

Amalgamation advocates now favour three municipalities; town hall today in Sidney

Bill Cleverley / Times Colonist

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Victoria Coun. Shellie Gudgeon at the Selkirk waterway in January 2016, when she lauded efforts by the Canadian Guard and the Victoria fire department to work together in the removal of a sunken boat in the Selkirk waterway. Now she's moving forward on the issue of amalgamation.

Photograph By BRUCE STOTESBURY, TIMES COLONIST

The question of amalgamation has many shades of grey, says Amalgamation Yes chairwoman Shellie Gudgeon, who is encouraging residents to attend a town hall on the issue in Sidney today.

“Many solutions can be found that aren’t black and white ... on how we can govern ourselves more efficiently and effectively in the capital region,” Gudgeon said.

Amalgamation Yes is hosting a town hall to outline how a citizens assembly could help to find the right amalgamation fit for the capital region.

The approach was used in the Cowichan Valley, where a 36-member citizens assembly was formed after residents voted to explore the costs and benefits of amalgamating North Cowichan with Duncan.

The assembly, comprised of volunteers chosen by lottery, ultimately recommended merging the two municipalities. Residents are to vote this year in a binding referendum on the issue.

The province would have to come to the table with funds, probably in the range of \$500,000 to \$1 million, to undertake a comprehensive citizens assembly study here, Gudgeon said.

“It would take it out of the politicians’ hands,” she said.

She noted that both Saanich and Victoria have passed resolutions asking the province to establish and fund a citizens assembly to investigate amalgamating willing municipalities.

Gudgeon said Amalgamation Yes has moved away from the idea of a single amalgamated municipality in the capital region and now favours the creation of three municipalities — one in the core, one on the Saanich Peninsula and one in the West Shore.

Sidney, North Saanich and Central Saanich all had similar questions on the ballot in 2014, and at least 60 per cent of residents supported examining amalgamation-related options for the three municipalities, she said.

In fact, eight of the region’s 13 municipalities had amalgamation-related questions on the 2014 municipal ballot.

Only in Oak Bay, where residents were asked if they favoured being amalgamated into a larger regional municipality, were voters against the idea (62 per cent said no).

Speaking at today’s town hall will be North Cowichan Coun. Maeve Maguire and Mona Kaiser, a member of the Cowichan Valley citizens assembly.

“We hope there’s a good public turnout that shows up to put the pressure on municipal elected officials so that the political will becomes there to encourage and to press the province to fund a study,” Gudgeon said.

“It’s not saying amalgamation yes. It’s not saying amalgamation no. It’s saying better is possible and we need a study and we need it paid for by the province.”

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- The town hall is scheduled for 10 a.m. today at Sidney’s Mary Winspear Centre, 2243 Beacon Ave.

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