

150 km of track, trains for price of new bridge: Study

You could pretty much serve all the south of the Fraser (and build lines to Coquitlam and Maple Ridge) for cost of new Port Mann crossing

BY KENT SPENCER, THE PROVINCE APRIL 9, 2009



John Buker is staging a day of action along Highway 1 for 'trains, not lanes,' hoping for non-partisan support as the May election looms.

Photograph by: Les Bazso, The Province, file, The Province

Spending \$3 billion on a new Port Mann Bridge makes no sense when a light-rail network could be built at the same cost, say rail advocates.

John Buker, spokesman for Rail for the Valley, said yesterday that a University of B.C. study shows \$3 billion could buy 150 kilometres of trains and light rails.

The group plans a "day of action" this Saturday at 11 a.m., when demonstrators will unfurl "trains, not lanes" signs to motorists on Highway 1.

Buker said "dozens" of homemade signs will be suspended from overpasses between West Vancouver and Chilliwack.

"The Fraser Valley is a rapidly growing region. We need to prepare for the future today," said Buker.

"We're trying to put passenger rail on the agenda for the election campaign."

Voters go to the polls across B.C. on May 12.

The province intends to tear down the existing Port Mann Bridge, which has 30 years remaining in its usable lifespan, and replace it with a single structure carrying 10 lanes.

"Europe is building light rail, while B.C. is tearing down bridges," Buker said.

UBC transportation Prof. Patrick Condon said a recent study proposes a cheaper, cleaner way to move people by using light rail on existing roadways.

The German-built Combino tram can be built and supplied with trains for \$20 million per kilometre, says a study for the UBC Design Centre for Sustainability.

The rails could go down streets such as King George Highway in Surrey. They can operate in single- or double-track formats.

"You could pretty much serve all the population south of the Fraser -- and build lines to Coquitlam and Maple Ridge" for the price of the new bridge, Condon said.

"Trains are substantially cheaper than buses over the long term. They are more energy-efficient and carry more passengers per driver.

"Removing a bridge with 30 years of life left may not be the most cost-effective thing to do," he said.

"We're about to spend an awful lot of taxpayers' money. It is worth the time and effort to look at affordable alternatives," Condon said.

Buker said the governing Liberals are paying "lip service" to the idea.

The Liberals have commissioned a \$400,000 light-rail study in the Fraser Valley, which Buker said should include Surrey and Langley, but does not. The findings will be released after the election.

"Feasibility studies can be done until the cows come home. It's time to focus on an implementation study," Buker said.

He is appealing for "non-partisan" support from any political party -- NDP, Greens and B.C. Conservatives.

"It doesn't matter if support comes from the left wing or the right wing," he said.

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