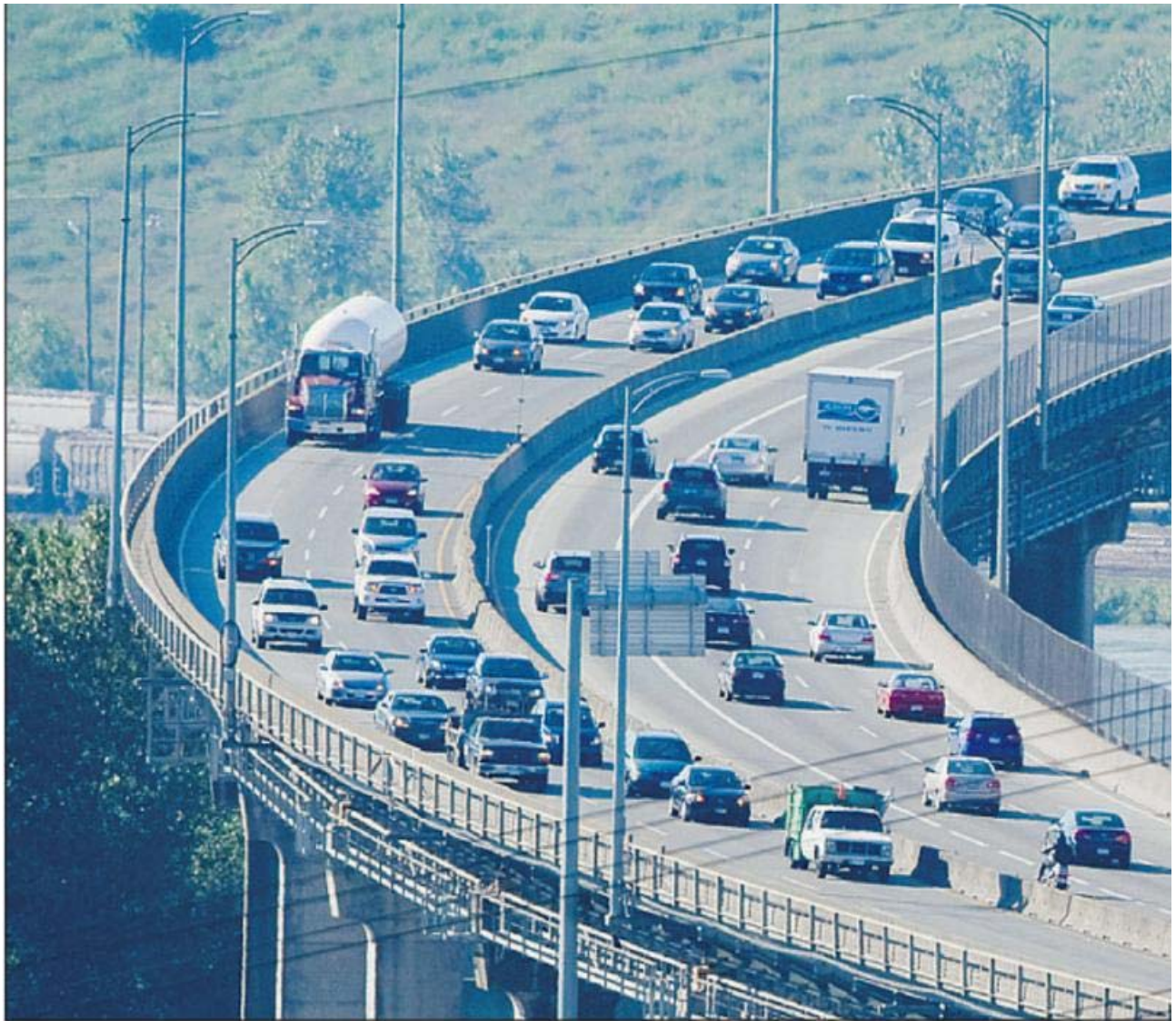


Expand services or face gridlock, TransLink warns

Metro Vancouver mayors meet today to discuss controversial taxes to cover Evergreen Line, new bus routes

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN JULY 28, 2011



TransLink says unless it gets more funding, it won't be able to expand its services, including use of the Port Mann Bridge for a rapid transit line.

Photograph by: Ward Perrin, PNG Files, Vancouver Sun

TransLink took steps Wednesday to reinforce the need for investment in transit services, ahead of what some predicted would be a heated meeting with Metro Vancouver mayors over its plan to increase the gas tax and other levies to pay for projects like the Evergreen Line.

Board chair Nancy Olewiler warned that while TransLink has the money to "live within [its] means" it **has to find more funding sources to expand services across the region, especially south of the Fraser, or risk more overcrowded buses, road congestion or lack of services in some areas.**

Her warning came as Metro Vancouver mayors prepared to meet with TransLink today to debate a 2012 transit base plan and proposed financial supplement, which would raise \$70 million annually for transit such as the Evergreen Line, connecting Coquitlam to Vancouver via Port Moody and Burnaby. The supplement calls for a two-cents-a-litre boost in the gas tax and a **potential temporary property tax increase in 2013** - if they can't find other sources of funding through a vehicle levy or road-congestion charges.

"People are worried about their pocketbooks, but what they need to remember is we're buying things with this funding," Olewiler said. "It may be more costly to play catch-up unless we invest along the way."

Mayors aren't required to support the base plan, but must approve the financial supplement, which will then go to the TransLink commissioner and back to the mayors' council this fall.

The supplement calls for the construction of the long-awaited Evergreen Line as well as other services that include a B-Line bus from White Rock to Guildford Town Centre, a Highway 1 rapid-bus service from Langley through Surrey to the Lougheed SkyTrain station, and a new bus route from White Rock to Langley.

Increased SeaBus sailings, upgraded SkyTrain stations with fare gates, improvements to Lonsdale Quay and cycling routes throughout the region are also included in the plan.

The mayors of Surrey and Langley support the plan, which would provide much-needed transit services in their communities. But other mayors argue TransLink is offering a broad "wish list" of projects across the region, hoping to entice the different mayors to push through the tax increases for projects that aren't necessarily priorities.

"To say that upgrades of three SkyTrain stations for fare gates is more important than putting buses on the road is a judgment call by Trans-Link," Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan said. "How can we plan the [region] with no ability to control the decisions made on transportation?"

Delta Mayor Lois Jackson argued TransLink should scale back the plan to include only the priorities that it can afford. It should also pursue other revenue-generating options for transit projects rather than pushing the burden onto ratepayers, she said.

An area benefit tax, which would see developers or residents near a station help pay for the rapid-transit line because they will see benefit from it, is one option, along with advertising, station kiosks and selling the naming rights to SkyTrain stations, Jackson said. Pushing for at-grade rail instead of the elevated SkyTrain would also save some money. "There's got to be some best practices as to how we can raise funding for these things and be more efficient," she said.

But Olewiler said the plan addresses a need to make the system robust across the region and goes further than just increasing transit: Adding 4,000 hours of bus service equates to increasing the number of trips by 20 million a year and taking 70,000 cars off the road by 2015.

TransLink is continually looking at ways to improve services along the SkyTrain lines, she added, and is working with municipalities to add shops and services to stations and to park-and-ride lots, noting it's a lot easier to deal with these benefits on new lines. But even with advertising and an area benefit tax, she said, it won't be enough to expand services in areas such as Surrey and Langley, which "have not had enough major investments and really need them."

Langley City Mayor Peter Fassbender agreed. "It's easy for mayors of Burnaby or Richmond or some other mayors to say we don't need to do so much," he said. "Those of us south of the Fraser really have a significant transit deficit here. [The province is] rebuilding the Port Mann Bridge with a rapid-transit line and park-and-ride.... If we don't put in funding, we won't have any buses [to use that]."

"It's about time in this region that we find a solution that is more equitable and fair. When you look at the growth south of the Fraser, we can't keep the current transit system we have or we'll choke everybody."

Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie said that while he would support the gas-tax increase, he wants more details on the alternate funding sources such as a vehicle levy before he would approve the plan. He draws the line at any form of property-tax increase, temporary or otherwise. TransLink already has the power to boost property taxes by three per cent each year.

Meanwhile, a new Sustainable Transportation Coalition, an alliance of organizations working to promote sustainable modes of travel, is also urging the mayors to support the supplement. A recent gathering of senior transportation decision-makers endorsed using a portion of post-2012 carbon-tax revenues, a flexible vehicle levy and road pricing as funding choices.

"The social and economic costs of inadequate transportation are greater than the cost of investing in these improvements," coalition spokesman Peter Ladner said. "These funds will help people move more efficiently everywhere in the Lower Mainland."

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