



Plans to privatize B.C. highway fuels protest

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KAMLOOPS, B.C. — About 1,000 people rallied at a Coquihalla toll booth Saturday to say no to a B.C. government plan to privatize the highway.

The protesters, honking horns and waving signs saying "The Coke Is Not For Sale," turned out to oppose a jump in the Coquihalla toll to \$13 from \$10 if the government proceeds with its plan to privatize the route.

The tolls would also last for 55 years on the main artery that links the Lower Mainland to the B.C. Interior.

Harry Lali, a former NDP highway minister, said the B.C. government is taking the controversial move to balance its budget in 2004.

"They know they can't do that so they're looking to sell off the house and the car and the refrigerator in order to make their payments on the credit card," Lali told CHNL News.

The move will also cost the government seats and possibly the next provincial election in 2005, said Green Party leader Adriane Carr.

The rally was the largest to date in the conservative-minded B.C. Interior, home of former Social Credit premier W.A.C. Bennett.

People came from Kamloops, Merritt and the Lower Mainland for the event.

Kamloops-North Thompson MLA Kevin Krueger played down the turnout but said the government will take into consideration the views expressed by the protesters.

"This is far from a done deal and we're listening," he said.

But that wasn't the message last Wednesday in Kelowna, when Finance Minister Gary Collins took an earful from about 200 furious residents at a meeting to discuss the plan.

Collins said the government won't be swayed by protests.

The only way the deal won't go through is if the bids aren't high enough, he added.

A \$13 bill depicting B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell's mugshot from his drunk-driving arrest in Hawaii has also been distributed in the B.C. interior to protest the privatization plan.

The phoney money declares the tolls "highway robbery," and the bills are purportedly signed by "Gordon Campbell, the prince of privatization and never-ending tolls."

There are also quotes on the back from the Kamloops mayor and area newspapers condemning the Liberal plan.