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JAMES: The trouble with lame duck 'continuity'

[Elizabeth James](#) / North Shore News

November 12, 2014 12:00 AM

"Where do (candidates) stand on the matter of regional committees, especially TransLink?" - B.C. election reform proposals ignored, North Shore News, Oct. 29, 2014

Candidates' answers to the [question I posed in my last column are critical to the independence of our new North Shore councils](http://www.nsnews.com/opinion/columnists/james-b-c-election-reform-proposals-ignored-1.1479044) (<http://www.nsnews.com/opinion/columnists/james-b-c-election-reform-proposals-ignored-1.1479044>) for the upcoming four-year term.

If you elect candidates who will always put the best interests of their constituents first as they make regional decisions, then you're on the right road.

If, on the other hand, you elect candidates who aspire to nominations to the unelected regional board of directors as a second step on their political ladder, then you may not be happy with some of the costly decisions they make at that level.

And if Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson is re-elected, one of those regional decisions could be a TransLink approval of his determination to go underground with a rapid transit system to the University of British Columbia.

Without going into a lengthy financial comparison here, suffice it to say current and projected ridership numbers do not support the exorbitant expense of a subway over other available options.

Yet the long-standing regional system of government offers no assurance that TransLink will do anything to protect your pocketbooks. In fact, if District of North Vancouver Mayor Richard Walton continues as chair of the regional Mayors' Council and as an appointed member of the TransLink board of directors, it's hard to see how he can avoid conflicts of community interests.

What else is wrong with the regional system? One of the egregious examples that illustrates the problem occurred 17 days after the 2005 municipal elections when a lame-duck TransLink board approved \$3.25 billion in spending initiatives. Only nine of 12 board members attended the meeting - three of whom had been defeated in the election and a fourth who had not sought reelection.

It's relevant that Surrey then-mayor Doug McCallum - who today is running to get his old job back - had no qualms about chairing that meeting.

When I challenged the legality of the meeting a few days later, Walton explained the system had been "set up that way to provide continuity in an election year..." Yet, on Feb. 6, 2006, he admitted he still had not received "the huge binder of briefing material we are supposed to receive from TransLink."

While continuity sounds reasonable, there was nothing then or now to preclude four newly ordinary citizens from committing you to a \$3 billion decision - even when the decision postdates the swearing-in ceremonies of the region's new municipal councils.

If continuity is the only goal, why does the Community Charter not contain a caveat that long-term agreements, especially financial agreements, cannot be concluded within, say, three months of the end of a council term? Nothing has been done over the past nine years to change that deficiency. In fact, things may be worse today than in 2005 and not just for TransLink. But first, a tiny bit of history: Before the Campbell government enacted the Charter in 2003, the Local Government Act (LGA) specified that a referendum was required if a municipal council proposed to commit its citizens - taxpayers - to an agreement that extended beyond five years or above an amount established by formula.

The Charter changed that. The requirements of the "alternative approval" process are so convoluted, most people don't have the time or resources to gather the mandated petition signatures.

But as residents of the Districts of North and West Vancouver are discovering, things can get worse.

North Vancouver: For item 9.7 on council's Nov. 3 agenda, staff presented a signed certificate of approval stating that, under the authority of the LGA, the "Williams Griffin Community Recreation Centre Loan Authorization Bylaw No. 7968, 2012" ... has been lawfully made and enacted, and that its validity is not open to question on any ground in any court of British Columbia.

Since when are taxpayers prohibited from questioning the terms of a \$28 million loan from the Municipal Finance Authority that will be amortized over 20 years? My question is not to devalue the project. It's about the right of citizens to consider and have a say in the borrowing decision.

West Vancouver: In a situation reminiscent of the 2005 TransLink end-of-year scramble, the outgoing council has scheduled a public hearing for Dec. 8 on Bylaw 4797 to amend the Official Community Plan.

Not only is the hearing scheduled during the run-up to Christmas when many people may be unable to attend but, again, it will be held less than four weeks after Saturday's election, allowing new councillors little time to do their homework on such a critical issue.

The only way you can hope to cause a systemic change for the better is to exercise your right - and responsibility - to vote.

In 2011, less than 25 per cent of our combined North Shore electorate turned out to the polls. Today's 19-24 year olds may well be married with kids by the end of councils' 2014-2018 term of office.

If you want to shape the community in which you will be living, your vote on Nov. 15 is essential.

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