

SPIN CONTROL

B.C. cities can spend taxpayer money on the issues they deem important

FRANCES BULA

VANCOUVER — Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Sunday, Jan. 25 2015, 10:09 PM EST

Last updated Monday, Jan. 26 2015, 10:57 AM EST

The Globe and Mail looks at statements in the news and tests them for truthfulness.

"We don't think taxpayer money should be used for partisan purposes." — Canadian Taxpayers Federation spokesman Jordan Bateman last week as cities started talking about putting money into campaigns related to the transit referendum.

More Related to this Story

- [Spin Control Vancouver police refute 'spike' in crime near new housing projects](#)
- [Heated debate on transit tax referendum highlights Langley divide](#)
- [Sales-tax opponents say maintenance top priority following SkyTrain glitch](#)

The Canadian Taxpayers Federation has said it's improper and possibly a violation of the mandated role for cities to use taxpayer dollars to persuade residents to cast ballots one way or the other in the coming transit plebiscite.

Mr. Bateman requested that the office of the Auditor-General for Local Government address the issue, but the office told Mr. Bateman its jurisdiction doesn't cover TransLink, which is also committing about \$4-million to an education campaign. Mr. Bateman responded that he wanted the office to look at decisions by Vancouver and Surrey.

In fact, it appears there are no rules or even precedents to prevent municipalities from spending money on issues they deem to be of importance to voters.

"If they think this is a good enough cause for the livability of the town, they can spend," says Sav Dhaliwal, the current president of the Union of British Columbia Municipalities. He's also a councillor in Burnaby, where Mayor Derek Corrigan is adamantly opposed to the plebiscite. "Local governments are pretty autonomous. There is nothing in legislation that I am aware of."

Burnaby, for example, is spending taxpayer money to mount legal challenges against Kinder Morgan's efforts to expand its pipeline there. Vancouver put money into an education campaign for the 2003 Olympic Games plebiscite, where then-mayor Larry Campbell was forcefully advocating for a Yes vote.

Elections BC has no dog in this fight, either. Its role is to run elections, not to monitor spending by levels of government, a spokesman says.

During the Harmonized Sales Tax referendum, Elections BC did not monitor spending by any group or level of government.

In that referendum, there was \$1-million in taxpayer money available for groups to run Yes and No campaigns. Stephen

Owen was appointed to dish it out and he decided the Fight HST Society should get half a million, the Smart Tax Alliance the other half for the opposing view.

The office of the Auditor-General for Local Government also says that it is not the role of the office to tell municipal governments what they can spend money on.

“Our legislation restricts us from calling into question the merits of policy decisions,” says Mark Tatchell, the deputy auditor-general for local government.

And the B.C. transportation ministry, which wrote the legislation for the transit plebiscite, is also hands off. A ministry representative said the province won’t be setting any spending caps for anyone running a campaign, nor any rules for local governments on whether they can put money in.

The only rule, in fact, is that “mayors and the various organizations mobilizing on either side of the plebiscite are responsible for funding their individual campaigns.”

Since both Vancouver and Surrey mayors ran their recent election campaigns with a promise to promote the Yes side, it likely won’t come as a huge surprise to voters that they’re spending money on that.

Those who don't like it can vote them out in 2018.

More Related to this Story

- [Vancouver parties agree on March transit vote](#)
- [Spin Control Robertson's minimum wage pitch drives debate on cost of hike](#)