

In the past several issues of *Focus*, I read with shock and awe the series of convoluted “Amalgacide” columns by Gene Miller.

He reminded us “that communities aren’t communities merely because they have place names or share postal code or some accidental adjacency, but because they actively practice a range of community functions and maintain commonwealth—that is do things together.”

If that is true, every week we experience more examples of how and where that doesn’t happen in our city.

Amalgamation Yes has never taken the position that the only path to improved accountability was one large city. The current campaign is focused just on the two largest agglomerations of urban residents. Concurrently we have suggested that the Peninsula 3 could also examine opportunities to build from their common interest and similarly for the Westshore.

The question before the voters of Victoria and Saanich is not “do you support amalgamation,” but rather to confirm public support for a serious review of that topic by an independent body of citizens.

We suffer from fierce defense of 13 municipal entities, each which resist possible mergers and yet whose councils refuse to agree to consider new inter-municipal agreements. Thus the impasse over regional land use planning, housing supply, transportation, arts funding, and emergency services common to all residents.

UVic Professor Emeritus Robert Bish, one of the frequently cited researchers opposed to amalgamation, simply repeats a dogma from advocates of the “public choice” model, introduced by Charles Tiebout back in the 1950s, who argue that administrative fragmentation—a larger number of local governments—is associated with a greater set of choices over public service provision and their costs. They suggest “increased choice and competitive pressure among local government improves quality of local public services.”

There are major flaws in this framework. First it limits itself to micro economic consideration of “efficiency.” Conveniently Bish and others offer stories of Toronto or Montreal and never study Kelowna, Kamloops, Abbotsford or Chilliwack. They ignore macro economic measure as to whether mergers can have a positive impact on economic growth and GNP via increased investment, employment and tax base (more on this below).

It also ignores the fact that the majority of residents travel through two to four adjacent municipalities on their way to work, play, shop or learn. A singular focus on cost savings to one particular municipality has no reality in terms of “externalities”—who actually uses and who pays for those public works and services? Daily there are over 100,000 vehicle trips by non-residents enroute to ferries, airport, UVic, Camosun, RGH, Uptown, Mayfair, Hartland, Inner Harbour, or their place of employment, on roads and bridges paid for only by residents of Victoria and Saanich. Similarly, non-residents access arts, cultural, sports facilities and festivals, or use community/health/ charity/church services which exist only because of millions in dollars of community grants and property tax exemptions supported by city residents.

As for evidence of cost savings, see the 2017 report of Canadian scholar Timothy Cobban: “Bigger is Better: Reducing cost of local administration by Increasing Jurisdictional size in Ontario 1995-2010.” Cobban was able to observe, record and research the significance of scale for local government. Instead of focusing on Toronto, he compared the results in administrative costs over 15 years for 587 municipalities which were amalgamated (to form 146 new municipalities) against another 297 municipalities that were not merged. He found that over time the larger the merger, the larger the savings. Research in Denmark and Israel confirm the same results.

International studies provide a picture of development in over 430 urban areas. If their conclusions that “administrative fragmentation is associated with lower productivity” are valid, they provide an answer to Miller’s question, “does everywhere include little old here?” And unfortunately it does. There is a clear body of scholarly research that indicates that amalgamation can absolutely provide savings in three respects: municipal administration, capital financing, and by providing cohesive leadership.

That perspective is reinforced by an oft-ignored 2013 paper “A Prosperous Region Needs a Vibrant Core” by our own UVic professors Elizabeth Gugl and David Scoones. They conclude, “Many potentially beneficial agreements are not undertaken [in the CRD], and some of the region’s most pressing problems remain unaddressed.”

In a recent column, Miller states: “it takes both a geographic and social border to sustain a sense of community identity and sense of shared purpose reinforced by familiar community structure and protocols.” I suggest that in their daily lives, urban residents within the bounds of Mount Douglas to the Inner Harbour and Dallas Road do in fact recognize “the us” that forms a combined Victoria and Saanich (and likely shared with Oak Bay and Esquimalt). But we need to address the need for changes to outdated municipal regimes if we are to defend and build from that sense of community.

Vote yes for an independent Citizens Assembly to identify how we go about that.

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