

The Concept of Municipal Amalgamation in the CRD - Q & A

Are 13 separate municipalities the best option for the residents of Greater Victoria now and in the future?

This is a complicated question, one which cannot be easily answered. Discussions about amalgamation have existed since Oak Bay and Saanich became municipalities in 1906. The idea of amalgamating some or all of the existing municipalities has come up again and again, even while new municipalities were being created. Over the years, public opinion has generally fallen into one of five categories:

- 1) Those opposed to any form of amalgamation.
- 2) Those in favour of amalgamating some of the municipalities.
- 3) Those in favour of amalgamating all 13 municipalities into one.
- 4) Those that have an open mind but lack sufficient information to make a decision.
- 5) Those that are ambivalent, don't care or have no opinion.

The short answer to the above question is that the concept of amalgamation of one or more municipalities in the capital region district has never been seriously investigated.

Generally, those opposed to amalgamation feel that “smaller is better”. They believe that smaller municipalities are more responsive to local needs, compete with each other to keep costs down and are more accountable to their residents. Their position includes the old axiom “if it ain't broke, don't fix it”. Some supporters of this view are elected officials in the 13 municipalities as well as some of their senior municipal executives. This view is also held by some academics, such as Dr. Robert Bish, UVic Professor Emeritus of the School of Public Administration, who wrote several papers on the subject of amalgamation while serving in that role. By his own admission, additional research was required to reach conclusions, although he supported smaller municipal entities. His papers generally dealt with micro-economic issues **but not with the larger issues of regional planning, population growth and land development, regional transportation infrastructure, regional transit, protection of farmland and wilderness areas, regional sustainability and regional economic development.**

How can the public have confidence that the status quo is the best option if other options have never been “objectively” examined?

The short answer is, at present, they can't. Without an in-depth and objective study, there is insufficient hard information to determine if the status quo is the best form of governance. The

status quo evolved over the past 100 + years while the world was changing, and in many respects, becoming smaller.

People today are far more mobile than their predecessors; in Greater Victoria people move across the artificial lines we call boundaries without thinking about them. Many people live in one municipality, go to school or an institute of higher learning in another, work in another, seek recreation and entertainment in another and shop in yet another. In the process of commuting, it is not uncommon for people to cross through 3 or more municipal boundaries daily.

Each municipality seeks to grow its own economy and tax base, look after its own infrastructure and plan for growth based on its own needs with very little thought to neighbouring municipalities and the region as a whole. The CRD, which is a **consensual** form of regional government, attempts to act as a coordinator for some of these functions but the bottom line is the CRD only provide those services that municipalities permit them to provide within their borders.

An in-depth, objective study is needed to assist the citizens of Greater Victoria to determine what other options are available and their pros and cons so they can decide how they want their local government(s) to be structured.

What other options might be viable for the Capital Region?

An **in-depth** study would identify and compare the existing multiplicity of municipalities with other models. There are several options, e.g. 6 municipalities (proposed by Metchosin Mayor John Ranns), 3 municipalities (West Shore, Core and Peninsula), 2 municipalities (Core/West Shore and Peninsula), 1 Regional Municipality and other combinations as well as the status quo.

Why hasn't the Provincial Government examined this issue?

Successive Provincial Governments (Social Credit, NDP and Liberal) have taken a "hands off" approach to the issue of amalgamation. Forced amalgamations (shotgun weddings) have happened elsewhere (Halifax, Ottawa, Toronto & Winnipeg, to name a few) however BC Provincial governments have consistently left the issue up to citizens. The Province will only act when there is **public support**.

The most recent amalgamations in BC were **consensual**; Matsqui and Abbotsford amalgamated to become the City of Abbotsford in 1995 and the Northern Rockies Regional District and the Town of Fort Nelson amalgamated in 2009 to become the Northern Rockies Regional Municipality.

In the case of the CRD, the Minister of Communities, Sports and Cultural Development will consider funding an **in-depth** study **if there is sufficient public support**. The study would be fully

funded under the **Local Government Grants Act**, hence would not impose any direct costs onto local municipal governments.

How can public support be demonstrated to the Minister?

Public support could be demonstrated through a “non-binding” referendum. Such a vote could be held during the next municipal elections, scheduled for Saturday November 15, 2014. Holding such a referendum in conjunction with municipal elections would cost very little and might even increase the rate of voter participation, which has historically been low. The municipalities together with the Minister would assess the results of the vote to decide if there is sufficient public support to warrant a study.

What would an in-depth municipal amalgamation study examine?

An amalgamation study would examine various amalgamation models, including the status quo, and would highlight the pros and cons of each. Various disciplines of expertise would be brought together to examine and report in detail on all aspects of each amalgamation model. Such a study would be expensive however it would identify the best option(s) for the region **for the long-term. It would provide** the public with sufficient objective information to make an informed decision.

What would existing municipalities and residents have to fear by agreeing to place an amalgamation study question on their November 2014 Municipal ballots?

Those who are opposed to amalgamation tend to fear increased taxes, decreased services, loss of voice in their local government, change in culture for the region or loss of employment. A study of potential options, or models would include the status quo; hence supporters of the status quo would have their preferred model assessed against others.

An in-depth study would thoroughly examine costs/taxes and suggest ways of ensuring that taxes would address varying levels of services for local neighbourhoods. An amalgamation study would carefully examine municipal service delivery for optimization of services and opportunities for enhancing services through efficiencies and cost sharing, for example, purchasing high technology equipment.

There are some residents who feel that amalgamation could provide an opportunity to strengthen community voices at City Hall. The study would include an examination of the electoral process and representation. Suggested models could include a ward system, or perhaps tiered representation (a combinatory of councilors elected “at Large “and by Wards with local citizen committees).

As to municipal employee staffing levels, the study would examine staffing levels throughout the region. Early comparisons of other districts with similar sized populations as the CRD suggest that there might be economies found in the reduction of very senior administrative staff who receive the highest salaries within municipalities.

But this is speculation; only a thorough study will provide the answers to questions raised.

What would happen after the study was completed?

A report would be presented to the Minister and to the 13 municipal councils. The Minister (and Cabinet) in consultation with municipal councils would determine the next steps based on the contents of the amalgamation report. One possible outcome would be a binding referendum on one or more amalgamation options, which would lead to a change in local governance.

What kind of organization is “Amalgamation Yes”?

Amalgamation Yes (officially called “the Capital Region Municipal Amalgamation Society”) is a non-profit Society registered under and governed by the Societies Act. *Amalgamation Yes* does not support any specific model of amalgamation, however our members generally agree that there are too many municipalities in the Capital Region and strongly support the need for an **in-depth expert** study into amalgamation options and models to determine what is best for the region for the long-term. We are a non-partisan organization and are not affiliated with any other group. Our members want the residents of Greater Victoria to have the democratic opportunity to decide how they are locally governed.