

## THE NEWSPAPER'S VIEW

# Metro still needs a plan for transit

**T**he public's expression of doubt in official wisdom about how to fund much-needed future transit infrastructure for Metro Vancouver came nowhere close to the "near run thing" predicted. Instead it was a decisive Waterloo for municipal Napoleons, as TransLink and its mayoral supporters were both cast by opponents and clearly appear to be perceived by voters.

The well-organized "No" side tallied a margin of 61.6 per cent of ballots cast, a margin of almost two-to-one over the "Yes" campaign supporting a 0.5 per cent sales tax to pay for future transit needs. Approval for the tax prevailed in only three of 23 communities. However, to keep even that in perspective, those communities represented only 0.3 per cent of the total vote.

For such an important issue, half Metro's voters didn't even bother, which means the plan was vetoed by about 31.6 per cent of eligible voters. Of course, the corollary is that it was supported by only 19.5 per cent. But let's leave the parsing of electoral statistics to the political scientists and take the result at face value. Voters in Canada's third-largest conurbation have offered a sharp rebuff to a provincial government that sought to shield itself from political fallout over its muddled transportation policies by foisting a plebiscite on the mayors; to municipal governments characterized as tax-and-spend profligates; and to TransLink itself, which was portrayed as a symbol of bloated, incompetent, self-entitlement.

Nevertheless, this is a democracy and in a democracy it is the ballot box that instructs governments in policy. In this case, agree with it or not, the instruction is clear. The sales tax option is a non-starter with a frustrated and cranky public. So it must be back to the drawing boards for the province, municipal governments and TransLink planners. They now need to come up with Plan B — and Plans C and D, for that matter — and they need to frame alternatives swiftly so that the region can move ahead with the integrated transportation infrastructure Metro Vancouver must have both to cope with unrelenting population growth and to generate economic growth and prosperity for the region.

What's not needed is a retreat into self-interest on the part of mayors and municipalities. The worst possible way to approach a rebuff by voters is for mayors to permit the response to transit needs to fragment into a series of ad hoc local measures or for TransLink to permit service to deteriorate and adopt a defensive "I told you so" attitude. And if the "No" campaigners are as mature as they profess, they will forgo triumphal crowing and present some acceptable and workable alternatives that go beyond simplistic nostrums like "do more with less" and "find efficiencies."

Great cities are defined by great transit systems. If Metro Vancouver really wants to move its game to the next level, it will now have to demonstrate the maturity to accept the advice from citizens and seek alternatives that find different ways to achieve the desired outcomes. Doing nothing is not an option. The democratic process has indicated other measures must be explored. Now is the time to set aside recrimination and crowing and get on with the still unresolved problem of what to do about providing the transit infrastructure that citizens, businesses and industry will require in a rapidly growing region.