

Major TransLink overhaul going ahead

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B.C. Transportation Minister Kevin Falcon announced sweeping changes to TransLink on Thursday, changes that include scrapping the transit authority's current board of elected directors.

It will be replaced by a government-appointed board of professionals — accountants, lawyers and engineers who will run day-to-day operations — and by a council of 30 mayors to look at long-term planning.

Falcon has also unveiled plans to expand TransLink's scope to include roads, bridges and transit all the way from Pemberton, north of Whistler, to Hope, at the eastern end of the Fraser Valley.

He said the smaller outlying communities that are now not part of Translink would be asked but not forced to join. If they were to join, they would have to impose the gas tax that supports Translink, which will go up three cents a litre.

They would also be required to collect property taxes that would be directed to TransLink.

The transit authority will also be given the power to raise money by developing land around SkyTrain and other transit stations.

However, the controversial parking-stall tax, which had run into heated opposition from business owners, is being scrapped.

The shakeup has been in the works for a year. Last March, the ministry hired consultants and launched a review of TransLink's governance and operations.

At the time, Falcon called the TransLink board "dysfunctional," and accused the authority's directors — mayors and councillors from around Greater Vancouver — of being too parochial, especially during the debate over the \$2-billion Canada Line rapid transit project.

He also accused the local politicians of not having the skills to understand major multibillion-dollar projects.

TransLink vice-chair Marvin Hunt said the Canada Line fight, which delayed construction of the rapid transit line from suburban Richmond to downtown Vancouver, should not be what the board is remembered for.

"Outside of that one particular issue, I think TransLink has been a tremendous success, and today the Canada Line is being built, and that is going to be a tremendous success, too."

NDP criticizes changes

The NDP said the changes come with a price, and transportation critic David Chudnovsky called the redesign a major attack on democracy.

"It's clear the point is to get power away from our elected municipal politicians because once in a while, they disagree with the aggressive privatization agenda of Mr. Falcon."

Calling the changes a "ludicrous idea," Chudnovsky said he is also worried about the financial impact of TransLink getting into the property-development business.

"What it means for the people of the region is if property development is going well, maybe you get some buses, and if property isn't selling, then you're on your own."

Meanwhile, the founding director of the TransLink board said the proposed changes will "create a mess."

George Puil told CBC Radio he is worried the new board, including 30 mayors, will be too unwieldy to be effective. He thinks the area they'll be covering — stretching from Hope to Pemberton — will be too large, as well.

Puil defended TransLink's past record of achievements, rejecting the minister's suggestion that the board has been dysfunctional.

"I think they've done quite well, when you think of what they've done. They've made hundreds of road improvements, they've added 1,300 buses, they've increased transit ridership by some 30 per cent. Now what's going to happen? Frankly, I don't have much confidence in what I see here."