MOVING IN A LIVABLE REGION: DIALOGUE FOR COMPLEXITY

AUGUST 18, 2015

FINAL REPORT
INTRODUCTION

WHO IS THIS REPORT FOR?

We hope this report is helpful for people working on complex, multi-stakeholder issues in the public interest or on dialogue to provide a path forward. Many of the lessons we learned are applicable to other public policy and planning issues such as housing affordability and mental health. This report is also intended to provide value to our partners and funders and as a legacy piece that we hope will inform future projects in our region. More information about the SFU Centre for Dialogue’s programs can be found on the website: www.sfu.ca/dialogue. A legacy site for Moving in a Livable Region can be accessed at: www.movinginalivableregion.ca

CASE STUDY IN COMPLEXITY: AN INTRODUCTION TO CANADA’S FIRST TRANSPORTATION REFERENDUM

In the spring of 2015, Metro Vancouver residents voted on whether to support regional transportation and transit investments for the next decade through an additional 0.5% regional sales tax. This brief report provides an overview of the Moving in a Livable Region consortium’s involvement in the referendum (also described as a plebiscite).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: This report was written by Claire Havens (SFU Centre for Dialogue). It was reviewed by Shauna Sylvester, Keane Gruending, and Robin Prest (SFU Centre for Dialogue). It was formatted and desktop published by Keane Gruending.

PHOTO CREDITS: Photos are listed by Flickr username. All photos are available on a Creative Commons license. Cover: colink. Other images in order of appearance: doviende, Matthew Tichenor, Igor Bertyaev, UweBKK, stephen_rees.
THE ORIGINS OF THE VOTE

During the 2013 election campaign, the incumbent candidate for the premiership of British Columbia, Christy Clark, pledged that a vote on potential new revenue sources for Metro Vancouver transportation improvements would be held. The referendum would seek public decision on the transportation funding measures identified by the Metro Vancouver Mayors’ Council. While common in the US, transportation ballot initiatives and referenda had not ever taken place in Canada. A transportation referendum lays out a set of transportation planning principles, potential funding sources, and/or specific transportation investments to be voted on.

WHAT WERE CITIZENS BEING ASKED TO VOTE ON?

Metro Vancouver faces a number of significant transportation challenges: roads are congested, transit cannot meet current demand, and people and goods are not moving efficiently throughout the region. In the face of substantial regional population and economic growth, strategic investments in transportation will need to be made in order to ensure livability in the metro area.

Over the summer of 2014, the Mayors’ Council developed a comprehensive transportation investment plan, which outlined key transit, biking, and road upgrades that would be approved by public vote. It included the construction of a new Surrey light rail transit (LRT) and extension of the Millennium Line Skytrain as well as increased bus, Seabus, and HandyDART service. The investments in the plan would ensure 70% of the region’s residents had access to frequent transit. The Mayors’ Council determined that the investment package would be funded by contributions from both the provincial and federal governments as well as a 0.5% sales tax for Metro Vancouver. After near unanimous agreement on the plan, the council decided to wait until after municipal elections in November before voting on a proposed question.

On December 11, 2015 the newly elected mayors voted on the funding option to be put to the public; out of 23 elected leaders, only the mayors of Burnaby, West Vancouver, and Maple Ridge opposed the motion. After a long period of uncertainty and back and forth between the Mayors’ Council and the BC government, the referendum question was approved in the legislature on December 17, 2014. The question was, “Do you support a one half percentage point (0.5%) increase to the Provincial Sales Tax in Metro Vancouver, dedicated to the Mayors’ Transportation and Transit Plan, with independent audits and public reporting?”

The ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns were given a campaign period of ten weeks from when the referendum question was approved in the BC legislature, to when the ballots were released. The first phase of mail-in ballots were sent out on March 16, 2015 with the voting period extending until May 29, 2015.
Moving in a Livable Region evolved from an apparent need for a neutral space where diverse stakeholders could discuss issues around transportation and transit issues in Metro Vancouver. It developed organically, beginning with a small and dedicated group, but quickly growing to an informal but diverse consortium of over 30 organizations and 100 business, government, and community leaders. The project was supported by the Real Estate Foundation of British Columbia, the Vancouver Foundation, the North Growth Foundation, and in-kind resources from Simon Fraser University.

WHAT IS DIALOGUE?

Dialogue is a concentrated conversation among equals. It offers helpful ways to work together cooperatively, encourages mutual understanding between diverse perspectives, and can lead to stable, resilient outcomes. Dialogue involves engaging in collaborative inquiry into a central topic. Productive dialogue is entered with a spirit of curiosity, an interest in continually learning from and with others, and a willingness to be changed. Instead of arguing, convincing and advocating for what one already knows, dialogue encourages one to enter a space of the unknown: exploring diverse experiences and values, as well as points of agreement and disagreement.

Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Dialogue uses dialogue to generate non-partisan and constructive communication around difficult topics. We partner with government, business, and community groups to explore critical issues that impact the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of our communities. The Centre has a mandate to “explore important local, national, and international issues in partnership with government, civil society, and the private sector.”

WHAT ROLE DID THE SFU CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE PLAY?

In December 2012, well before the referendum was called, a group of city officials, businesses, and academic leaders began meeting in a small group on a regular basis. This group was convened and facilitated by the SFU Centre for Dialogue with the aim of exploring the issue of regional transportation, and the related problems of congestion, economic, health, and environmental degradation.

Over time this group grew to over 100 individuals on a distribution list, with between 25-50 members attending meetings approximately every six weeks. The diversity in organizations that came together over the next two and a half years was impressive: labour sat with business, active transportation advocates sat with taxi and trucking associations, academics sat with regional representatives, health authorities sat with local government, and the port sat with
environmentalists. It was truly a group of unlikely bedfellows, comprised of many organizations that had campaigned on opposite sides of the harmonized sales tax (HST) referendum or the implementation of the provincial carbon tax. The group was not a coalition, not the Yes campaign, and not a social club; it was a diverse cross-section of the region’s interests, coming together regularly to share information, consider solutions, and agree on a path forward for transportation in Metro Vancouver.

Early on in the process, the group determined that despite their diverse societal roles, their thread of unity would be to support sustainable funding for transportation in the region. Transportation, widely defined, would include road and highway improvements, but there was strong recognition that Metro Vancouver’s congestion problems could not be solved by building more infrastructure that would continue to lock regional residents into a car-dependent lifestyle. It was clear to the goods movement sector that traffic congestion is costing our economy, to the health authorities that it degrades our air quality and safety, and to the environmental groups that it greatly contributes to our regional carbon emissions. Alternatives would have to be provided and, based on decades of regional planning and data, the group knew they take the form of expanded rapid transit and active transportation options. They were therefore willing to consult on, and subsequently wholeheartedly support the Mayors’ Council when it put forward a plan

Moving in a Livable Region was a consortium of businesses, organizations, local governments, and transportation leaders working together to create a long-term sustainable funding regime for transportation in the Metro Vancouver region. Given that the current transportation network is stressed and the region is growing by 35,000 people and 17,000 jobs per year, the consortium recognized that a properly funded transportation system is required in order to stay nationally and internationally competitive. A sustainable funding regime for regional transportation will help to grow our economy and maintain a high standard of living for residents.
that was comprehensive, fair, and detailed in its assessment of costs and timelines.

Early on in establishing this group, research into transportation ballot initiatives in the United States revealed that successful campaigns had separate bodies taking on educational, political, and advocacy roles. Housed at a university, it was clear that the SFU Centre for Dialogue would not play a political or advocacy role—that would be left to the elected officials and a yet-to-be developed coalition. About a year ahead of the referendum vote, Moving in a Livable Region (MLR) became committed to developing the educational campaign and preparing Metro Vancouver citizens and stakeholders for the referendum by providing information on transportation issues and funding options for the region in the context of the upcoming vote. This communications goal was explicitly to educate and provide information, not to persuade or advocate for a ‘Yes’ vote.

WHY DID MEMBERS JOIN THE CONSORTIUM? WHAT WAS THE VALUE FOR THEM?

This group of unlikely bedfellows met approximately every six weeks over a two and half year period. The value in regular meetings, came from the collective power of their individual contributions to the group. Each meeting offered individual members the opportunity for intelligence sharing, interaction with regional and municipal leadership, and place to voice concerns and develop ideas. Shauna Sylvester, Director of the SFU Centre for Dialogue, designed the process for, and facilitated each meeting. The meetings were held under Chatham House Rule, allowing participants to speak freely, off the record and without attribution, and to share ideas and opinions in a neutral space. This facilitation style emphasizes the principles of equitable contributions in dialogue, ensuring all voices—whether from a student transportation representative or a mayor or senior government employee—are heard. The Chairpersons of the Mayors’ Council became regular attendees at the meetings; the opportunity to interact with and hear directly from the region’s leadership, and the details of the investment plan, drew strong participation from members—at times, meeting room capacity could not keep pace with attendance.

Over the two and a half years of meetings, there was very little conflict or strong disagreement between members. As a collective that did not have any responsibility to each other, except to speak honestly about an issue that they all deeply cared about, the opportunity to share intelligence and provide advice to each other was stronger than any sectoral or institutional rifts. Members attended to check their assumptions, consult each other, network, and provide input on each phase of the political and financial process.

---

1 When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.
BEYOND THE CONSORTIUM: OTHER MLR ACTIVITIES

The consortium established a communications goal of developing an educational campaign; a source of information for the public to learn about transportation in the region ahead of the referendum vote. With funding from the Real Estate Foundation of BC, staff at the SFU Centre for Dialogue developed social media channels, and a website that includes a library of referenda publications, FAQs, news, and other resources. All materials are evidence-based and are drawn from publications, reports, and regional experts. In the lead-up to the vote, the website received high traffic, reaching an average of 15,000 pageviews per month. The public was hungry for clearly communicated, fact-based information on regional transportation issues.

MLR meetings often included a speaker with experience in conducting regional transportation campaigns. Invited guests from Move LA, Move the GTHA\(^2\), San Francisco, and Seattle all provided advice and direction to the MLR group. These meetings often coincided with a public MLR event, some of which attracted over 100 members of the public curious to hear more about the experience of other jurisdictions.

\(^2\) Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area

---

**Tangible research and communications outcomes of MLR**

**Survey and results:** Queried approximately 2000 Metro Vancouver residents on their transportation choices

**Website:** 15,000 total pageviews/month and 9900 users per month over the voting period

**Social media:** 1,060 Tweets and 542 Twitter followers 322 Facebook likes

**Public resource library:** Containing community specific information and resources on referenda, local transportation and transportation financing

Briefing documents and presentations for MLR consortium members and Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure staff
SFU Centre for Dialogue staff working on MLR met with members bilaterally, and played a significant role in connecting members to each other, and providing a platform for collaboration. From the outset of referendum planning, MLR staff provided briefings to the Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, business groups and associations, and the regional health authorities. At one point, the Minister of Transportation quoted directly to the media from MLR’s briefing notes. Aside from presentations and meetings, MLR convened and facilitated a number of small roundtables, including a half-day session with the region’s health authorities and academics.

Over the course of the program, MLR held three public events attracting a total of 200 participants from Surrey, Vancouver, and Burnaby. Speakers included elected officials, business, labour and environmental leaders, as well as guests from other jurisdictions who had experienced transportation votes and led campaigns. These events were webcast and the recordings are available online for reference.
OTHER GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Moving in a Livable Region played a relatively passive role in the transportation referendum, due in part to the direction of the MLR consortium as well as modest funding and staff capacity. There were many other groups that played a pivotal role in providing information to the public, or advocating for either a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No’ vote on the ballot.

Two early organizations whose members participated in MLR over the two and a half years included the Sustainable Transportation Coalition and Get OnBoard BC. The former grew out of mutual labour and business interests, the latter out of student transportation and the UPass (student transit pass) movement; these two organizations recognized the necessity of developing a network of diverse stakeholders to advocate for sustainable funding for transportation long before the referendum was ever mentioned.

As the critical nature of this issue became more apparent, other networks and groups began to organize. This included the well-established, grassroots Metro Vancouver Alliance, “a broad based alliance of community groups, labour, faith and educational institutions working together for the common good.” Across the region, groups meeting in church basements, universities, boardrooms, and schools began to put the impending referendum on their agendas.

As the referendum question and funding tool were finalized, the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns gained steam. The ‘No’ campaign, headed by the Canadian Taxpayers Federation (CTF), and led by BC Director, Jordan Bateman, was strategic and fast-moving. Shortly after the announcement of the referendum question and funding tool in late December 2014, Bateman began a communications push to rally supporters. The CTF’s messaging resonated with many members of the public, in particular the arguments about the affordability of the tax, transparency and governance of TransLink, and perceptions of wastefulness of the administration of the transportation authority.

The ‘Yes’ campaign was slow to develop communications platform over the winter break. By February, there was a website, social media channels, and messaging from both the Mayors’ Council, and the Better Transit and Transportation Coalition (BTTC)—an organized group of labour, business, environment, and student groups. Coalition co-chairs were named, and included Peter Robinson of the David Suzuki Foundation, Bahareh Jokar of the Alma Mater Society of UBC, Gavin McGarrigle of Unifor, and Iain Black of the Vancouver Board of Trade. These organizations were also active and regular participants at MLR meetings through which a group of particularly passionate leaders who understood the need for an advocacy coalition, pulled together funding to create the ‘Yes’ campaign. The BTTC grew quickly to encompass 145 groups representing more than 400,000 people; it held rallies, telephone townhalls with elected officials and business leaders, and mounted an impressive ‘get out the vote’ effort in the months leading
up to the voting period. Transit stations were filled with students signing people up to pledge to vote ‘Yes’; volunteers from member organizations spent thousands of hours calling up supporters and providing the undecided with more information, social media was streaming with videos, infographics and memes pushing for a ‘Yes’ on the ballot.

THE RESULT

On July 2, 2015 the result of the referendum was announced. Metro Vancouverites had voted ‘No’ in a plebiscite to support a $7.5-billion regional transportation plan. A total of 759,696 ballot packages were considered, of which 61.7% registered a ‘No’ vote. Contrary to expectations of a lower voter turnout than municipal elections, 51.1% of the total registered voters returned a ballot. The result was stunning; pollsters and coalition members were expecting a close result.

British Columbia has a history of referenda in which the public votes against diverse expert opinions or rebels against the voting process: HST, Single Transferable Vote, and the 2002 aboriginal treaty referenda are all fascinating examples. Many possible reasons for the clear ‘No’ vote were considered in the days following the announcement. The ‘No’ vote on the transit and transportation plebiscite might have indicated the public’s mistrust of TransLink or distaste for taxes; for some, including transit riders, voting ‘No’ was a protest against transit wait times and reliability; for others ‘No’ was a message about their anger at the referendum process and the lack of BC’s commitment to what they view as an essential service. Further research will have to be conducted to understand the origin of the public’s reaction to the referendum question, and the campaigns leading up to the vote. Regardless, the outcome of the vote brought uncertainty as to how improvements to regional transit and transportation will be funded over the next decade.
LES SONS AND REFERENDA ALTERNATIVES

In a country where investments in infrastructure are generally made without direct public voting (though not without consultation), Metro Vancouver’s transit and transportation referendum is a political anomaly. For campaigners and transportation professionals who worked to secure a positive result on the transit and transportation referendum, the No vote was a great disappointment. Many supporters were students, volunteers, low-income transit users, non-profit workers, and young professionals. In hindsight, the result was not particularly surprising: Asking voters whether they want to pay more taxes, with only 10 weeks to explain the benefits they will receive in return, is a nearly impossible task, as many visiting American transportation experts had forewarned. A global survey of referendum timelines indicates that 10 weeks was unusually short for a campaign on such a complex issue, and our early research revealed that opponents of transportation funding usually have an easier campaign (Weyrich and Lind, 2001). The mayors knew this, but felt they had no choice; it was a vote or the prospect of no funding for transportation for years to come.

It is hard to believe, however, that voters would vote against their own best interests if given the time and opportunity to fully explore the implications of further traffic congestion on the economy, the region’s health and environment. Many transportation ballot initiatives in the United States are unsuccessful at first, but over years of organizing and educating the public about the tangible benefits of investing in better transit, the votes are often favourable. In fact, in the US in recent years over 70% of ballot initiatives on transportation investment have been successful. However, in a region with unaffordable housing and long commute times, is it any wonder many budget conscious citizens do not have the time to consider complex policy issues and move beyond a vote of frustration? The very nature of a referendum question that asks for a binary response on a tax increase, oversimplifies an issue that has implications for long-term land use planning, development, jobs, health and safety, and environmental outcomes. The opportunity for the average citizen to have the time, space, and objective information not filtered through partisan politics, to consider what defines affordability and what is best for them and their family, just doesn’t exist. What might seem obvious to transportation planning professionals, academics, health practitioners, and environmentalists who have the privilege of working directly on these issues is not accessible to the average voter.

In addition to a lack of information and time for voters to make an informed decision, there was very little engagement of the public to begin with. A longer timeline would have allowed the mayors and province hear from the public about its transportation needs and preferred funding mechanisms, which would allow for two-way engagement and the strongest referendum question possible. As the process was rushed, the public was polled but never invited to participate in a
Dialogue provides an alternative to referenda; it deepens the democratic process beyond a simple yes/no vote. The public’s distrust of the transportation authority (TransLink) and the region’s elected officials was widely cited as a potential reason for the referendum result. In addition, the No campaign used the argument that Metro Vancouver “elites” were determining the region’s future, without properly consulting residents. Perhaps, given the opportunity to fully engage with regional elected officials, local government staff, and business and community leaders, and to ask the tough questions and provide input on a regional vision and potential revenue tools, the public response to the Mayors’ Council request for transportation funding would have been different. This process could have been led by the Province, drawing upon best practices from citizen engagement processes run instead of, or parallel to, transportation ballot initiatives in the US [e.g., Oregon’s Citizens’ Initiative Review]. Results from Moving in Metro, another project of SFU’s Centre for Dialogue held in the fall of 2014, suggests that citizens in Metro Vancouver are open to innovative financing options for transportation improvements. This project brought together four groups of citizens from across the region to consider road-pricing options. Post-survey results show that upon evaluating regional constraints on expanding the footprints of roads and simple transportation economics, citizens shifted their thinking towards supporting regional road pricing for reasons of fairness and equity.

In considering the two and a half year project, primary learnings from the SFU Centre for Dialogue’s role in the transportation referendum include:

1. Sustainable funding for transportation is an issue that cuts across every jurisdiction and every sector in Metro Vancouver. Through professionally facilitated dialogue and a common basis of unity, diverse groups with varied interests can come together to develop a vision for working together to address sustainable funding for regional transportation.

2. Early on in the referendum process, MLR provided evidence-based research on past ballot initiatives and referenda that highlighted three main points (i) the political process requires a lead time of at least 18 months from the development of the question and revenue tool to host a well-organized transportation referendum3; (ii) there needs to be strong political leadership that supports a favourable outcome; and, (iii) there needs to be both a strong advocacy campaign and a strong educational campaign from a trusted source.

---

3 Insufficient time to plan effective messaging, properly organize the affected communities, and put together a robust ‘get out the vote’ effort can doom a campaign. This was the case in the 2012 Los Angeles ballot initiative that failed, despite strong coalition, ample local political support, and several previously successful campaigns.
3. Despite making this research widely available, the recommendations from this research were not followed, and a reasonable period for both the Yes and No campaigns to inform voters were not established.

4. The economic, health, and environmental impacts of traffic congestion that were apparent to diverse business and community organizations did not resonate with or were not communicated well to citizens prior to the vote. Citizens did not have an opportunity to meaningfully engage on the transportation vision, referendum question, or funding sources; despite broad consensus on the need for sustainable funding for regional transportation, regional leaders focused their efforts too narrowly on diverse but representational stakeholders groups. Given a longer timeline, the province, Mayors’ Council, and TransLink could have developed an engagement strategy to ensure that citizens had a voice in developing the region’s transportation vision.

5. The sector representatives who participated in MLR valued the opportunity to expand their networks, their understanding of transportation, and their capacity to bridge to new communities and across sectoral cleavages. Such a process can provide a model for other complex cross-sector negotiation.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Dialogue is a way of addressing complex policy issues; there are many approaches to dialogue that can help citizens move from understanding an issue to formulating a perspective on it. This may include deliberative dialogue, citizen juries and assemblies, and virtual and large scale engagement processes. Dialogue emerges when participant citizens work from a common basis of information and are able to analyze strengths, weaknesses, and tradeoffs inherent in any public decision. A binary referendum question does not enable such a process.

Participation in a democratic process requires cultivating a certain level of knowledge on political issues that affect us as civil society. The truth is that free time, access to objective information, and the opportunity to consider a range of opinions and ideas, is a luxury in today’s world. How can we connect the decision-making mechanisms of government with citizens, while ensuring that they have the opportunity to move beyond an emotional or partisan response, to a full consideration of the implications of a certain result? The SFU Centre for Dialogue will continue to explore these questions, and partner with government, business, and community groups in developing new tools and processes that involve citizens in policymaking.