

A Tale of Two Cities – Halifax and Victoria

Background

Halifax Regional Municipality and Greater Victoria have much in common. They are both provincial capital cities, they are of similar size (Halifax 414,000, Victoria 359,000 according to official Statistics Canada estimates¹ in 2014), they are respectively the home ports of the Royal Canadian Navy's Atlantic and Pacific fleets, within their regions they are relatively old cities founded by the British (Halifax in 1749, Victoria in 1843), and they both include suburban and rural communities in addition to their urban cores.

But there are significant differences as well. Halifax is not only the capital of Nova Scotia and the largest city in the province but is also the leading commercial centre and transportation hub for the maritime provinces. Victoria, on the other hand, is overshadowed by its younger but very much larger neighbour Vancouver which is not only the dominant city in British Columbia and the third largest metropolitan area in Canada but is also the location of the largest port and the second busiest airport in the entire country.

An even more striking difference between Halifax and Victoria, however, is how the two regional cities are governed. Greater Victoria comprises 13 separate municipalities each with their own mayors and councils (91 of them!), and 3 electoral areas, all overseen by a Capital Regional District (CRD) with limited authority and responsibilities, and whose Board members are appointed or elected by the various municipalities and districts themselves. The Halifax Regional Municipality is a single entity having been created in 1996 through an amalgamation of Halifax City, Dartmouth, Bedford and the County of Halifax. It is governed by the Halifax Regional Council (HRC) of 16 councillors and an elected mayor. Local matters are considered by three community councils, composed of several councillors from the HRC, which make recommendations to the Regional Council. This is the exact opposite of the situation in Victoria where it is the CRD that is subservient to the individual councils rather than the other way round. Board members of the CRD are accountable not to the region but to their municipalities and can, through their councils, block any recommendation from the CRD that would benefit the region as a whole but which they perceive as unfavourable to their own small municipality (and their own prospect of re-election!).

Whereas the Government of Nova Scotia, concerned that the disunity of its largest metropolitan area was hindering its economic development, decided to commission a study of governance in the Halifax region and subsequently introduced an Act to Incorporate in 1995, the present Government of British Columbia prefers a "hands-off" approach to municipal affairs and anyway appears to be totally disinterested in Victoria as it focusses almost exclusively on Vancouver where its support is based.

Andrew Sancton, a well-known expert on municipal amalgamations, states that the Halifax Act was largely the pet project of the Liberal Premier, John Savage, who as mayor of Dartmouth had,

¹ Annual population estimates by census metropolitan areas, July 1, 2014, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/150211/t150211a001-eng.htm>

ironically, previously opposed amalgamation when it was first mooted by the former Progressive Conservative Premier Donald Cameron. His motives apparently were to reduce public spending and foster economic development, but Sancton claims there was little public interest in the matter and certainly no pressure from external sources for him to pursue this course of action, or in Sancton's own words²:

“It is extremely difficult to argue that there were strong societal forces urging Canadian provincial governments in the 1990s to implement sweeping municipal amalgamations in major metropolitan areas. In Halifax, the Royal Commission on Education, Public Services, and Provincial-Municipal Relations called for a single municipality as early as 1974. In 1992 the provincially appointed Task Force on Local Government arrived at a similar conclusion. In neither of these cases was there great public interest in the issue. ... Such policies were brought in with little or no thought by provincial premiers who acted as they did in response to the particular political circumstances in which they found themselves. They made little or no effort to mobilize consent for these policies beyond a small group of cabinet ministers who in turn helped control obedient caucuses.”

Circumstances in Victoria couldn't be more different. The amalgamation question has been alive and debated for decades: numerous public discussions have taken place; several well-attended forums featuring panels of experts and distinguished guest speakers have been organized; citizens' groups seeking an independent study of local governance have been formed (Amalgamation Yes, Grumpy Taxpayer\$ of Greater Victoria, Greatest Greater Victoria Conversation); countless articles and letters on the topic have been published in the local press³; radio and TV interviews on amalgamation are a regular occurrence; and so on. In 2014 an Angus Reid poll determined that 84% of residents in the Capital Region favoured some sort of amalgamation with 50% “strongly in favour”. An overwhelming majority of 89% supported a non-binding referendum on the issue, and 80% expressed support for an independent study and cost-benefit analysis of amalgamation in the region, extraordinarily high figures for a poll of this nature.

Local councils and mayors have traditionally been opposed to any change in the present governmental structure which is not surprising since many of them would be losing their positions in a unified region. Possibly influenced by the poll results, however, and reacting to pressure from various business, professional and citizens' organizations, eight of the thirteen municipalities agreed to put some sort of question on the ballot when the municipal elections were held in November, 2014, asking if voters favoured a non-binding, independent review of

² Andrew Sancton: *Why Municipal Amalgamations? Halifax, Toronto, Montreal*, in “Canada: The State of the Federation 2004, Municipal-Federal-Provincial Relations in Canada” (Robert Young & Christian Leuprecht editors), McGill University Press, 2006, pp 119-134.

³ See <http://www.amalgamationyes.ca/media-articles.html> for a selection of such articles and letters

governance in the region. It was perhaps a reflection of the disunity in the region that there was no agreement on a simple, common question; rather each municipality phrased the question to suit their own purposes – one was so convoluted that the result could be open to various interpretations, another was worded virtually to invite a ‘No’ vote. Five municipalities (fairly small ones) deemed the topic of no interest to their residents and declined to place any question on the ballot. Despite this lack of enthusiasm by local politicians, the public responded with a higher than average turnout in those municipalities with a question on the ballot and a resounding 75% vote in favour of a review of local governance.

It is tempting to ask if Professor Sancton would regard the case for amalgamation in Greater Victoria different from and more compelling than that in Halifax given that it has grown out of a grassroots campaign rather than a top-down imposition by the provincial government.

Financial Considerations

The first thing opponents of the Halifax amalgamation will point out is that the promised savings were never realized in the short term. They will mention the fact that salaries rose to the level of the best paid equivalent positions among the pre-amalgamation municipalities and that economies of scale were a dream never realized. According to Robert Bish⁴ the cost of implementing the amalgamation alone was four times the original estimate and he further stated that:

“It is not yet apparent that any cost savings will result. From 1996 to 2000, user charges increased significantly and average residential property taxes rose by about 10% in urban areas and by as much as 30% in suburban and rural areas.”

All that was some time ago, of course, and although proponents of amalgamation are primarily interested in delivering a more efficient, more equitable and less complicated model of governance rather than in any potential cost savings that may result, it is nevertheless interesting to compare the current costs of government in the two regions, Halifax and Victoria, and their economic development.

The Executive Summary in Halifax’s proposed operating budget⁵ for 2015/16 begins with the statement:

“As a municipality, Halifax is in a strong, healthy financial position. The long term financial position of the municipality is generally sustainable as evidenced by its debt position. In line with the long-term trend, the Tax Supported Debt of

⁴ Robert L. Bish, *Local Government Amalgamations; Discredited 19th-Century Ideals Alive in the 21st Century*, C. D. Howe Institute Commentary No: 150, March 2001, pp 35.

⁵ *Proposed Operating Budget 2015/16*, Section A, Executive Summary, https://www.halifax.ca/budget/documents/proposed_operating_book.pdf

the Municipality continues to steadily decline. Debt had peaked in 1998-99 at nearly \$350m but at the end of 2015-16 is expected to total \$256.3m, a decline of nearly \$100m, more than 25%. This has been achieved despite a substantial increase in the population and higher demands for capital expenditures.”

On this same theme, Halifax Councillor, Reg Rankin, was quoted in the February 4th, 2016, issue of ‘The Coast’, a Halifax newspaper, as stating

“Today, this is the equivalent of paying off two-thirds of our mortgage. We’re so pleased it has been accomplished over a generation, a generation I guess since amalgamation.”

Whatever Professor Bish’s post-amalgamation prognosis in 2001 might have been, it is apparent that in 2016 the Halifax Regional Municipality is in a strong and still-improving financial position.

Further evidence⁶ of its economic health is provided by its admirable economic development since 2005 when it was placed 15th out of Canada’s 28 large city regions in terms of GDP growth. It rose to 8th place in 2014 and is predicted to be 1st in 2015, while over the same period Greater Victoria has fallen from 4th to 27th position in the same table. One cannot simply attribute Halifax’s remarkable economic growth to amalgamation, of course, but it certainly hasn’t hampered it! Meanwhile the Greater Victoria Development Agency has recently identified the lack of collaboration and common goals among the region’s multiple jurisdictions as a major reason for its sluggish performance and lack of success in attracting available funding. It proposed formation of a South Vancouver Island Development Association, funded by all constituent municipalities, to rectify the situation. The proposal had to be ratified (or not!) by all 13 councils, of course, an obstacle and delay that would have been entirely unnecessary if Greater Victoria were a unified city-region. In the end 11 municipalities and the Songhees First Nation signed the agreement with only two small semi-rural municipalities, Metchosin and Sooke, opting out.

A detailed comparison of revenues and expenditures in the two metropolitan areas is not a simple task that requires little more than a straightforward perusal of their operating budgets. The figures for Halifax are readily extracted from the published Consolidated Financial Statements for the Regional Municipality that are available on the internet⁷, but the corresponding amounts for Greater Victoria are spread over 14 different financial statements which are not fully consistent in the way the data are presented. A further complication arises because Halifax

⁶ *A New Regional Strategy and Model for Economic Development in South Vancouver Island*, 2015 Report published by the Greater Victoria Development Agency Board, pp 46.

⁷ *Consolidated Financial Statements*, <http://www.halifax.ca/finance/>

shows totals for the fiscal year ending on 31st March while the Greater Victoria municipalities use the calendar year for their financial statements.

There is also the “apples and pears” problem of trying to ensure that comparisons are like with like, since some services listed as part of the operating budget in one region may be treated differently in the other. One obvious example is the cost of transit. Halifax Regional Transit is a responsibility of the municipality whereas the Victoria Regional Transit Commission is a branch of BC Transit, which is partially financed by the Provincial Government. In 2014-15, for example, the total cost of operating transit in Victoria was \$120.5 million to which local municipalities contributed only \$28.8 million from their property taxes⁸. In the same fiscal year, expenditure for Halifax Transit was \$110.9 million with property tax revenues contributing \$76.3 million⁹, a far higher proportion than in Victoria. The three school districts in the Capital Region receive funding from the Ministry of Education which in turn receives municipal taxes collected on its behalf by the constituent municipalities themselves. The financial statement for Halifax clearly defines a single line item for ‘Educational Services’ but it is not at all clear in Greater Victoria what proportion of the Ministry’s grants to the school districts are funded by the various amounts collected by the municipalities. ‘Amortization’ is another significant entry on all the financial statements; these recorded amounts will depend on a number of factors that require detailed examination beyond my expertise.

There may be other examples of inappropriate comparisons that I am not aware of and, in any case, the different conditions existing in two separate provinces make meaningful interpretations of results somewhat tricky at best. Harsher winters in Nova Scotia, for example, mean heavier road maintenance and snow removal costs, and the sheer size of Halifax Regional Municipality is a factor not reflected in population figures alone. It covers a huge land area of 5490 km² which is nine times larger than the area of Greater Victoria (696 km²) and even over twice that of the entire CRD (2341 km²) which includes the largely undeveloped and sparsely populated Juan de Fuca Electoral Area. Halifax region hugs the coast for a linear distance of roughly 150 km and extends about 50 km inland. The CRD would have to expand as far as Nanaimo in order to encompass a comparable area. No-one on Southern Vancouver Island is advocating an amalgamation on that scale.

Thus it soon became apparent that an unravelling of all the intricacies of these revenues and expenditures were best left to a qualified financial auditor. Two parts of the financial statements, however, which can be retrieved relatively unambiguously, appear to lend themselves to a direct comparison. They are wages and salaries, and protective services. It is also a fairly simple exercise to compare the grand totals of revenues and expenses (slightly modified to account for

⁸ *How Victoria Regional Transit is Funded*, http://bctransit.com/*/about/facts/victoria

⁹ *Proposed Operating Budget 2015/16*, Section I3, Halifax Transit Operating Budget Overview, https://www.halifax.ca/budget/documents/proposed_operating_book.pdf

differences arising from some incompatible ways of reporting revenues and expenses in the two regions). The financial statements in these three areas are compared in the following paragraphs.

Wages and salaries. Wages and salaries, including benefits, are stated in the first line of expenses in the Table of Segmented Information included in one of the ‘Notes to Financial Statements’ in the audited Consolidated Financial Statements for each municipality. They are shown here in Table 1 which suggests that Greater Victoria residents pay about \$100 more per person for the salary and wages of mayors, councillors and municipal staff than the residents of Halifax Regional Municipality. With 13 councils plus the CRD all employing their own administrative officers and staff this is perhaps hardly surprising. Halifax’s one mayor receives a salary of \$168,449 while the 13 mayors of Greater Victoria are paid a combined total of roughly \$450,000. All available evidence suggests that the cost of wages and salaries would be reduced in an amalgamated region.

Table 1
Expenditures on salaries & wages
Figures in millions of dollars except last column

Municipality	2013/14	2014/15	Average	per capita
Halifax	324.0	343.5	333.8	\$806
	2013	2014		
CRD	49.5	51.8		
Victoria	104.1	107.3		
Saanich	87.9	90.7		
Esquimalt	12.9	13.5		
Oak Bay	19.8	19.6		
Central Saanich	10.5	11.0		
North Saanich	5.2	5.4		
Sidney	6.6	6.8		
View Royal	4.1	4.3		
Colwood	6.7	7.0		
Langford	8.1	9.3		
Metchosin	1.0	1.1		
Highlands	0.6	0.6		
Sooke	3.0	3.1		
Total	320.0	331.5	325.8	\$908

Protective services. The police, fire and emergency preparedness services provided for citizens in all municipalities across Canada must be fairly standard. Thus one would expect the cost per person for such services to be fairly uniform in communities of similar size. “Protection

services” is also a separate category of revenues and expenses on financial statements so a direct comparison between regions of similar size is fairly straightforward.

There are, of course, significant differences between Greater Victoria and Halifax in how the delivery of such services is organized. The Fire and Emergency Services Organization Chart for Halifax shows one Fire Chief supported by a Deputy Chief of Operations, a Deputy Chief of Operations Support, and a Manager of the Emergency Management Office. Every municipality in Greater Victoria has its own Fire Chief and fire department, some of which are run on a volunteer basis, as are some of the rural components of the Halifax Regional Fire Department. The three former police forces in Halifax, Dartmouth and Bedford have been amalgamated into one Halifax Regional Police department responsible for policing those three former municipalities along with some neighbouring districts. Policing in the rural areas is contracted out to the RCMP. Greater Victoria, by contrast, maintains four separate departments in Victoria/Esquimalt, Saanich, Oak Bay and Central Saanich each with their own Police Chiefs and with markedly different caseloads per officer. Two RCMP detachments, one based in Langford and the other in Sidney, serve the Westshore and north Peninsula respectively. Small detachments are also present on Salt Spring and Pender islands which fall within the jurisdiction of the CRD. The Senior Manager of the CRD’s protective services is also the Emergency Manager for the entire region.

Table 2 shows compares the cost of protective services in the two regions. The per capita expense in Greater Victoria is slightly greater (\$20) than in the Halifax Regional Municipality.

Table 2
Expenditures on protective services
Figures in millions of dollars except last column

Municipality	2013/14	2014/15	Average	per capita
Halifax	192.1	203.0	197.6	\$477
	2013	2014		
CRD	8.5	8.7		
Victoria	64.2	65.9		
Saanich	47.2	50.3		
Esquimalt	11.3	11.9		
Oak Bay	8.9	8.6		
Central Saanich	6.9	7.3		
North Saanich	2.7	2.8		
Sidney	4.0	4.1		
View Royal	3.0	3.1		
Colwood	5.2	5.5		
Langford	8.6	10.1		
Metchosin	0.7	0.7		
Highlands	0.4	0.4		
Sooke	3.0	3.2		
Total	\$174.6	\$182.6	178.6	\$497

Total revenues and expenditures. The grand totals of revenues and expenditures in each jurisdiction are prominently displayed on all financial reports. While the figures themselves provide a simple overview of how much tax and other revenue is generated in the two regions and what their overall operating costs are, they are not directly comparable in a meaningful way because of the “apples and pears” reasons given earlier. Their interpretation is further complicated by the different formats used in reporting year-end financial statements in different municipalities. For example, Sooke clearly identifies taxes received as “Net taxes available for municipal purposes” and in an explanatory note lists the actual property taxes collected less taxes levied on behalf of schools, CRD, hospitals, Municipal Finance Authority, BC Assessment and BC Transit. North Saanich and Sidney also state that taxes shown under revenues are for municipal purposes, but others simply state “Taxes”. I have assumed these are all net taxes since there are no payments to the various outside agencies listed under expenses and proportionally the amounts seem consistent with those for municipalities reporting net taxes. Payments to the CRD are included under revenues in the CRD’s Financial Statement of course.

Table 3
Revenues

Figures in millions of dollars except last column

Municipality	2013/14	2014/15	Average	per capita
Halifax	778.9	815.0	797.0	\$1925
	2013	2014		
CRD	181.8	191.6		
Victoria	209.5	221.2		
Saanich	189.1	187.5		
Esquimalt	31.1	33.3		
Oak Bay	34.0	36.7		
Central Saanich	25.1	25.2		
North Saanich	17.5	17.9		
Sidney	18.8	20.1		
View Royal	18.0	12.5		
Colwood	19.7	19.4		
Langford	55.1	51.1		
Metchosin	5.3	4.8		
Highlands	3.8	2.6		
Sooke	13.6	16.2		
Total	822.4	840.1	831.3	\$2316

Table 4
Expenses

Figures in millions of dollars except last column

Municipality	2013/14	2014/15	Average	per capita
Halifax	733.0	779.1	756.1	\$1826
	2013	2014		
CRD	147.6	148.7		
Victoria	173.9	174.0		
Saanich	151.1	164.4		
Esquimalt	29.5	30.2		
Oak Bay	32.2	32.5		
Central Saanich	25.8	25.2		
North Saanich	15.1	15.9		
Sidney	17.9	17.9		
View Royal	12.1	12.4		
Colwood	17.7	18.5		
Langford	53.0	39.3		
Metchosin	4.4	4.6		
Highlands	2.7	2.8		
Sooke	11.6	12.0		
Total	694.6	698.4	696.5	\$1940

Halifax also collects taxes for its school system but records the amount as a separate item in Revenue under Educational Services. The identical amount is then shown under Expenses as a lump sum payment to Educational Services. The funds simply flow through the Financial Statement without having any effect on the overall surplus or deficit. In Greater Victoria such payments to outside agencies do not appear at all. Thus for a fair comparison the amounts appearing under Educational Services have been omitted from the totals for Halifax in Tables 3 and 4 on the preceding page, which show the total revenues and expenses for Halifax alongside the corresponding totals for the combined Capital Region. (An even fairer comparison would have resulted if the taxes for transit in Halifax and its net operational expenses had also been removed from the totals because transit in Greater Victoria is run by BC Transit, not by the CRD or individual municipalities.) Note that the total of expenses in the tables is not a measure of property taxes levied in the two regions. It excludes all the taxes collected on behalf of other agencies in Greater Victoria and those for educational services in Halifax.

What can we conclude from this discussion? First, I think one can immediately put to bed the alarmist claims by some politicians that amalgamation would dramatically increase the costs of local government in the Victoria region. The tabulated data, unprofessional as they are, indicate that after amalgamation Halifax has possibly lower rather than higher operating costs per person than the combined costs of the Capital Region's 13 separate municipalities. Indeed, they suggest that in certain areas there are probably modest savings to be gained through amalgamation of a mid-size city-region with a population of about 400,000.

Other Factors

Potential fiscal savings are not the main reason proponents support amalgamation, however, a point that defenders of the *status quo* seldom recognize. There are more compelling grounds of a wider nature admirably summarized by Rudiger Ahrend *et al.*¹⁰ who state in their abstract:

“A city’s metropolitan governance structure has a critical influence on the quality of life and economic outcomes of its inhabitants.” ... “Administrative fragmentation, which complicates policy coordination across a city, has a negative effect on individual productivity. This finding, combined with benefits from good governance such as improved transport and lower pollution levels, highlights the importance of well-designed metropolitan authorities.”

Referring to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the authors go on to say:

“The OECD Metropolitan database defines ‘functional urban areas’ across the OECD on the basis of a common method that relies on settlement patterns and commuting flows rather than administrative borders.” ... “A large number of municipalities in metropolitan areas can complicate policy coordination among local governments. A potential solution to this coordination problem could be the amalgamation of municipalities within a metropolitan area.”

On this definition Greater Victoria is certainly a single functional urban area as anyone who uses the Trans-Canada or Pat Bay highways at commuting time knows. So how do Halifax and Greater Victoria compare when measured against those factors related to economic well-being and quality of life referred to by Rudiger Ahrend *et al.*? Of course, with its scenic setting, mild climate and general ambience Victoria has a natural built-in advantage with regard to quality of life, and it is fortunate to have a well-educated population including some, especially among those who have retired to the region, who are quite wealthy and willing to support arts and culture. But there are other factors which should contribute to the economic success and efficiency in the two regions which are discussed below.

Policing. With an amalgamated regional police force and one emergency call centre for its core districts it is inconceivable that Halifax could experience the shocking delay in responding to a frantic 911 call that occurred in Oak Bay some years ago. The address was on the artificial border between Victoria and Oak Bay and the resulting confusion eventually involved three different police forces. Six hours later police discovered five bodies inside the house in a murder-suicide crime. This was a terrible failure due to lack of communication between separate police forces. Attempts to create integrated units for Greater Victoria have only had limited success with municipalities joining and subsequently withdrawing because of costs. Kash Heed, a

¹⁰ Rudiger Ahrend, Alexander C. Lembcke, Abel Schumann, *Why metropolitan governance matters a lot more than you think*, VOX, CEPR’s Policy Portal (Research based policy analysis and commentary from leading economists), 19 January 2016, pp 6: see <http://www.voxeu.org/article/why-metropolitan-governance-matters>

former BC solicitor general (and a former police chief in West Vancouver) is quoted as saying integration is a failed policy that fuels conflict rather than co-operation and that integration is a “band aid solution to a gaping wound”. Another problem is the enormous difference in cost per capita among the municipal police departments within Greater Victoria¹¹, \$455 for Victoria, \$263 for Saanich, \$257 for Oak Bay and \$245 for Central Saanich in 2013. This is because VicPD is responsible for policing the downtown core where much of the crime, drug-dealing and homelessness exists. Ironically over 50% of downtown crime is committed by residents of other municipalities in the region. Halifax is well ahead of Greater Victoria in policing.

Influence in Ottawa. Halifax is a member of the 21-strong Caucus of Big City Mayors which meets two or three times a year, sometimes with leaders of government, business, labour and the economy, to plan strategies for dealing with infrastructure renewal, homelessness, social housing, sustainability, and related issues. Their most recent meeting in early 2016 was with Justin Trudeau, the newly-elected Prime Minister. With a population of only 80,000 Victoria doesn’t qualify for membership of the Caucus but it is certainly burdened with the “big city” issues listed above. It is frustrating to see smaller (but unified) cities such as Regina, Saskatoon, St. John’s, Windsor, Gatineau, Kitchener, all having the ear of the Prime Minister while Victoria is excluded simply because it is a constricted urban core surrounded by independent suburban municipalities. Unfortunately, unless the region is represented by a single mayor it will be forever excluded from this influential body. Halifax is poised to take advantage of funding made available to big cities while Victoria, Saanich, Langford etc. will compete with each other for the scraps left over.

Payments in lieu of taxes. Both Halifax and Greater Victoria receive substantial payments in lieu of taxes from the Federal Government for the Atlantic and Pacific Naval Bases and Dockyards respectively. The difference is that while the funds going to Halifax benefit the whole region, in Greater Victoria it is the municipality of Esquimalt (population 16,800) that receives the entire payment representing over 40% of its tax revenue, even though many of the naval and dockyard personnel reside in other municipalities. The general taxpayer in Halifax gets the fairer deal.

Sewage treatment. Although scientific and medical opinion is firmly of the view that secondary sewage treatment in Victoria is unnecessary and a complete waste of money, the fact remains that it has been mandated by the Provincial Government. The CRD took charge of the project and the history of the sorry saga that followed exemplifies all that is wrong with that body and with governance of the Capital Region. After ten years of debate, planning, public consultation and engineering reports, and an expenditure of nearly \$100 million there is still no site selected for the treatment plant(s) or a decision on whether there will be one, two or more plants. The estimate of the overall cost now exceeds \$1 billion. At one time a site had been selected but Esquimalt council refused to rezone the additional land needed to accommodate the plant. One small municipality’s action caused the collapse of the entire project. In Halifax, where treatment is most definitely needed (its effluent empties into the enclosed, sheltered waters of Halifax

¹¹ *Police resources in British Columbia, 2013*, <http://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/law-crime-and-justice/criminal-justice/police/publications/statistics/2013-police-resources.pdf>

harbour) construction of treatment plants didn't begin until after amalgamation because as separate cities, Halifax and Dartmouth could not reach agreement on the design of the plants. Sewage treatment was completed in 2011 at less than a third of the estimated cost for Victoria. And the moral of the story? It took amalgamation to get things done.

Arts and recreation. Victoria had the foresight and good fortune to retain and restore two lovely Edwardian theatres, the 1416-seat Royal, home to Pacific Opera Victoria and the Victoria Symphony, and the 772-seat McPherson Playhouse used for plays, concerts and amateur productions. Although they serve regional audiences and beyond, Victoria is the sole municipal contributor to the McPherson and only three municipalities (Victoria, Saanich and Oak Bay) contribute to the Royal Theatre. (Professional theatre is also staged at the Belfry Theatre, a converted church building, and the Roxy Theatre, while the 800-seat Alix Goolden Hall and the 1228-seat University of Victoria Auditorium are alternative venues for musical concerts. These are independently run facilities, however.) Despite this rich choice of venues for Victoria's vibrant cultural scene, what is lacking for a capital city is a modern performing arts centre with a large stage suitable for ballet and major touring productions, and acoustics that befit a fine symphony orchestra. Given the reluctance of other municipalities to provide funds for theatres located in downtown Victoria, it is not surprising that after decades of informal campaigns, studies and proposals there is no sign of any progress having been made towards building such a facility. By contrast, Halifax is not nearly as well provided with performance spaces. Its main professional theatre is the Neptune which seats 479 playgoers. For larger productions and symphony concerts it uses the 1023-seat Rebecca Cohn Auditorium on the Dalhousie University campus. These are meagre facilities compared with Victoria, but the Halifax Regional Council does have a new performing arts centre officially on its agenda as one of the large projects in the concept phase. With the council representing the whole of the region it is likely to be built while unofficial groups in Greater Victoria are still talking. The same can be said for arenas. Many of the municipalities in Greater Victoria have built their own community recreational centres which is excellent, but a city-region of 360,000 also needs a large arena suitable for a semi-professional hockey team, figure-skating and gymnastics competitions, trade shows and rock concerts. Victoria's tired old 4200-seat Memorial Arena was replaced in 2005 by a new 7000-seater courtesy of the City's taxpayers alone. Halifax has an arena with seating for 10,600 spectators (12,000 for concerts) but is already considering building a bigger one with a capacity of over 15,000 spectators for hockey games. If this comes to fruition the costs will be distributed equitably across the region. One can only imagine what kind of arena Victoria could have had if it had been an amalgamated city when the aging Memorial Arena was replaced.

Garbage collection. Each municipality in Greater Victoria has its own regulations and methods for garbage pick-up. Whereas Victoria employs several men and one truck for residential services, Saanich, with a more automated system, needs only one man and a truck. Langford doesn't provide any garbage collection at all as a municipal service – residents have to make their own arrangements with a private company. Some municipalities provide residents with two standard containers, one for general non-recyclable rubbish and the other for organic kitchen waste, others do not. Halifax has a uniform method of garbage collection but it appears to be less advanced than some of those in Greater Victoria.

Neighbourhood representation. Halifax is divided into 16 Districts each electing one councillor. The Districts are grouped into 3 Community Councils comprising the councillors elected in each District. The Community Councils make recommendations to the Regional Council which has final authority. Local public input and consultation is generally made at the Community Council level or, personally, to the District councillor. In Victoria and Saanich, members of neighbourhood associations are ordinary residents interested in community activities, planning, development, and the general character of the areas in which they live. Board members of a neighbourhood association, who meet usually once a month, are all volunteers. Each councillor is assigned to one or more neighbourhoods and attends their board meetings if possible. The associations may draw up neighbourhood plans, advise on land-use management and raise objections to unwanted developments, but they have no final authority which rests with the municipality. It would be possible to copy the model of regional governance in Halifax by dividing the CRD into perhaps four community councils, say (i) East Victoria, Oak Bay, Gordon Head and Cadboro Bay, (ii) West Victoria, Esquimalt, View Royal and South Saanich, (iii) West Shore and Juan de Fuca, and (iv) Cordova Bay, Prospect Lake, Peninsula and Islands, with each “Community” sub-divided into three or four “Districts”. Some members of the neighbourhood associations are ambivalent about amalgamation as they feel it would relegate them to an even more remote position of influence from the ultimate decision-makers, but perhaps they could play a similar role in their District if the Halifax model were adopted.

Rural protection. Some opponents of amalgamation claim it would threaten protection of rural areas. Halifax includes a large rural component and it remains intact. Saanich, the largest of the Greater Victoria municipalities has managed to preserve its rural part despite the encroachment of suburban housing. It is the smaller municipalities that are more worrying, as it is harder for them to resist the temptation of increasing their tax base when presented with attractive offers from developers. Langford cleared forested areas, including a Garry Oak meadow, in order to develop its cluster of box stores. Central Saanich, a mainly rural community, has allowed an ugly strip of light industry, warehouses and commercial businesses to grow along Keating Cross Road, and now a new proposal has emerged to build yet another shopping mall on the outskirts of Sidney, the last thing that compact community needs. A single regional plan for the entire region would surely help to prevent such haphazard developments from happening. In my opinion, amalgamation would provide better rather than less preservation of the rural areas in the Capital Region.

Emergency preparedness. Halifax has one emergency plan and one emergency call centre. Victoria, situated in an earthquake zone, has 13 plans and 3 call centres. The mind boggles at the sort of chaos that will develop if the ‘big one’ occurs with the present administrative structure still in place.

Infrastructure renewal, traffic and planning. Two bridge replacements demonstrate the unfair burdens placed on individual municipalities when infrastructure serving the entire region is renewed. The Johnson Street bridge is on one of three routes connecting the West Shore to downtown and beyond. Yet it lies entirely within Victoria which must therefore bear the full cost, even though it is Esquimalt which probably receives the most benefit in this case. Much of the funding for the Craigflower Bridge upgrade came from the gas tax, but Saanich and View

Royal, the municipalities at either end of the bridge (just – the Esquimalt border nudges up to the corner of the bridge on the View Royal side), each contributed \$2.5 million. Much of the traffic on this bridge, especially at commuting time, is to and from the naval dockyard in Esquimalt, which was not financially involved in this project. Planning in the region is not well coordinated. Langford's box stores were planned by that city alone, yet they attract traffic from other parts of Greater Victoria causing congestion on the Trans Canada highway and on the road leading from the stores to the highway. Langford is, however, anticipating the possibility of a reopening of the E & N railway for commuter trains between the West Shore and downtown while, ironically, Victoria has severed the rail link into the city centre because it couldn't afford the additional cost of incorporating it into the new Johnson Street bridge. There appears to be no coordinated plan in Saanich and Central Saanich to identify potential arterial routes through their municipalities to the airport and BC ferry terminal, with the result that all through traffic to those destinations is funnelled onto the already busy Pat Bay highway. And surely it is only in Victoria that one encounters such bizarre situations as a plethora of building codes, designated bicycle lanes ending abruptly when reaching an invisible line between two municipalities, a default speed limit that suddenly changes when driving along what appears to be the same road at a constant speed, a suburban road where one side is like a country lane with no kerb or sidewalk while the other is a typical suburban street, a house that receives two partial tax bills because it happens to straddle two municipalities on an ordinary suburban street. All quite hilarious, but unfortunately true. I know little about Halifax in these departments but I'm sure it has a regional plan, a standard building code, uniform traffic regulations and no invisible boundaries!

Conclusion

Amalgamation of the Halifax municipalities was not perfect. Almost certainly it covered too large an area. With its historical urban core centred on Halifax, Dartmouth and Bedford surrounded by vast tracts of rural land dotted with small communities, it is a marriage of barely compatible parts. In such a large region some rural residents probably feel disconnected from the city and with their different priorities may perhaps disproportionately influence policy issues on such urban issues as libraries and transit. Greater Victoria's geography is rather different. Only the small municipalities of Sooke, Metchosin and Highlands on its fringes are truly rural (and even they also serve as bedroom communities for daily commuters) while Central and North Saanich and parts of Saanich itself contain pockets of productive and protected farmland. It resembles a more cohesive community containing a mix of countryside, suburbia and urban core which geographically, at least, is probably even more suited to amalgamation than Halifax.

Otherwise, however, amalgamation of the Halifax region appears to have been a great success. The amalgamated city is thriving economically, it has reduced its debt in spectacular fashion and it punches well above its weight in national affairs. I believe one would be hard-pressed to find local leaders, businesspeople, members of the arts community and government officials yearning for a return to the previous balkanized structure of governance. Amalgamation has worked well for Halifax. It should be held up as an example that Greater Victoria should emulate.

Amalgamation? YES!

John Weaver

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