

TRANSPORTATION

# Majority would back transit funding referendum: polls

Metro, TransLink officials warn it will take a united effort to sell the concept to the public

KELLY SINOSKI

VANCOUVER SUN

More than half of Metro Vancouver residents say they would likely support a referendum on transportation funding as long as the higher fees and taxes go directly to transit, according to two TransLink-commissioned polls released this week.

The polls, conducted in May and June before and after regional mayors unveiled a \$7.5-million investment plan, suggest 57 per cent of those surveyed would likely vote yes in a referendum, while 35 per cent would reject it.

Another 75 per cent said that "even if taxpayers don't like new taxes and fees, they are necessary to build new transit and transportation infrastructure to deal with congestion."

"I'm encouraged by what we see here," said Bob Paddon, TransLink's executive vice-president of strategic planning. "What it tells us is a referendum is winnable."

But while Metro and TransLink officials say they are encouraged by the poll results, they argue there is still work to be done if they are to sell the concept to the public, including forming a united front with the provincial government and MLAs, along with business, advocacy and environmental groups.

Right now there is no clear champion of the campaign, which was dictated by Premier Christy Clark and opposed by many mayors, who said it was doomed to fail because they don't have enough time to educate the public ahead of the vote. Some mayors, like Vancouver's Gregor Robertson, say they expect they will have to sell the idea to their communities if they want the region's 10-year transportation vision to go ahead.

"None of the mayors support the referendum but it's inevitable, so we have to do what we



ARLEN REDEKOP/PNG

A full 75 per cent agreed new taxes and fees are necessary to build transit and transportation infrastructure to ease congestion.

can to make sure it succeeds," Robertson said.

Richard Walton, mayor of North Vancouver District and chairman of the mayors' council on transportation, said mayors hope the province will hammer out a referendum question later this month so they can start the public campaign before municipal leaders get embroiled in campaigning for the municipal elections on Nov. 15.

"It's going to have to be a very broad collective effort in the community," Walton said. "This is very new territory for this kind of initiative in B.C. We're going to have to make it up while we go."

Greg Moore, mayor of Port Coquitlam and chairman of

Metro Vancouver Regional District, said the challenge will be to keep the focus on the region's 10-year vision, noting both the wording of the referendum question — which will be decided by the province — and TransLink's troubled brand could significantly affect the outcome. Others agree the results could differ significantly depending on whether the question was framed in terms of supporting funding to TransLink or funding for investment in jobs and transportation.

The polls found support for TransLink had already been waning last spring, ahead of two major SkyTrain shutdowns within days of each other last summer and revelations about

high payouts to TransLink executives and Transit police. A poll from Mustel Group suggests only 68 per cent of respondents have a favourable opinion of TransLink, compared with 75 per cent in 2010.

"We hope this referendum is not about TransLink," Paddon said. "It's really an investment in public transportation and we hope people will focus on that."

SFU City Program director Gordon Price said the results, which were "higher than I would have anticipated," could also significantly change once the public sees the question and how much it's going to cost them in household taxes.

Choosing a funding source could also get tricky: only 15 per

cent of the respondents say they support a carbon tax — the mayors' preferred funding source — while 27 per cent would prefer a \$75 vehicle levy. Another 27 per cent would like to see tolls of up to \$2 on all bridges, while a regional sales tax of one per cent garnered 17-per-cent support.

However, Price said there is a chance the referendum could be winnable, given the poll results. About 47 per cent of respondents also said the current traffic and transit situation in Metro was a "major problem."

The polls were conducted by telephone with a margin of error of 4.4 per cent at 95 per cent confidence.

ksinoski@vancouver.sun.com