Editorial: Region riddled with duplication

Last week's report on service integration in the capital region is both frustrating and intriguing. Frustrating, because the report, commissioned by the B.C. Liberals, is largely silent on the obvious question: Is there sufficient evidence to support amalgamation among the region's 13 municipalities?

That was not an accident. Christy Clark and her colleagues had no intention of even broaching this matter. Neither, as we've been told, does the new NDP administration. File that under the heading of opportunities missed.

Yet the report is also intriguing, because almost by accident, it makes the case for some form of amalgamation. Here is what the authors found.

First, our local governments have erected layer upon layer of duplicate bureaucracies.

These include 13 fire departments, 13 emergency planning departments, 13 parks departments, 13 bylaw-enforcement departments, 13 overhead and administration departments (each with its own human-resources, purchasing, and finance staff), 11 sewage-collection departments, etc.

There are some shared services in the region, among them library facilities and recreational programs.

Nevertheless the preferred service delivery model, by far, is a standalone approach. The waste and inefficiency involved is evident.

For example, most of these duplicate staff departments are headed by a manager making more than $100,000 a year, and often backed up by subordinates also taking home hefty paycheques. Here alone is an opportunity to save several millions by culling the excess layers of

management.

Second, there are clear indications that some of the smaller municipalities are paying dearly for their go-it-alone mindset. Central Saanich, for instance, spends $434 per resident to maintain a separate police force. Colwood, which contracts with the RCMP, spends only $187 per capita.

North Saanich, with its tiny population base, pays $251 per resident for overhead and administration. Saanich spends less than half that amount ($120 per capita).

Pursuing economies of scale by merging some of these duplicated services could hardly fail to save money.

Third, there is the long-debated issue of police amalgamation. The report notes that Greater Victoria has four separate municipal police forces and three RCMP detachments.

That raises the question: How many times have criminal cases gone unsolved because our law enforcement effort is fragmented?

There is indeed a degree of co-ordination in certain specialty areas, such as organized crime, forensic identification and underwater search and recovery. However, experience shows that walling off police forces into independent fiefdoms impairs their effectiveness.

Port Coquitlam pig farmer Robert Pickton is believed to have killed at least 26 women. Over a period of years, police missed numerous opportunities to catch him. When he was finally brought to justice, the extent of these investigative failures became apparent.

Retired B.C. attorney general Wally Oppal conducted an inquiry into the handling of the case. He found that fragmentation of policing and lack of co-ordination played a major part.

At the time, Metro Vancouver had five separate police forces and 17 RCMP contracts. Oppal recommended amalgamation into one regional force.

Yet that recommendation was not acted on. Likewise, there have been several calls for an amalgamation of policing in the capital region, and these too have gone unanswered.

Here, then, is where we stand. The report details extensive waste and duplication, and in some areas what can only be described as featherbedding.

This is not necessarily a reason to amalgamate municipalities. Many residents appreciate the responsiveness of a local council based in their community.

But it should prompt serious consideration of shared services. For some hefty bills are pending, not least among them paying for the new sewage system.

To date, our municipal councillors have been happy to kick this can down the road. It will take pressure at the ballot box to bring about real change.