

## TransLink urged to clarify tax-and-spend plan



Express bus service on Highway 1 over the new Port Mann Bridge, connecting northern Langley to Surrey City Centre and Lougheed Station in Burnaby, is among the planned transit upgrades that depend on TransLink getting new funding sources – beyond a proposed two-cent gas tax hike.

*Gateway Program*

By [Jeff Nagel - BC Local News](#)

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TransLink's independent commissioner is warning the plan to finance the Evergreen Line and other transit upgrades with a two-cent gas tax hike plus other yet-to-be-determined fees or taxes may be too murky to accept.

Martin Crilly suggested area mayors insist on a better understanding of how money will be spent if the province fails to enact some of the revenue sources.

"What are the mayors actually buying for sure?" he asked in an interview.

Many motorists and some mayors already oppose raising the TransLink-dedicated gas tax from 15 to 17 cents per litre, an increase the province has pledged to legislate this fall to take effect next April.

But even more uncertainty hangs over the other sources – possibly an annual vehicle levy averaging \$24, a second regional carbon tax or even a system of road-use fees, all of which may be at least as controversial as the two-cent gas tax increase. Higher parking taxes and mechanisms to tax property developers are also on the table.

If there's no agreement within a year among mayors and with the province to use an additional source, a temporary property tax hike of \$23 per average home kicks in for 2013 and 2014.

Crilly said it's not clear enough what happens next.

If no longer-term revenue solution is in place going into 2015, TransLink and the mayors may be faced with deep cuts or at least shelving many of the priority projects supposed to be paid for through the proposed funding supplement.

"It's important to be clear what happens in that circumstance because it's not beyond the realm of possibility that we might find ourselves in that place," Crilly said.

"You don't want to be in a position of having to make emergency cuts."

If Victoria fails to pass the gas tax hike, he said, the supplement would effectively collapse and TransLink wouldn't deliver its \$400-million share of the \$1.2-billion Evergreen Line linking Burnaby, Port Moody and Coquitlam.

TransLink spokesperson Erin McConnell said the proposed supplement will be revised in light of Crilly's comments to show the order in which future transit upgrades would proceed if the extra sources don't materialize.

That could open up new splits between the region's politicians depending on how the priorities are phased.

Some projects – like express bus routes on King George Boulevard and Highway 1 through Surrey and a Langley-White Rock route – would enhance South-of-Fraser service, while more frequent SeaBus runs would appeal to the North Shore.

A general lift in bus service, more road and cycling infrastructure and upgrades to several transit stations are also promised.

McConnell said the improvements would deliver an extra 20 million transit trips per year, equivalent to removing 70,000 cars a day from traffic.

"That would have significant benefits in reducing congestion," she said, seeking to soothe angry motorists who feel they will pay for transit service they don't use.

Area mayors, meanwhile, are divided on whether they can accept a plan that leaves a big controversial

funding source to be determined with a property tax hike as the fallback mechanism.

"I don't see how property taxes relate to transportation," said Delta Mayor Lois Jackson, one of several mayors who oppose any scenario that could result in higher property taxes.

She noted TransLink already has a built-in ability to collect three per cent more from property taxes each year without mayors' council approval.

Development charges to extract money from businesses near SkyTrain stations would be a better choice for a new source, she said, adding she could also conceivably support a regional carbon tax or an annual levy on vehicles, provided it's for a small amount.

Jackson also wants TransLink to reconsider a previously discarded idea – taxing shipping containers that pass through the port.

"They take up a tremendous volume of road capacity and add to the burden of maintaining roads and highways," she said.

A \$20 charge per container would generate \$50 million based on the 2.5 million containers a year that go through Metro Vancouver.

In comparison, TransLink's proposed gas tax hike would generate \$45 million, while a total of \$75 million annually is needed to pay for the entire proposed package.

Jackson said she'd also like to see the spending priorities pared down and the Evergreen Line built for less by scrapping SkyTrain technology.

Port Coquitlam Mayor Greg Moore said he supports the expanded list of transit investments, not just an Evergreen Line-only option that some mayors suggest would be simpler.

"We need better bus service South of the Fraser," he said. "We've got a third Seabus that's just sitting there and not operating."

TransLink has agreed to extend its public consultations to the end of September in response to a request from Metro mayors at Moore's urging.

Mayors are expected to vote on the finalized supplement in early October.

Crilly said a move towards user-pay road fees or tolls is inevitable and would make the entire transportation system more efficient.

A ring of tolled bridges around the region could be a first "easy step" toward road pricing, he said, although he acknowledged it would require the province to revise its policy of only tolling new or upgraded infrastructure.

A haphazard set of bridge tolls is coming anyway, Crilly noted, referring to the Golden Ears Bridge and the tolling of the new Port Mann Bridge when it opens in 16 months.