

Mayors resisting TransLink reform

By Jeff Nagel
Jun 15 2007

A number of regional politicians are vowing to fight transportation minister Kevin Falcon's radical remake of TransLink every step of the way.

Since the required legislation didn't pass the Legislature this spring, they will start by refusing to join the transportation minister's plan to get an early start on work to select a new, unelected professional board of directors.

Falcon says the reforms will go ahead, with or without their participation.

TransLink vice-chair and Surrey Coun. Marvin Hunt said he's "amazed" Falcon will try to establish the five-member screening panel this summer before getting legislative authority.

Regional mayors are to name one member to the panel, with the other four picked by the transportation ministry and various business groups. The panel is to draw up a list of 15 professionals qualified to serve as TransLink directors, from which a regional mayors' council will select the nine-member board.

But Hunt said Falcon's planned reforms are widely opposed by area city councils and he doubts any mayor in the region will be part of even the first step of choosing their panel rep.

"I would really be surprised if Kevin got cooperation from the mayors' council," Hunt said. "I don't know of any appetite on their part to step into doing this until Kevin forces them to do it through legislation."

Many mayors still hope the province might change course. But even if Bill 36 passes in the fall unchanged, some say they will boycott the role set out for them.

Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan said he and several other mayors will refuse to serve — either in the initial selection of the new board or later on the mayors' council that will have little power beyond a duty to collect property taxes and oversee high-level plans.

"I'm not participating in a process that's entirely a fraud on the

public,” he said. “I’m not going to sit there and be the tax collector for a bunch of private sector businessmen to operate the transit system.”

Corrigan said the mayors’ council is merely to give “a pretext that we are in control” while ensuring real power rests with the province and its allies.

Burnaby’s lawyers are already looking at possible legal action to challenge the TransLink amending legislation, if it passes this fall.

“I think other municipalities will be interested in joining us if we think we’ve got a case,” Corrigan said, adding the reforms breach the contract the province first struck with the GVRD to form TransLink.

Langley City Mayor Peter Fassbender, however, said he likes most of the changes and will go along with the government.

“The legislation is going to pass,” he said. “I think we need to just bite the bullet and get on with it.”

Responding to the resistance, Falcon said if the mayors refuse to name a rep to the screening panel, he’s willing to let it proceed to nominate directors without civic input.

“I’m not going to twist their arm,” Falcon said. “We can let the rest of the panelists go forward and do that job.”

The other four parties that appoint reps are his ministry, the Vancouver Board of Trade, the Greater Vancouver Gateway Society and the Institute of Chartered Accountants of B.C.

Bill 36 provides for automatic appointments of up to three directors from the screening panel’s list if the mayors refuse to appoint at least that many.

Falcon won’t speculate about what happens if the mayors refuse to take on their ongoing role in TransLink governance. But he said those who opt not to have a say on the next 10-year strategic plan will only hurt their cities and will have to answer to their voters.

He maintains he wants the five screening panel members named by late August and for the panel to be at work by early September.

Falcon said there’s no requirement for legislation to be passed to begin that work.

He said civic leaders opposed to the reforms are out of step with

the public, which has lost confidence in TransLink.

“They are the lone defenders of the current structure,” he said. “I think they might want to contemplate on that.”

New vision panned

By Jeff Nagel
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The B.C. Liberals’ new vision for TransLink represents a huge U-turn away from their traditional mantra of delivering efficient, transparent, accountable government.

That critique of transportation minister Kevin Falcon’s plan doesn’t come from an ideological opponent on the left, but a like-minded conservative – Surrey Coun. Marvin Hunt, a longtime TransLink director.

“Kevin used to be the minister of deregulation,” Hunt said. “Why is he creating a massive bureaucracy that’s way more expensive than what we’ve got right now? It doesn’t make any sense.”

Instead of making TransLink more accountable, he said, it will end up arguably less so, even though homeowners and motorists will pay higher property and fuel taxes.

The three-tier structure provides for an appointed board of professionals, a mayors’ council that will ratify property tax levels and plans, and a separate TransLink commissioner that will advise the mayors and oversee fare increases.

But most power will be concentrated in the hands of the unelected board.

It will present just a few options for long-range plans. If the mayors don’t like them or fail to choose, the board can do as it wishes.

If the commissioner rejects a proposed fare increase, the board can override the objection and impose the hike with a two-thirds majority vote. Although mayors technically appoint the board, they must choose from a list prepared by a panel dominated by Falcon’s allies – a system that guarantees two-thirds of directors will be the choice not of the mayors but of groups such as the Vancouver Board of Trade and Institute of Chartered Accountants.

Anyone upset about the decisions will have a hard time figuring out where to complain, Hunt said.

“The professionals are allowed to have all their meetings in private,” he said. “Where’s the accountability? Who is the Bus Riders Union going to go and talk to?”

Much of the municipal angst is rooted in the fear elected mayors will end up blamed for TransLink’s actions and its tax hikes but with almost no control over what happens.

But criticisms go far deeper.

GVRD officials worry their efforts to maintain a livable region will founder if TransLink’s transportation plans are no longer required to be in synch with the regional government’s growth management strategy.

There are also concerns over possible conflicts of interest, especially since TransLink will gain powers to engage in land development near transit stations to bring in more revenue.

Unlike the current system, where directors must first be elected mayors or councillors and then get selected via the GVRD to serve on TransLink, the new directors won’t be elected in any way nor will they represent any particular geographic areas.

Falcon says that will purge the board of its tendency to be parochial a key complaint of his since TransLink came close to nixing the Canada Line after Vancouver was awarded the 2010 Winter Olympics.

He says the new structure will ensure expanded funding for TransLink to add to the transit system and restore public confidence and accountability in TransLink.

It also provides for an eventual expansion of the system east and north.

Surrey Leader, June 2007