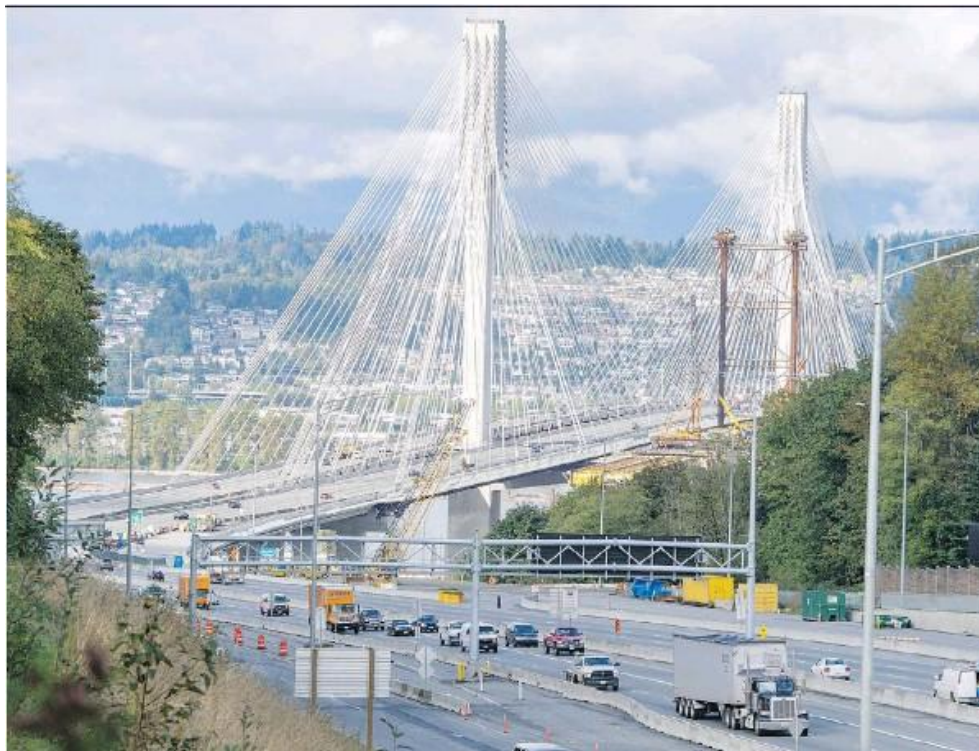


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VOTERS' ATTITUDES SHIFT ON PUBLIC TRANSIT ISSUES

Only 34 per cent of British Columbians would support paying tolls for roads or bridges if it guaranteed a shorter commute.

A year ago, voters in Metro Vancouver were mailing their ballots in the transit plebiscite that was orchestrated by the provincial government to fulfil a promise made during the 2013 electoral campaign. Insights West had tracked the feelings of voters for four months, up to the moment the ballots were mailed to residents. When the results of the plebiscite were announced, the outcome closely mirrored what our final survey suggested would happen, and many political figures and interested parties doubted: a resounding defeat for the "Yes" side.



RIC ERNST Asking residents to pay daily to access roads and bridges they now use for free could have political consequences.

In the 11 months that have passed since the victory for "No," the feelings of Metro Vancouverites about public transit have shifted on specific issues. Our post-plebiscite exit poll showed that 62 per cent of residents outlined "reforming the way TransLink operates" as their most pressing concern, far ahead of securing funds from the federal and provincial governments and coming up with a "Plan B" to deliver the projects.

Many things have changed since the plebiscite ballots were counted, including the federal government in Ottawa. The federal Liberals appear to be committed to spending on infrastructure projects. The wave of support that led them to capture 35 per cent of the vote in British Columbia — a glaring improvement from the 13 per cent the party received in 2011 — was concentrated in Metro Vancouver. There are three cabinet ministers here, two in Vancouver alone. This presents political opportunities for Canada's governing party that probably wouldn't have emerged if the Conservatives had been reelected.

For the provincial government, the challenge is different. With a provincial election scheduled for next May, it's imperative for the B.C. Liberals to re-establish some rapport with a public that was disappointed that a plebiscite was held for some infrastructure improvements, while others were authorized promptly.

In addition, "managing TransLink" has consistently been one of the lowest ranked files for the provincial government, with only 16 per cent of British Columbians expressing satisfaction with their actions last month. There has been some confusion recently about the provincial government's commitment to funding capital projects, with conflicting statements issued at different times by different ministers. With important incumbent MLAs defending seats that were very close in 2013, Surrey will indubitably take precedence (politically speaking) over other municipalities when it comes to ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

So, there's been some movement on the funding issue. The "Plan B" has always entailed a variety of options, but **one thing is certain at this stage: the public isn't prepared to embrace the concept of tolls.** In a wide-ranging survey on commuting, only 34 per cent of British Columbians would support paying tolls for roads or bridges if it guaranteed a shorter commute time. The public just rejected a tax hike to fund improvements. Asking them to open their wallet on a daily basis to access roads and bridges they currently enjoy for free would have detrimental consequences politically, especially with a provincial election looming.

The other pending task from the plebiscite is reforming TransLink. There have been some improvements. **In spite of the painfully slow process to implement the Compass Card, residents who rely on public transit are happy with it.** Last week, 67 per cent of Compass Card holders told Insights West they're "very satisfied" or "somewhat satisfied" with the new system.

It took a long time to get here, but the early reviews from users are positive.

But if asked, are they happy with the implementation cost of the Compass Card? - cjk

Still, there's more work to be done. This month, the proportion of Metro Vancouver residents who regard reforming the way TransLink operates as their main priority is 49 per cent — definitely lower than the post-plebiscite high of 62 per cent. We continue to have a sizable proportion of residents seeking what the winning strategy for the "No" side outlined extraordinarily well: lower taxes, less waste and more accountability.