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Abstract (Summary)

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Full Text (683 words)

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Clark does U-turn on Bombardier's Skytrain

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British Columbia Bureau

VANCOUVER -- The Canadian-made rapid transit system he dismissed a decade ago as a billion-dollar bumble has suddenly become B.C. Premier Glen Clark's answer to traffic congestion, job creation and political pressures.

Mr. Clark surprised Vancouver-area municipal leaders by revealing yesterday that he is negotiating with Montreal's Bombardier Inc. to install a \$1.5-billion extension to the Skytrain transit system in Vancouver as soon as possible, if Bombardier can deliver B.C. jobs to go with it.

Back in the 1980s, when the Social Credit government bought the first Skytrain run, Mr. Clark and other B.C. New Democratic Party politicians condemned the elevated system as a costly, unproven venture, calling it a turkey on stilts.

But Mr. Clark, who has been dashing around the continent for weeks offering incentives to companies to locate plants and create jobs in B.C., has made a u-turn on Skytrain.

His endorsement of Skytrain also gives Bombardier a badly-needed vote of confidence for its transit system, which so far has only been bought by Vancouver and Kuala Lumpur. Mr. Clark will require Bombardier to build a factory in Greater Vancouver as a key condition of the deal.

"The Premier is quite anxious to get some jobs" and met with Bombardier chairman Laurent Beaudoin in Montreal on Tuesday, said Bombardier vice-president Jacques Laparé in a telephone interview. "The chairman was able to express how we deal with such requests."

Mr. Laparé said Bombardier is not prepared to build a new Skytrain rail-car manufacturing plant in B.C. just for the sake of winning and servicing the Skytrain contract.

But "it is not the first time we have been exposed to requests for industrial benefits" by a potential customer, and the company is exploring all options, including using a B.C. site to build other transit components, he said. Mr. Clark's unilateral declaration that Skytrain is the answer to Vancouver's traffic woes echoes the leap of confidence by then Social Credit premier William Vander Zalm more than a decade ago.

When Mr. Vander Zalm forked out \$600-million for the high-speed transit system prior to Expo '86 and also entered a joint marketing venture with Bombardier, Mr. Clark and his opposition NDP colleagues vilified the project.

Mr. Clark was still condemning it during the early 1990s because Skytrain's cost overruns saddled the province with almost \$1-billion in debt and the lack of Skytrain sales to other customers had produced no new jobs in B.C. The Malaysian Skytrain cars are being built in Ontario.

Mr. Clark's deal-making expedition to Montreal surprised and angered the Opposition Liberal party and Vancouver-area municipal leaders.

The Vancouver region's two million residents have one of the least effective transit systems in Canada, with the second-lowest per capita ridership in the country and no increase in ridership share versus cars in a decade. Promised new transit lines are eight years behind schedule.

The Skytrain system or the LRT, whichever Mr. Clark finally decides, is envisioned to have a line built to Burnaby by 2002, and connector lines from New Westminster to Port Moody and Vancouver to Richmond later on.

Based on Clark government studies in 1995, the Greater Vancouver regional government and the province committed to a street-level \$1-billion light rapid transit system similar to Calgary's streetcar-like LRT with construction to begin next year.

Last month, provincial officials were in Europe investigating LRT products there and Bombardier was preparing to submit its own bid on the LRT project using conventional rail-cars and technology it has sold to a number of transit systems.

However, the Vancouver LRT project was hampered by demands for costly alterations coming from merchants and residents along the proposed route as well as from politicians. Also, municipal mayors were squabbling about the construction schedule and construction estimates had risen close to \$1.3-billion.

"He's alienated a lot of municipalities" with his move to Skytrain, said George Puill, regional chairman of the regional council and a Vancouver city councillor. "The province is supposed to be consulting with us."

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