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Op-Eds

New tax needed or we face gridlock nightmare

There has been a lot of attention paid to the upcoming plebiscite on transportation and transit funding and for good reason. Our current network of roads, buses and trains is simply not able to support our growing region.

We've all sat in gridlock, been passed over by packed buses and had to squeeze onto the SkyTrain during peak travel times.

So the question in front of us — the real question we will be asked when we vote — is whether we are prepared to collectively build the infrastructure we rely on every day.

This plebiscite is about the future of our region, the future of our economy and the future of our environment. But at the end of the day, it's also as simple as the future of your daily commute.

The truth is, more than one million new residents are expected to move to Metro Vancouver in the next 25 years and right now we do not have the funding to meet the transportation needs that come with our growing communities.

That means gridlock is growing and air quality is at risk. It is not an overstatement to say that our region faces a crisis.

That is why the B.C. Federation of Labour has joined a broad-based coalition of business, environmental, labour, student and community groups to support a regional sales tax to fund transit and transportation improvements. We hope you will Yes too. Here's why:

Efficient transit and transportation systems are better for working people, shortening commutes and increasing the time people have with their families and friends.

It is better for our economy, making us more competitive because we can move goods and people in, out and around the region faster.

And it's better for our environment, improving air quality, cutting emissions and helping us meet the challenges of climate change.

As a member of the Better Transit and Transportation Coalition, we believe the mayors' council has put forward an affordable, equitable and accountable solution.

Through the introduction of the Metro Vancouver Congestion Improvement Tax of 0.5 per cent, we can get to work building a transportation system that works for everyone.

If this referendum succeeds, Metro Vancouver residents will receive increased SkyTrain service on all major routes, a Broadway subway line, more SeaBus and West Coast Express service, light rail between Surrey, Guilford, Newton and Langley, 200 kilometres of more B-line routes, a new Pattullo Bridge, more HandyDart service and expanded walking and cycling networks, to name just some of the many improvements.

All this for just $125 a year per household — just 34 cents per day.

This plan is about meeting the needs of all commuters, no matter how you get around.

If you are a driver, you will benefit as much as transit users from the increase in services.
Think of the thousands of people who won't be idling next to you in traffic but travelling instead through the region on SkyTrain, bus or light rail. Commute times for transit riders and drivers will improve by an estimated 20 to 30 minutes each day.

We also need to remember this is not a referendum on TransLink. There are legitimate complaints about TransLink and the province absolutely must address them. This referendum is about transit and transportation improvements, the kind of region we want to live in and how we get there.

The mayors' plan has taken steps to ensure transparency and accountability. The new funding is dedicated solely to the outlined improvements, with annual independent auditing and public reporting.

Voting No has very real consequences on our time, our economy and our environment. If you think traffic is bad now, picture our existing roads and transit routes with one million more people attempting to move around Metro Vancouver every day.

An efficient transportation system is not a luxury, it's a necessity.

When you receive your ballot on March 16, I urge you to vote Yes. Together we can build the transit and transportation network we need to support our growing and thriving region.

Find out more information about the coalition at www.bettertransit.info and read the mayors' plan at www.mayorscouncil.ca

Irene Lanzinger is president of the B.C. Federation of Labour.