

Groundwork laid for Victoria, Saanich citizens' assembly on amalgamation



Saanich Municipal Hall.

Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, Times Colonist

Victoria and Saanich have moved a step closer to establishing a citizens' assembly that will examine the pros and cons of amalgamating the two municipalities.

After nearly a year of talks, Saanich council signed off on the assembly's terms of reference Tuesday, joining Victoria, which granted approval in December.

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The two municipalities will now present the document to the province and

ask for up to \$250,000 to cover a third of the projected \$750,000 cost. Saanich and Victoria will contribute matching amounts.

“It was a lot of work getting here and I’m pleased at that, because this is not something that we should rush,” Saanich Mayor Fred Haynes said in an interview Wednesday. “This is a very important decision for Saanich and Victoria.”

Haynes said it took a year since the last municipal elections to come up with the terms of reference, “because we have to make sure the terms of reference are detailed enough and thoughtful enough so once we activate a citizens’ assembly, we know it’s on the right track.”

In the 2018 municipal elections, Victoria and Saanich residents voted in favour of the municipalities spending up to \$250,000 each to establish a citizens’ assembly that would examine the costs, benefits and disadvantages of amalgamation.

Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps said that she’s happy with the process to date.

“We knew it would take a long time,” she said. “These are really difficult conversations. I would say the speed is less important than the process and we’ve had really good conversations with the District of Saanich.

“I think if people want us to rush through this, that’s going to get us nowhere fast. I think we’re taking the time that we need to take.”

Under the terms of reference, the assembly will consist of 75 people selected by civic lottery. They will generally mirror the population of the two municipalities based on the 2016 census, with an equal proportion of men and women and proportionate numbers of renters and homeowners, urban and rural residents, and members of First Nations.

Haynes said it’s unclear how long it will take the province to review the terms of reference and decide whether to contribute money, but he hopes

it's only a matter of months.

“We think the citizens’ assembly can be launched in the summer, run through the fall [and] deliver its results in 2021 first quarter,” he said.

The recommendations will be non-binding on the councils and could include anything from leaving things as they are to full amalgamation or something in between, such as the merging of police or fire departments, Haynes said.

Saanich and Victoria will wait to hear from the province before hiring a consultant to compile all the research and prepare a technical report for the assembly.

“The technical report that the members of the assembly will be presented with will lay out massive details on how the two cities function,” Haynes said.

Colin Nielsen, vice-chairman of the advocacy group Amalgamation Yes, said he’s optimistic the process will be fair and transparent.

“We’re not necessarily pro-amalgamation,” he said. “We’re pro looking at governance — which has never been done in this fashion before — to see if the two [municipalities] being together is actually a better option than the two standing alone.”

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