

Lawrie McFarlane: Province should fix municipal dysfunction

B.C.'s new municipal affairs minister, Selina Robinson, says she has no plans to force local governments in the capital region to amalgamate. In her view, “local governments are responsible for making choices about how they want to deliver services — and the governance issues that come along with that.”

Robinson did express interest in more sharing of services among municipalities, but it is clear she's sticking with the line her predecessors took: Local government issues must be decided locally.

I understand Robinson's reluctance. What provincial politician would wish to own a shambolic project such as the Johnson Street Bridge? Equally, why would they want to be anywhere in sight when someone finally decides to cull our urban deer population?

But municipalities are creatures of provincial legislation, and there is ample evidence that some of the applicable statutes need revisiting.

Three examples. First, there is the ridiculous situation where the police complaint commissioner is not obliged to keep local police boards fully in the loop when their senior officers are under investigation.

Thus, while Victoria's former police chief, Frank Elsner, was the subject of an inquiry, the commissioner, Stan Lowe, withheld details from the Victoria and Esquimalt Police Board. The board co-chairs had to file a court writ demanding to know what was going on.

The blame here rests with neither the commissioner nor the board, but with the Police Act, which is needlessly ambiguous. So rewrite it to prevent the kind of circus we just endured.

Second, there was the sewage fiasco in which the province's environment minister instructed the Capital Regional District to lead a system rebuild, then ducked when Esquimalt balked. That piece of cowardice cost untold millions in delays.

The problem here lies with the CRD's legislative mandate, which is a mile wide and an inch deep. If you're going to tag a regional body with projects that are guaranteed to encounter NIMBY opposition, you need to empower it properly. So do it.

A third concern is lack of budget discipline. Between 2004 and 2014, the 20 largest municipalities in B.C. increased spending 33 per cent above inflation, outpacing population growth three to one.

Poorly managed employee compensation rates played a major role. The problem is most evident at the upper-management level.

Victoria's chief administrative officer, for example, takes home essentially the same salary and benefits (\$275,000) as the province's deputy minister of health (\$280,000). The CAO of Saanich isn't far behind, at \$250,000.

Yet the Health Ministry's operating budget is 80 times larger than Victoria's and 100 times larger than Saanich's. Where is the sense in that?

This misalignment between compensation and responsibilities can be found throughout municipal pay scales. Between 2001 and 2012, municipal employees, on average, received a 38 per cent salary lift — well above background inflation of 23 per cent. Over the same period, provincial employees saw their wages increase by only 19 per cent.

Municipalities such as Victoria justify their pay scales by using other local governments as a "benchmark." But, of course, that simply ensures that everyone is out of line.

The provincial government attempted to address this and other issues with

the appointment of an auditor general for local government.

Unfortunately, as currently conceived, this office is a waste of money. Staff appear to be laboriously working their way through the province's 162 municipalities, one at a time, looking for local anomalies.

What's needed is a performance audit of the entire system, focused on a rational compensation strategy. If that means updating the relevant legislation, then get on with it.

In short, there are numerous indicators of dysfunction among the province's municipalities. As the governing authority, only the province can fix this. Let's hope Robinson finds the courage.

jalmcfarlane@shaw.ca