

TransLink board to be axed, mayors take wheel

Changes include new 'professional board' of overseers

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The B.C. government will massively overhaul the public transit system for Greater Vancouver and beyond today with a top-to-bottom redesign of TransLink, sources confirm.

The government will announce it is firing the board of TransLink and replacing it with a "council of mayors" that will chart a new 10-year strategic direction for public transit in the Lower Mainland.

The council will be originally made up of mayors from the Greater Vancouver Regional District but will eventually expand beyond the GVRD borders to include Fraser Valley communities.

Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon will also announce the creation of a "professional board" that will include appointees from private business and professional associations, including the accounting, engineering and legal sectors.

The council of mayors will map out the "long-term, big-picture strategy" for Lower Mainland transit. The professional board will then be responsible for executing the plan by overseeing the executive team at TransLink.

Falcon will also announce the creation of an independent transit commissioner for the region who will be responsible for approving fare hikes and for ensuring the professional board is carrying out the strategic direction of the mayors.

There will also be a new funding model for TransLink, though it was unclear whether TransLink's hated parking-stall tax will be eliminated.

Sources told me Falcon will announce a new revenue plan for TransLink. I'm guessing that means the parking tax will be parked as the government bows to the wishes of GVRD businesses that have fought it tooth-and-nail.

The massive TransLink changes -- the biggest transit shakeup in a decade -- will closely follow the recommendations of an independent "governance review" of TransLink, which Falcon will also release today.

"The review panel said the old model of rotating TransLink board members was confusing to the public, who never knew who was making the region's transit decisions," a source told me.

The council of mayors will create clear lines of public accountability while the professional board will bring business discipline to a transit board with looming budget deficits, Falcon will argue.

Falcon and TransLink have been on a collision course for three

years now, tracing back to the transit board's repeated attempts to kill the Canada Line rail link to the airport, one of Premier Gordon Campbell's pet projects.

TransLink's plan to build the proposed Evergreen rapid-transit line to Coquitlam as a public project without a private-sector partner also rankled the Liberals. Their preference for public-private partnerships has been reinforced by the massive cost overruns on Vancouver's new convention centre, a public project with no private partner.

How will Falcon's overhaul be greeted today? It's hard to argue against giving the mayors control over transit planning in the region.

But watch for critics to pounce on the professional board as turning too much control over to private business, as the Lower Mainland's never-ending transit wars enter a historic new phase.