

B.C. will get infrastructure cash regardless of plebiscite outcome in Metro Vancouver: 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.

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James Moore

Photograph by: DARRYL DYCK, THE CANADIAN PRESS

VANCOUVER — Industry Minister James Moore says British Columbia will get its fair share of federal infrastructure funding regardless of the outcome of a Metro Vancouver transit tax vote.

Speaking to a gathering of business leaders, Moore said the federal government would provide the province with promised investment dollars whether or not voters approve the historic transit plebiscite.

A proposed \$7.5-billion public transportation overhaul over 10 years would include projects such as an upgraded rapid-transit system, a new bridge and additional buses.

"We know that our cities are getting more dense and more congested," said Moore, who was in Vancouver for a meeting with members of the B.C. Business Council.

The technically non-binding plebiscite gives citizens the option of a 0.5-per-cent sales tax increase to

raise money to finance the massive investment.

Ballots were mailed out in mid-March and must be submitted by May 29.

As the Yes and No sides jockey for position, residents are trying to balance traffic woes in a growing region with what some are calling a tax grab.

Proponents say the upgrades are crucial to accommodate an estimated influx of one million people to the Vancouver region over the next three decades.

Opponents have condemned TransLink, the region's transit authority, as wasting taxpayers' money.

Moore pointed to \$53 billion of cross-Canada infrastructure funding that the federal government has promised over the next 10 years through the New Canada Building Plan.

He also highlighted a yearly \$1-billion public transit fund targeted for big cities and announced in Tuesday's budget.

Moore said provinces are not restricted to spending the new funding exclusively on public transit and that the money can be used for infrastructure including roads, bridges and tunnels.

Dubbed the new Public Transit Fund, the new money won't start flowing to Canadian cities until 2017-18 — and with only a \$250-million down payment for the entire country that fiscal year.

The total will rise to \$500 million in 2018-19, before reaching the targeted \$1 billion in 2019-20. The new fund will be merit-based, according to the budget, meaning that all regions shouldn't expect transfers based on their share of the population. If the money were allocated on a per capita basis, B.C.'s share would be \$32.5 million in the first year, \$65 million in the second, and \$130 million once the fund reaches the \$1 billion mark.

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