

Mayors propose property tax, fare hikes for transit upgrades

Mobility pricing, which could put a toll on all bridges, included in plan

What the mayors have put on the table has shown we're willing to try and bridge the gap. But we have a missing partner.

Metro Vancouver mayors are proposing to raise property taxes — as well as to tap everyone from transit riders to drivers — to help fund TransLink's \$7.5-billion transportation plan over the next 10 years.



JASON PAYNE/PNG Surrey Mayor Linda Hepner and Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson took part in a meeting of the mayors' council which unveiled a plan Thursday to raise Metro's share of the \$7.5-billion transit improvement plan. **Approval of a property tax hike for the expansion is a reversal by the mayors.**

The strategy, unveiled Thursday, lists a raft of measures that will hit local wallets, including an average \$4 property tax increase and a two-per-cent transit fare hike in 2018.

The mayors' council, which must approve funding for TransLink, also hopes to generate \$50 million annually through a mobility pricing scheme, which could include tolling all the bridges or charging a fee-per-distance travelled, starting in 2022.

TransLink must contribute 17 per cent toward the 10-year transportation plan in order to secure \$370 million in federal funding. The province's share is 33 per cent.

"We're willing to fund our fair share of the plan," said Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson, who is chairman of the regional mayors' council. "We've got a comprehensive plan and we have to start investing in that urgently."

The proposed strategy follows months of secret meetings as mayors struggled to find a new funding source after the public rejected a sales tax increase in a plebiscite last spring.

It also indicates a significant reversal by the mayors, who have stubbornly refused to raise property taxes for transit expansion.

TransLink is already authorized by the province to collect a maximum of two per cent in property taxes. By increasing it to three per cent, with an annual lift of \$4 per average house, the mayors' council expects it could generate another \$339 million over 10 years.

The mayors had last approved a time-limited property tax increase for 2013-14 to pay for the Evergreen Line, but nixed it after the province rejected their calls for a vehicle levy or carbon tax to generate funds.

Delta Mayor Lois Jackson said she was concerned the mayors were backing down on their stance against increasing property taxes after “we stood that line for a long time,” while looking to slap more fees on drivers — especially in communities south of the Fraser River where they don't have the transit services in place.

“Does it mean people living in Langley or Surrey will pay by the mile?” she asked.

“The farther you have to move out for your job or your family, the more you have to pay.”

Mike Buda, spokesman for the mayors' council, said the region has yet to come up with a mobility strategy, which would require extensive consultation and a pilot project, but the aim is to have it in effect by 2022 when both the new Pattullo Bridge and Massey Bridge are built.

It was never "ad hoc" - it was based on a newly built facility! - cik

The move, Buda said, is to “replace the ad hoc tolling on bridges” to make it more fair and equitable for drivers across the region. It's expected to generate a net \$326 million over five to six years.

Transit users, meanwhile, would face a small hit in 2018, ranging from five cents to 20 cents per single trip, bringing in \$106 million over 10 years, while the mayors' council expects it could reap another \$454 million during the same period by expanding service and increasing ridership.

“It's always you and I who pay,” said Surrey Mayor Linda Hepner, who is vice-chairwoman of the mayors' council.

But Maple Ridge Mayor Nicole Read warned the fare increase could backfire. Transit ridership dropped after the last transit fare hike in 2013 and is just starting to rebound.

It now costs travellers \$2.75 to travel one zone in the region, \$4 for trips across two zones and \$5.50 for three zones, such as from Vancouver to Surrey.

“Fare increases are problematic and I have concerns about that,” Read said. “The public is reluctant to pay more without additions.”

Other measures in the mayors' plan include selling surplus TransLink properties, seeking city land for the proposed Vancouver subway and Surrey light rail lines, taking a larger share of the federal gas tax and charging developers a regional fee for building around transit hubs.

The mayors have also asked the province to return control of TransLink to the mayors by the end of this year and redirect \$50 million annually from a regional carbon tax for transit projects. TransLink Minister Peter Fassbender said Thursday “the carbon tax will not be dedicated to transportation in this region.”

Meanwhile, New Westminster Mayor Jonathan Cote warned the mayors could lose out on federal funding, especially since the province has only agreed to provide \$246 million over three years to fund the first phase of the plan. The mayors say they are still waiting for official word from the province but need funding for the full 10 years to move ahead.

The plan calls for comprehensive transit improvements, including a Broadway subway, light rail transit in Surrey, 11 new B-Line bus routes, a 25-per-cent increase in regional bus service, including more all-day and night bus routes, **50-per-cent more Sea Bus service**, more service for Handy Dart and West Coast Express and upgrades to the Expo, Millennium and Canada Lines.

“We know there’s going to be substantial money available for transit,” Cote said, adding he’s worried the province will delay the funding until after the next election. “What the mayors have put on the table has shown we’re willing to try and bridge the gap. But we have a missing partner.”