

Metro counting on increased usage to help fund transit plan

More services will bring in revenue to pay for more services, mayors say

The mayors are waiting for a written proposal from the B.C. government that hopefully includes a full commitment to the 10-year plan.

Transit users will be a major driver of Metro Vancouver's \$7.5-billion transportation plan, as regional mayors hope to draw more riders, and ultimately more revenue, to the transit system in the next 10 years.



Light rapid transit

in Houston. A similar system in Surrey should help pay for itself by drawing more people to transit, regional mayors say. Indeed, additional riders is a key part of funding TransLink's 10-year plan to increase transit services in Metro Vancouver.

Again, and again,,, - cjk

A funding strategy unveiled by the mayors' council Thursday suggests the region's transit riders will contribute \$560 million more in fare revenue over that time to the beleaguered transit authority, with more buses and increased service hours, another SeaBus and the proposed Broadway subway line in Vancouver and light rail in Surrey. The increased service, the mayors say, would mean 70 per cent of Metro Vancouver residents would live within walking distance of a transit station or bus route.

0 percent if you account for inflation. -cjk

The new Evergreen SkyTrain Line and a 2018 fare increase of two per cent, calculated at between five cents and 20 cents a trip, are also expected to bolster revenues.

"When you add these types of new services, you can significantly increase ridership," New Westminster Mayor Jonathan Cote said. "Certainly there's a number of different components that make the plan work. We wouldn't be taking these on initially if we didn't feel it would have an impact on travel behaviours."

Without the transportation plan, TransLink estimates the system would add only about six million journeys — either through single trips or additional transfers — over the next 10 years, mainly on the Evergreen Line, which goes into operation next year. TransLink expects the 10-year plan would boost that number by another 43 million trips to a total of 286 million journeys, because of the addition of the Broadway subway and Surrey's light rail, said Mike Buda, executive director of the mayors' council.

Plans for mobility pricing, which could include tolling all the bridges or charging drivers a fee-per-distance travelled, is also aimed at getting more people out of their vehicles and onto transit, but that will likely take at least five years to work out.

Maple Ridge Mayor Nicole Read worries that increasing transit fares in 2018 could be a problem, especially in areas where transit service has declined.

TransLink has acknowledged that a transit fare increase had discouraged ridership in 2013, which is only now starting to rebound, rising by 1.1 per cent last year. The recent boost was credited partly to TransLink's decision to change all bus trips to a one-zone fare as part of the Compass Card rollout, but the transit authority forecast a \$1.1-million decline in revenue this year as the Compass card takes full effect.

Buda said service hours have been on the decline since 2009 as TransLink struggled to find new funding sources to expand services, but he doesn't expect a two-percent fare increase to have a huge effect on ridership because the 11-kilometre Evergreen Line and additional buses should be running before the ticket price goes up.

"If you increase fares without increasing service, it will have an effect at some point," he said. "That's why we want to increase services before we increase fares."

TransLink is reviewing its transit fare structure for the first time in 30 years, which could lead to replacing the three-zone system with a flat fare or a distance-based fee. A one-zone fare right now, for instance, is \$2.75, while a two-zone is \$4 and a three-zone fare — say from Vancouver to Surrey — is \$5.50.

Surrey Mayor Linda Hepner, who is also vice-chair of the mayors' council, said she believes the fare increase is small enough to have a negligible affect on ridership. "We haven't increased fares for a very long time," she said.

Increasing fares is just one of the measures being considered by the mayors council to fund transportation, after the public rejected a sale tax increase in a plebiscite last year. Other proposals include raising property taxes, selling off surplus properties and slapping fees on developers in return for allowing higher density around transit lines. Surrey and Vancouver have also pledged to provide land and services to help offset the costs of the Broadway subway and light rail projects.

The mayors, who are responsible for operating TransLink, must come up with 17 per cent of the first phase of the 10-year plan to cash in on \$370 million in available federal funding. But it's facing another hurdle: The provincial government, which is responsible for 33 per cent of the costs of the plan, says it will only formally commit its funding for the first phase and not the entire plan.

The province has also rejected the mayors' request to get \$50 million from the carbon tax for transportation, which means they will have to find another funding source. But Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson, chairman of the mayor's council, said the mayors should be able to fill the gap, either by increasing fuel taxes or a vehicle levy, and said he is optimistic the province will hold true to its pledge to support the entire plan.

"The mayors are waiting for a written proposal from the B.C. government that hopefully includes a full commitment to the 10-year plan," he said.

Meanwhile, West Vancouver Mayor Mike Smith said the province should return full control of TransLink to the mayors so they can “get on with it.”

“It’s too important to play games,” he said.

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MINISTER BLINDSIDES MAYORS ON TRANSIT

Fassbender’s ‘pre-emptive strike’ could upend infrastructure hopes

So from our perspective, it seems like the commitments are shrinking as opposed to finding a way to close the gap to move forward.

As minister responsible for TransLink, Peter Fassbender is at the wheel of the provincial government’s transit portfolio. On Thursday, he ran a red light, roared through the intersection, and T-boned Metro Vancouver’s mayors’ council. What remained from the ensuing collision was a writeoff.



GERRY KAHRMANN/FILES Peter Fassbender, the minister responsible for TransLink, says the province will fund \$246 million worth of improvements to TransLink over the next three years.

Fassbender, through the media, and without the mayors’ prior knowledge, announced the provincial government’s “commitment” to fund \$246 million worth of improvements to TransLink over the next three years. All the mayors would have to do to fund their share of the plan, Fassbender said, would be to raise property taxes — a suggestion they had previously refused to consider — and levy development cost charges on developers who benefited from increased density around transit stations. The timing of the announcement, the apparent generosity of the \$246-million commitment and the fact that a provincial government minister was

making the announcement by himself while the mayors were nowhere in sight seemed designed to suggest that the provincial government was being proactive on transit while the mayors were being obstructive and uncooperative.

What the public didn't know was that it was the mayors who originally suggested raising property taxes, and that it was they who suggested it to Fassbender. After last year's disastrous referendum, which saw the mayors' \$7.5-billion, 10-year transit plan rejected by the public in an overwhelming No vote, a select group from the mayors' council held a series of private meetings with the provincial government in hopes of salvaging something from the wreckage.

Their suggestion to raise property taxes, which they had previously refused to do, was a concession to the province to break the policy impasse. Several mayors I talked to felt Fassbender saw the opportunity to play politics, instead.

"This," wrote Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore in an email to me, "was a betrayal of the Mayors' Council." Moore, who is in China at the moment, wrote that Fassbender had been wellapprised of the council's intentions. "The (council) passed a resolution regarding the funding source at our meeting in April and sent (Fassbender) an official letter with all the details and asking for a response. After which, we had two meetings with (him). Our goal, collectively, was to work together and announce a funding solution together — he knew this at both meetings. We originally planned to have the Mayors' Council meeting May 10, but (Fassbender) wanted more time to respond, so we adjusted our meeting to May 26. Why (he) decided to negotiate through the media is beyond me. In fact, he has yet to officially respond to our letter even though he asked for more time and agreed to our date of May 26. All we know to date is what we read by his comments in the media.

"From my opinion, this is no way to build partnerships and work towards solutions. I question why we continue this strategy. The mayors are looking to deliver services for our residents, but the province is stalling. I am not sure what their motivation is.

He's not the only one. New Westminster Mayor Jonathan Cote, who did a lot of groundwork on the transit plan, met with Fassbender earlier in the year. On Thursday, Cote saw the previous commitment to fund one-third of the entire plan shrink radically to much, much less.

"We're getting a lot of mixed messages from Minister Fassbender and the provincial government on this. The mayors had always gone under the assumption, going back to the last referendum, that the province was committed to 30 per cent of the capital for the entire plan. And since that time, we've continued to work under that assumption. It's only more recently that the wording has slightly changed to 'commitment to a third of the funding for the major projects,' which have never been defined what they are. Then yesterday, really the only thing he was stating was that they were going to commit to one-third of Phase 1, which is only 10 per cent of the mayors' plan. So from our perspective, it seems like the commitments are shrinking as opposed to finding a way to close the gap to move forward."

There's a lot at stake. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government has promised \$370 million for transit improvements in Metro. But that money comes with a due date. It won't be on the table forever. And it comes with the proviso that the provincial and Metro governments can reach a consensus. Fassbender's pre-emptive strike might have shattered that consensus. The mayors, who have worked hard to come up with a capital plan time and again, were blindsided Thursday. If they walked away from the table and let the provincial government take over all the planning and all the political heat that comes with planning public transit, I wouldn't blame them.

Meanwhile, plans proceed to build Premier Christy Clark's \$3-billion 10-lane bridge to replace the Massey tunnel — the cost of which some private contractors are now suggesting will end up being north of \$4 billion. What an appetite it has. What a testament it will be.