouver has the expertise and mechanisms in place as it runs both the sewer and water districts as well as other core services. He wasn't sure what form such a utility could take, but suggested transit and transportation could be a separate organization, while merging portions of

it with the regional district. For instance, the corporate office could potentially manage the board, while the Metro utilities committee managed the transportation authority.

"The regional district would take on the role of delivering road and transportation services," Moore said. "The notice of motion looked at the governance and accountability of TransLink. The mayors' council has had a position that governance should be by local (municipalities). Why not look at it in more detail?"

Any changes to TransLink governance would require approval from the B.C. government, which has been hesitant to give the mayors more control.

Metro Vancouver and the provincial government have a long history of butting heads over TransLink. The transit authority was initially run by local politicians who were responsible for funding everything from buses and trains to roads and bridges, but they were replaced with an unelected board. Mayors now complain they have little control over TransLink's priorities, while the province has consistently stepped in to approve mega-projects like the Canada Line over cheaper transit such as light rail.

Transportation Minister Todd Stone was not available for an interview Friday, but said the province would work with the mayors on governance changes, noting he expects the system will improve once a new TransLink CEO is hired this fall.

"The people involved in this debate very clearly said they have concerns at how TransLink is run," Stone said.

He said if he was choosing a new CEO, he would look for someone who spends more time out of the office, focuses on customer service and will "build public confidence in what is a pretty good system."

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