

# Give people a real voice

**After No vote:** Let citizens' assembly help politicians make decisions

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**W**ell, no one said it would be easy. On the contrary, there were early signs it was going to be extraordinarily difficult to persuade voters to mark Yes on their transit ballots.

Take the Broadway B-Line bus driver who told me while driving during rush hour he planned to vote No despite the evidence being overwhelming that a new rapid transit solution is needed on the Broadway corridor.

Take my friends, a very progressive elderly couple who want enhanced transit in the city but who voted No.

My hunch is there are many people who support the need for better transit but for some reason voted against it: can't trust TransLink; can't trust government; how can we be sure the tax revenue will go to building transit?; the proposed sales tax is regressive. Never mind that Metro Vancouver is an incredibly expensive place to live and many people are tapped out.

So a No vote is no surprise.

Maybe you object that the voters were just misinformed and only if they had truly understood the arguments for the plan and tax they would have voted Yes.

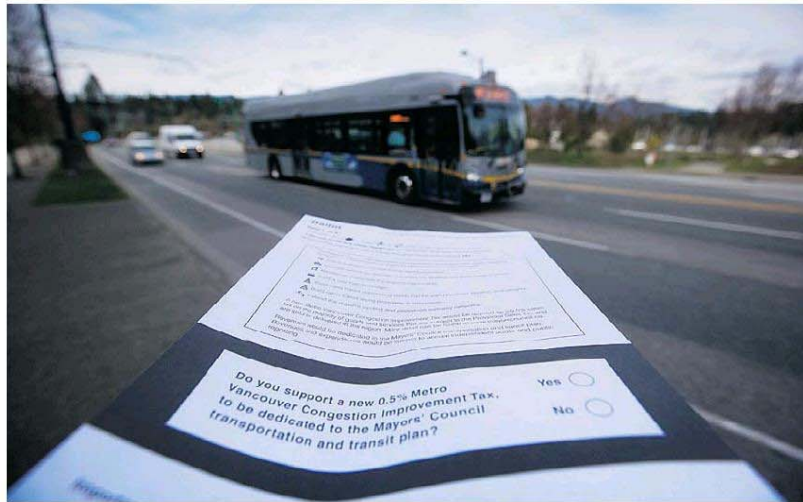
It was always going to be very difficult to convince voters to pay more for transportation infrastructure no matter how much advertising the Yes supporters purchased or how many mayors or business tycoons backed the idea. Call it human nature.

People simply don't like paying more taxes and they really distrust governments.

In the face of this enormous marketing challenge, what was the promotional plan for the Yes side?

Line up the mayors, add some respected business, environmental and union leaders, stir in large dollops of advertising and a sprinkle of paid canvassers to court the student vote, plenty of grasstops and expensive advertising, but not much grassroots.

But there was a different way to try to sell the idea of more taxes for more transit: Create a citizens' assembly on the transit plebiscite. Randomly select a group of independent citizen peers representative of the different Metro municipalities to dive deep into the mayors' transportation plan and the tax to pay for it and ask them to deliberate on whether the plan and tax were worth voting for or not.



**It is likely many who voted No in the transit plebiscite support the need for improved public transportation in Metro Vancouver, but didn't trust elected officials to carry the plan out.**

The assembly would have issued a public report on its findings for all citizens to consider before exercising their vote.

Citizens' assemblies are an important democratic innovation that permit more meaningful citizen participation, are designed to be more inclusive and representative of the general population and act as an information proxy for voters generally. They are being used more frequently in Western democracies to help guide public policy.

British Columbians will be familiar with this engagement tool from the 2004 Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

The City of Vancouver in 2014 created the Grandview-Woodland Citizens Assembly as a way to respond to residents' indignation at the city's mishandling of the planning process.

This assembly recently made recommendations that city council must now take into account when finalizing the neighbourhood's official community plan.

Voters in Oregon have had the benefit of the Oregon Citizens' Initiative Review for several years, where randomly selected panels of citizens report to voters before they vote on referendums. Research indicates these reports have played an important role in helping voters exercise an informed vote. As a way to infuse a more grassroots, citizen-led consideration of the transit plebiscite, I, along with a few other hardy citizen souls (including Gordon Gibson, the godfather of citizens' assemblies in British Columbia),

pitched the idea of creating a citizens' assembly on the transportation funding referendum to the government of B.C. and mayors in the fall of 2013. Our pitch: Who do the people trust, elected officials, business tycoons, paid ads? Nah. Let the people sell the plan to the people.

A citizens' assembly could have decided the mayors' plan and the tax to pay for it was — on balance — not worth voting for.

If the mayors couldn't persuade a randomly selected group of citizens that would study the issues, how could they persuade the larger public their plan was worth supporting?

The mayors didn't go for the citizens' assembly idea. Then again, the mayors never wanted a referendum.

The referendum was a bad idea. Since when do we ask citizens to vote on whether to pay more taxes to build schools or hospitals?

But perhaps the impulse to involve the people — even if Premier Christy Clark's motivations were less than authentically democratic — in public policy-making isn't such a bad idea.

So what now?

It is likely many who voted No support the need for improved public transportation in the Metro Vancouver region.

Maybe it's time to use a citizens' assembly process to build consensus about what to do next.

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