

B.C. will get infrastructure cash regardless of plebiscite outcome: federal minister

The Conservative government's pre-election budget Tuesday promised a \$1 billion-a-year permanent fund to boost transit spending and reduce commute times.

BY PETER O'NEIL, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 23, 2015



James Moore

Photograph by: DARRYL DYCK, THE CANADIAN PRESS

OTTAWA — B.C.'s biggest cities will get a fair share of new federal infrastructure dollars, even if Metro Vancouver residents vote No in the transit tax plebiscite, Industry Minister James Moore said Wednesday.

But Moore's pledge, which came after Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson warned a No vote would jeopardize the region's ability to tap the new \$1 billion-a-year Public Transit Fund, relies heavily on Metro mayors having a Plan B to raise money if the tax is defeated.

"Should the No side win in the campaign, I suspect there will be alternative approaches that will be developed by the mayors' council or by the province or by others," said Moore, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's senior minister on the West Coast. "We as British Columbians will absolutely get our fair share regardless of the transit referendum outcome. Period."

But Metro mayors have said they don't have a plan B, warning the only other way they can generate funds for transportation expansion is by increasing gas or property taxes. And mayors have repeatedly said they will not raise property taxes beyond the three per cent already collected for TransLink.

The problem with tapping into the new federal dollars is that large transit projects require Ottawa, Victoria and TransLink to each pay a third of construction costs.

"If we don't have a Yes vote from the referendum, we don't have funding locally to match the provincial and federal funds that are being promised," Robertson said Tuesday.

The federal fund, which begins at \$250 million in 2017-18 and expands to \$1 billion a year by 2019-20, is "for large-scale infrastructure projects principally for large cities in Canada," said Moore, who would not say how he intends to vote on the transit tax. "You can expect Surrey, Vancouver — the large cities

of Canada — to do well.”

The mail-in plebiscite seeks support for a 0.5 per cent sales tax in Metro Vancouver to fund a \$7.5-billion, 10-year transit plan that includes a proposed \$2.4-billion subway along Vancouver’s Broadway corridor and a \$2.1-billion light rail project in Surrey.

But Moore also indicated that Ottawa’s contribution isn’t tied to the transit megaprojects proposed in Surrey and Vancouver. The province can decide how to spend the money, he said, acknowledging it could be used to build roads and bridges, such as the proposed new Massey Bridge, though he said the B.C. government has not approached the federal government on this.

“It’s not just Surrey or Broadway. There’s no shortage of projects. The money will find its way to British Columbia.”

Moore, in an interview, wouldn’t be drawn into the politics of the debate over the Surrey and Vancouver rapid transit proposals. It has been noted that Surrey is politically friendlier turf for federal Conservatives and Premier Christy Clark’s provincial Liberals than the heart of Vancouver.

“They’re very different projects,” said Moore, the MP for Port Moody-Westwood-Port Coquitlam. “I frankly don’t have a bias for one over the other. They both make sense relative to the clear and coming demands in both of those communities.” While he said the Broadway project “certainly has its merits,” he described the Surrey proposal as “a critical project for the long-term growth” of that city.

Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan said he expects B.C.’s share of funding will likely go to roads projects, rather than transit, because “transit won’t buy any votes” for the provincial Liberals.

Moore, responding to criticism that Ottawa should have made immediate new investments in transit infrastructure rather than wait until 2017, said the plebiscite underscores the uncertainty over whether Metro Vancouver residents are prepared to fund the operating costs of a greatly expanded transit system.

“The government of Canada pays for the capital (costs), we don’t pay for the running of the infrastructure, and there’s still clearly in Vancouver very much a debate over how much public infrastructure can we afford to build, and how much are we prepared to (spend to) keep it operating,” he said. “It’s up to the public to decide how much public transit they do or don’t want, and how much they’re prepared to pay or not.”

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With a file from Kelly Sinoski

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