

Premier backs high density around rapid transit hubs

Mayors look at development charges to help advance transportation plan

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B.C. Premier Christy Clark says she expects Metro Vancouver municipalities to allow high density around the billion-dollar rapid transit projects proposed for Surrey and Vancouver but has yet to commit to a pitch by regional mayors to be able to collect on that development.



FILES Highrises have sprouted along the Millennium SkyTrain line in Burnaby, while the Premier Christy Clark wants municipalities to approve higher density around transit hubs, she has not committed to allowing them to use development charges to help pay for new transit lines.

Clark's comments come as the B.C. government continues secret discussions with regional mayors on the possibility of collecting development cost charges around transit hubs — such as the SkyTrain, Evergreen Line and Canada Line — to help pay for transit expansion. At the moment, municipal development charges can be collected from developers for amenities such as pools and parks but not transit.

“I have thought for a long time that density around transit is a really important part of making sure that transit works, and it’s a great way to improve (housing) supply,” Clark said in the legislature this week. “I think it is a very good way to address housing affordability and also get full value for the public investment that we make in public transit.”

Metro Vancouver mayors said they are investigating the use of development charges to invest in a \$7.5-billion 10-year transportation plan that includes more buses, a new SeaBus, a new subway for Vancouver and light rail for Surrey. Surrey Mayor Linda Hepner, who raised the idea at a Vancouver Board of Trade luncheon last month, said mayors have to find alternative funding sources to expand the transit system after losing a transportation tax plebiscite last spring.

Development charges “are a discussion point going on where there are densification opportunities around lines that exist or will be built,” Hepner said.

Hepner declined to speak further on the issue Friday while discussions are continuing with the province, but expects to have more news on the proposal at the end of the month. Mayors say they are also re-pitching proposals to the province to use a carbon tax or vehicle levy to help pay for the 10-year plan, while calling on the B.C. government to fund up to 40 per cent of the costs of the plan.

Typically, the provincial and federal governments and TransLink have each contributed one-third of the cost of transportation projects, but the federal government has suggested it would pay 50 per cent.

The premier said in an interview with The Vancouver Sun that building up housing around the transit lines will form part of the business case and funding estimates for the Vancouver and Surrey projects. She said that density — likely through high-rise condo developments — is an opportunity to maximize ridership on the new transit lines while also boosting the supply of housing in the Lower Mainland, a shortage of which Clark has said is partly behind the region’s red-hot housing market.

“We do want them to build density around the stations, there’s no question about that and they’ve agreed to that, that’s part of the discussion,” Clark said about municipal governments. “When we build the business case for it, ridership is one of the metrics we plug in. Well, if you don’t have anybody living around the stations, the ridership is really low. If there’s no parking lots there, it’s really low. So they’ve already accepted density needs to be a part of it. How that density would be developed, that hasn’t been settled.”

Clark said transit density is a bigger issue in Surrey than Vancouver, but noted some of the stations on the Expo Line “practically land in somebody’s backyard, of a single family home. That’s not the way to build density, to use transit for development. That’s what I think we need to do. I think cities agree with that and we’ve kind of worked that into the modelling on what the costs will be.”

However, the premier wouldn’t yet commit to the idea that municipalities could give concessions in zoning and density on land around the transit hubs in return for levying charges to pay for the transit projects.

“Let’s see how much the feds come up with first and then we’ll figure out the rest of the pie,” Clark said. “We’re in for our one-third, that’s what we’ve got and we’ve booked it and are committed to it. The federal government may come up with 50 per cent, they may come up with less or more, I don’t know. It’s hard to answer the question when we don’t know what the gap could be.”