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Regional Transportation Commissioner Reports on TransLink's 2010 Ten-Year Plan

TransLink's 2010 10-Year Plan, approved by its Board on July 31 2009, proposes transit services, capital projects and other initiatives, with financial projections, through the year 2019. In his report released today, the Commissioner gives his opinion and insights on whether the Plan is reasonable as to its parameters and assumptions. His report advises the Mayors' Council, who may vote on TransLink's Plan in October 2009.

Highlights of **the Commissioner's findings** are:

- the Plan's economic assumptions (e.g. future inflation, interest rates and fuel prices) are not unreasonable; and transit ridership forecasting is adequate (with reservations noted);
- TransLink's approach of adding supply to capture market share, in the absence of demand management policies to boost transit ridership, is increasingly costly, especially for TransLink's expansion scenario;
- TransLink's capital planning priorities are rational;
- as a preliminary indication, Commissioner's approval is warranted for only the first of TransLink's four proposed fare increases;
- a balanced funding formula (set in the South Coast BC Transportation Authority Act) is satisfied, allowing access to an additional 3 cents per litre fuel tax;
- the achievement of the Transport 2040 goals is of limited value in assessing reasonableness; and
- the Plan (except the expansion scenario) is financially sustainable, provided higher borrowing limits are authorized for one of the Plan options.

The Commissioner observes that, unless the Mayors' Council approves one of two "supplement" options involving some higher taxes and fares, there will be drastic cuts in transit service. This is not recommended, unless keeping tax increases of any kind (including gas taxes) to the absolute minimum is the overriding consideration.

The Mayors' choice between the "supplement" options depends on the appetite for higher taxes and levies on citizens, relative to perceived benefits. On this aspect the Commissioner makes no recommendation. The options are:

- “*Funding Stabilization*” which maintains today’s level of transit service, buys some time for further planning and funding efforts; needs an extra \$130 million per year from existing revenue sources; and uses the existing borrowing limit (\$2.8 billion). This stabilizes service at a level much higher than a few years ago; and
- “*Maintain and Upgrade*” which strengthens existing services; lays groundwork for future expansion; needs an extra \$275 million per year from revenue sources in the Act, including a new vehicle levy; and borrows up to \$3.9 billion, which is beyond the existing limit. This is a positioning option which might only pay off with future expansion.

The Commissioner states that TransLink must find ways to bridge the gulf between system planning and system financing to ensure that it does not continue to live beyond its means; planned expansions in services and infrastructure must be accompanied by the revenues to support them.

He observes that for fifteen or more years in Metro Vancouver, there have been calls for more transit service to be in place before behaviour-changing measures (especially pricing reforms—i.e. how transport is paid for, by whom and how much) are applied to influence travel choices. Looking back, one sees that ample expansions of transit service have indeed been made. The time has arrived, he says, for policy makers to follow through with carefully crafted measures to influence travel choices. If well-designed, these can improve the utilization of all forms of shared transport, notably public transit as provided by TransLink, control traffic congestion, and improve the overall efficiency of the urban system.

Similarly, the region has long had a land use strategy in place to develop in a way that will support walking, biking and transit on a much broader scale than today. Achievement, however, of land use goals has been mixed, particularly with regards to the siting of employment. TransLink cannot significantly change these patterns by offering major expansions of service in low density areas but must rely on the region and its municipalities to do so using the more the effective and focused tools in their arsenals.

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Established under the SCBCTA Act in June 2008, the Regional Transportation Commissioner is the independent regulator of TransLink, and is separate from the Council, TransLink Board of Directors and TransLink staff.

The 38-page Commissioner’s Report on TransLink’s 2010 10-Year Plan can be downloaded at http://translinkcommission.org/html/what_s_new.html

Contact

Martin Crilly, Regional Transportation Commissioner
at 250-339-2714 or

martin.crilly@translinkcommission.org

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