

Editorial: Amalgamation study must focus on details

Voters in Victoria and Saanich have approved the creation of a citizens' assembly to advise on amalgamating the two municipalities. Almost 67 per cent of voters in Victoria and 57 per cent in Saanich gave the proposal a thumbs-up during the recent civic elections.

Since the question on the ballot was presented as a non-binding referendum, neither council is formally obliged to proceed. Nor are they required to accept the advice of the assembly, if one is formed. Some councillors are known to be firmly opposed to amalgamation.

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Nevertheless, given the strong support expressed by voters, presumably the assembly will go ahead.

But here the questions begin. Are we talking about a purely political amalgamation, in which we end up with just one mayor and council, instead of two?

If so, we don't need a citizens' assembly to advise. That is a matter for the voters to decide.

But realistically, this option makes little sense. How can there be one city council, but two city managers, two police chiefs, two sets of financial statements, etc.? Councillors would have to resolve endless disputes and conflicting advice with such an arrangement.

If amalgamation is to work, it has to reach down to the staff level, as well. And that is no small matter.

Combined, the two municipalities have budgets totalling about \$430 million.

Each has nine or 10 separate departments, dealing with everything from fire and rescue services to bylaw enforcement and engineering.

Coming up with a plan to merge these duplicate staff units is an enormously complex task, and one that no citizens' assembly would be qualified to undertake.

Last year, Duncan and North Cowichan formed an assembly to look at amalgamation. But first, to guide the deliberations, a consulting firm with experience in municipal mergers was hired to nail down the options.

If Victoria and Saanich are serious about this project, some such expert advice will be needed.

However, the Duncan/North Cowichan project tells us more. While the consulting firm identified the kind of decisions that would be required, it was unable to quantify the financial benefits that could be gained, other than halving the salary bill for councillors. That's because it could not predict how far the merger would proceed at the bureaucratic level.

In the case of Victoria and Saanich, if half the senior managers were displaced in a full-scale merger, the savings would approach \$5 million a year. But would they be displaced, or would they merely be given new titles?

Of course, there is more to amalgamation than a search for economies. It makes complete sense, for example, to have one police service instead of two.

The benefits include better sharing of information, better co-ordination of resources and greater sophistication in the deployment of new technologies.

But merely stacking one police department on top of another and calling it a merger evades the critical issue. In a genuinely amalgamated police service,

there can be only one chief, not two.

The same is true for the other departments. If there is to be a merger, it must reach throughout the two bureaucracies, not merely skim the surface.

All of which points to this: Whether a citizens' assembly is left to its own devices or a consulting firm is hired, precise deliverables must be established at the outset.

And those deliverables must go beyond broad proposals. They must include which management jobs will be made redundant, how differing salary grids will be unified and how chains of command can be integrated.

Voters in Victoria and Saanich should watch this process closely. How the citizens' assembly unfolds will tell us just how serious the two councils are about a genuine merger.

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