

Comment: ‘Bigger’ doesn’t necessarily mean ‘better’

Times Colonist

August 18, 2017 08:07 AM

The Tuesday Times Colonist provided a serendipitous relationship among three items: developer Townline’s desire to create an unprecedented 29-storey residential tower as part of its Hudson District development; municipal amalgamation advocate John Vickers’ departure from Victoria to Toronto; and Les Leyne’s regional-amalgamation column titled: “Inertia deflected change on civic front.”

Here’s a word you will never hear from any of the above if their intentions or preferences were to come true: “Oops.”

I’ve noticed that bigger, taller and amalgamated (or the coy word, “rationalized”) appear to be the flavour of the day, and having worked frequently at the edges of municipal politics and dabbled in real-estate development, I understand the sensibility and the arguments in favour, all of which are routinely delivered with sidelong references to Victoria’s “institutionalized parochialism” and “inertia” (Leyne).

Asked to describe the conditions under which a sense of human belonging can be sustained, or to identify the thresholds beyond which a sense of citizenship and connection to political decision-making start to deteriorate, pro-amalgamation (and development) types retreat, answerless, to spin about “bold new ventures” and “efficiencies of scale.”

Of course, it’s mostly just attitude, or mood ... an irritated and aggrieved feeling — facts be damned — that people who step on the brakes are backward-looking and clinging to tradition, not expressing cautious wisdom. The facts are that against every analysis showing or promising efficiencies and savings from political amalgamation and service integration, you can find one that reports on the failure to achieve the promised beneficial outcomes.

Why? A little thing called reality. People don’t optimize, they don’t live socially engineered lives, and hoped-for savings of one kind are simply re-expressed as expenses of another.

Pointedly, words that never come into play in pro-amalgamation drum-beating include “community,” “story,” “citizen” and “connection.” Communities have stories; amalgamated, service-rationalized regions don’t. As well, there is, in my opinion, a lack of a considered view of the future.

The future as some recognizable continuity with what has come before, anywhere, everywhere, is a proposition in grave doubt. Mitigating against that happy future are economy and ecology (climate): In a word, we’re living as a society on unrepayable credit, we’ve grown way past scale, and the moment of truth (or a string of such moments) is poised, waiting to land onstage with a heavy thud.

And when that happens, abstractions such as regional governance and all other essentially arbitrary forms of administrative delivery are likely to wither. The habits and talents of and genius for smallness, localism and social manageability will then prove to be great and valuable assets.

What Victoria and a few of the neighbouring municipalities (Esquimalt, Oak Bay, maybe one or two more) have in spades is story, memory, attachment to place, idiosyncrasy, connection between citizen and elected representative — the essential

ingredients and building blocks of any local social commonwealth.

Why would you diminish such qualities by even the smallest increment?

And relative to Townline's proposed 29-storey tower proposal, let's translate the developer's "It's about design and livability and striking a balance" into Earth-speak: "It's about maximizing real estate values with Vancouver high-rise product in a hot market, and devil take the hindmost."

If the developer said: "I'm going to create a building — in fact, an entire project — so beautiful and socially coherent, so rich in social assets, it will be the envy of every other city in North America," I'd give him 35 storeys.

Gene Miller arrived in Victoria from Manhattan in 1970 and since then founded Open Space Cultural Centre, Monday Magazine and seven Gaining Ground Urban Sustainability Conferences. He and colleague Rob Abbott are co-writing a book, FutureTENSE: Robotics, AI and a World Without Work.

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