May 21, 2022

MAP held a public forum at the Community Hall Saturday May 21st to provide an opportunity to discuss the proposed CRD Integrated Transportation initiative and referendum. The meeting was advertised the Pender Post, by e-mail and on social media. There was modest attendance given the first good weather of the Spring !! but there was a lively discussion and this summarizes the input that was gathered.

Although the forum might be somewhat premature given that a referendum would not take place until the Fall I think the insights gained by the exercise are valuable and should inform decision making.

The format was an initial information presentation outlining what the CRD is proposing and the slide set that was used for this is attached.

This was followed by an excellent review by Fay Weller from Gabriola about the Referendum on Gabriola that established funding for the Community Bus there, GERTIE.

Following this we had a pro and con debate about the merits of the proposal and then an open discussion and question and answer session. These were facilitated by Pender Trustee, Ben McConchie.

Although the sample size was relatively small I think the thoughts and ideas expressed capture the broader community views on the issue and are important to consider in making a decision about supporting a referendum and if supported, future communications to the electorate.

The participants were mostly very involved permanent residents although we had one part timer who is a transportation planner with Translink and who made valuable contributions to the discussion.

The major concern with the plan at the moment is with the lack of transparency regarding the distribution of the funds between CRD administration and support and on-island support of island transportation projects. In the absence of more precise data on this distribution participants were suspicious that too large a percent of the collected tax would go to off-island CRD staff and administration with a smaller than appropriate amount going to island societies and groups doing transportation projects. This suspicion was bolstered by the numbers that were presented in the different modeling exercises presented by the CRD staff and consultants at public meetings.

Specifically, it is proposed to collect 675k with the option D selection which is the one supported by the CESC.

The only proposed breakdown of how that 675k would be expended that has been suggested in the material presented to islanders was expenditure of 70-80k per island on local community buses and 6-10 k per island for support of trail development. If we assume the maximum expended on these projects that would mean 80k X 4 islands + 10K x 4 islands for a total of $360,000 of the $675,000 that would be collected. That means there is $315,000 unaccounted for. It was the prevailing fear that this funding would be spent for yet more CRD bureaucracy. This fear was shared by all present at the meeting even the most supportive of the general concept behind the initiative. No one in the room would support such a proposal if this is indeed how the funding would be allocated.

I should say that I had anticipated this concern before the forum and asked repeatedly if I could get at least a ball-park breakdown of how the funding would be divided and was not able to get an answer.

The presentation by Fay Weller indirectly addressed this issue when she disclosed that only 5% of the $$$ requisitioned by their referendum for support of public transit on Gabriola, was retained by the Nanaimo Regional District to administer the program. The vast majority of the funds are expended on-island to support operations can capital expenses for the Community Bus.

I think the second major concern raised by the participants was the inclusion of support by tax-payer dollars for inter-island water transportation. Although I tried to explain that this would actually be a small amount of money and would be for planning and coordination and linking any such water taxi service to other modes of on-island transport this did not dispel the negativity of the participants concerning this part of the proposed service.

Although not specifically addressed I believe there would be wide spread support for a tax levy devoted solely to supporting community buses on the islands.

The third largest concern was with respect to having one service and commission covering islands with very different population sizes and transportation issues. There was some support for Island-specific Commissions. A subsequent suggestion from one participant regarding governance was that a “Transportation Council” be created of representatives selected from separate commissions for each island. The Council members would be selected by the Islands’ commissioners and ratified by approval of the CRD director.

Additional concerns were that the active transport portion of the proposed Service overlaps to some extent with the mandate of the islands’ Parks and Recreation Commissions which can, and are, requesting licenses of occupation to build road side trails. This was also seen by some as an opportunity for collaboration.

In summary I would say that, to the extent that the opinions of those present mirror the feelings of the general population, and I think they do, the referendum would not pass at the present time. To make it more attractive I think that there are at least 3 major actions which would increase support:

1. More transparency on fund distribution with the bulk of the funding (~ 80%) going to actual projects on the islands
2. Scaling down or eliminating the water transportation component
3. Ensuring that the distribution of funds to the islands is accompanied by local control of how it expended (eg one island could decide to expend the bulk of their funding on public transportation while another would provide more of their allocation to trails).

The meeting was live-streamed and a video of the meeting as well as copies of all slides used are available for other island groups to use in public forums.