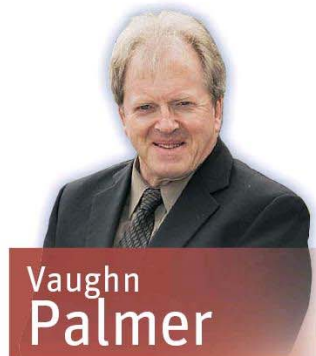


Mayors rose to challenge of unwanted referendum

**Clark insisted:
If Metro Vancouver
voters reject this
sales-tax-funded
transportation plan,
the onus will be back
on the B.C. Liberals**



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As Elections B.C. prepares to mail out the ballots to Metro Vancouver residents for the coming transit plebiscite, it is timely to recall how folks got the vote on the half-a-point increase in the sales tax to pay for transportation funding.

The promise that triggered the ballot-by-mail was right there in the election platform that Premier Christy Clark put out two years ago this spring.

"B.C. Liberals will work with the Metro Vancouver mayors' council to identify possible sources of funding for transit improvements," it said. "Any new revenue sources would then be subject to a referendum to be held at the same time as municipal elections in November 2014."

From the outset, a chorus of regional leaders disparaged the Liberal promise to give the public a say on that tax increase, and that tax increase alone.

"The hypocrisy of this policy platform is unbelievable," declared Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore. "Abdication of leadership," announced Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie. "Political posturing," continued Coquitlam's Richard Stewart. "Ridiculous," snapped Gregor Robertson of Vancouver.

Even Langley City Mayor Peter Fassbender, then running as a candidate for the Liberals in one of the Surrey ridings, had to admit that the platform's three-line reference to the possible transit referendum "raises a lot of questions."

But the Liberals weren't all that hard-pressed to provide answers before voting day, because most observers thought the electorate was unlikely to give them a mandate to implement any part of their platform. Even after Clark did pull out the win, regional leaders

proceeded as if the Liberals could be talked into abandoning a promise that they had perhaps not expected to be in a position to keep in the first place.

The referendum was "a terrible idea and it should be reconsidered," said Richmond's Brodie. "Unwinnable," as well, said Burnaby's Derek Corrigan.

Besides, taunted Surrey's Dianne Watts, if the Liberals were so high on putting infrastructure funding to referendum, they should first schedule one on their election platform proposal for a toll bridge to replace the George Massey Tunnel.

But when, in the month after the election, the TransLink mayors' council crafted a letter calling on the Clark government to scrap the referendum proposal, the Liberals were not long in disabusing regional leaders of their presumptions.

"I want to make something very clear to the mayors' council," replied newly minted transportation minister Todd Stone.

"There will be a referendum."

On any new funding source, that is. If the mayors were content to pay for transit expansion from existing sources like the property tax, then there would be no need for a vote.

Pressed for their reasoning, the Liberals recalled how a public backlash had twice forced the province into vetoing new funding sources for TransLink. Once was in the 1990s when the then New Democratic Party government supported, then rejected, a \$75 vehicle levy. The other time was in 2007, when the Liberals brought in legislation to scrap a tax on parking stalls.

Yes, governments get elected to make tough decisions; but in this instance, the government had gotten elected

by promising to leave this particular tough decision to the electorate.

For ahead of all other considerations for the governing party was the nightmare experience with the harmonized sales tax. The message being that governments break promises (however vague or barely noticed) on taxation at their peril, and the Liberals weren't about to play into the hands of their opponents by breaking this one.

As election year gave way to 2014, the Liberals made a concession or two to bring regional leaders around to the idea of a referendum.

They abandoned the insistence that the vote coincide with the fall 2014 civic elections, a surefire recipe for a ratepayer backlash as the mayors and councillors saw it. Gone too was the premier's notion of a multiple-choice ballot in favour of one clear choice on a funding source. The province agreed to pay the staging cost of the actual referendum, now rebranded as a plebiscite.

In return, the mayors rose to the occasion with a firm list of priorities — \$7.5 billion in all — to be funded by what they concluded was the least-objectionable option: a half-point increase in the sales tax within Metro Vancouver.

They have also weighed in with a well-funded (and, yes, taxpayer-funded) campaign. They've pulled together a broad Yes coalition that includes such unlikely bedfellows on most issues as organized labour and the board of trade.

Several regional leaders have moved to the forefront in the campaign, never mind what they said about the merits of referendums as a way of approving tax increases. Mayor Moore of Port Coquitlam — he of the above-cited quote about Liberal "hypocrisy" — has gotten quite good at making the case, as I discovered this week when I interviewed him.

None of this should be taken as suggesting that the Yes campaign is all that likely to succeed in persuading folks to vote for a tax increase.

But it does show that regional leaders have risen to the unwanted challenge imposed on them by the provincial government, thereby earning the right to put the onus back on the Liberals if the campaign fails.

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Given that the overall North Shore population is about 175,000, and Metro Vancouver population is about 2,476,000 the prorated amount to the North Shore of \$7.5billion would be \$530million. Correction for the fact that the average North Shore resident may well contribute more than the Metro average on the 0.5% sales tax should also be taken into account. What is the list for the North Shore, it's 10 year phasing, and the value of each of these projects? - cjk