

Atwell: Cowichan-Duncan referendum good for democracy

Saanich's mayor says the amalgamation vote in Cowichan was a boon for democracy even though Duncan rejected the idea.

Richard Atwell says regardless of the outcome, "citizens had their vote and there's some finality to that — it's good for democracy."

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On Saturday, voters in North Cowichan voted 59 per cent to amalgamate with their southern neighbours.

However, in Duncan, 68 per cent of voters were against the initiative, killing the idea.

Atwell says one can look at it as a two-thirds rejection by Duncan or a close vote, with amalgamation losing by only 221 votes.

Victoria and Saanich councils will meet Tuesday in a special joint committee meeting to consider a referendum question on amalgamation.

Atwell and Helps are recommending each municipality put the same referendum question on the Oct. 20 municipal ballot.

Their suggestion: "Are you in favour of establishing a citizens' assembly to explore the costs, benefits and disadvantages of the amalgamation between the District of Saanich and the City of Victoria?" Saanich councillors this week agreed to a joint meeting, to be held at the Capital Regional District boardroom Tuesday at 7 p.m., and to a format that will allow citizens three minutes each to address the councils.

If the two municipalities couldn't agree on the same question, which is not

expected, the idea would not be put on the ballot.

The vote in Cowichan does not affect the Victoria-Saanich question, said Atwell.

“I don’t think we can look at their outcome,” said Atwell. “We are a community and have to have our own process, and our own citizens have to vote in their own referendum.

“It’s not relevant to us. We have to give our citizens a chance to have their say — that’s what matters here.”

North Cowichan Mayor Jon Lefebure said the amalgamation was posed in the Cowichan Valley because the majority of voters from both municipalities indicated that they were interested in exploring the idea of amalgamation during the 2014 municipal elections.

The two municipalities convened a citizens’ assembly to study the idea, with a final recommendation to proceed with a referendum, which took place on Saturday.

“We believed that there were some real benefits to amalgamating,” said Lefebure, who has been mayor for the past 13 years.

Amalgamation would streamline council and some services, leading to money freed up to spend on infrastructure projects in the future.

Prior to 1912, Duncan, with an area of about two square kilometres, and North Cowichan, which covers 194 square kilometres, were a single municipality.

The two municipalities currently share water services, sewage treatment and the cost of some recreational facilities in the district.

In the 2014 municipal election in the Capital Region, eight of 13 capital

region municipalities put some sort of question about amalgamation on the ballot.

Victoria residents voted 80 per cent in favour when asked: “Are you in favour of reducing the number of municipalities in Greater Victoria through amalgamation?”

Saanich residents voted 88.5 per cent in favour when asked: “Do you support council initiating a community-based review of governance structures and policies with Saanich and our partnerships within the region?” Saanich followed up by establishing a citizen advisory committee, which made several recommendations, including calling on the province to fund a citizens assembly on amalgamation with interested municipalities and to go to referendum on the possibility.

In a report, Atwell and Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps noted that the Duncan-North Cowichan citizens’ assembly could serve as a model for Saanich and Victoria.

ceharnett@timescolonist.com

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