

Comment: Making the case, once again, for amalgamation

At a meeting recently, someone finished their point about how to improve a service (in this case, child care) with the statement: “And, of course, all of this would be easier if there was only one local government.” There was a pause. There was a sigh. And then we carried on.

It has become common practice at almost every meeting I attend for someone to express a similar thought on regional services. It has become our standard footnote.

And now the Capital Integrated Services and Governance Initiative report, released by the province in the dog days of August, has provided a full explanation of why we say it so often.

It is an exhaustive and exhausting description of the crazy world we live in when it comes to local government services.

It tackles 16 services and describes each thoroughly by municipality, including what the service is, what parts are shared with other governments, the different ways it's delivered, what it costs per capita, how decisions are made and who pays.

I know the public servants delivering these services are doing their best with the mandate they have. Many are as (or more) frustrated as the public and business owners with the unnecessary expense and waste of time and drag on the economy. They do their jobs despite the governance burden. It is the political level that sets the mandates and that is where the change must occur.

One of the most troubling areas is also one of the most important — public-safety services (police, fire protection, emergency dispatch and emergency

planning). Here are some observations:

Police services

Why does Victoria pay \$573.68 per citizen for policing while View Royal pays \$115.40? Does anyone believe the Victoria Police Department is not helping keep the people of View Royal safe?

We have four police departments and three RCMP detachments, and they have created 40 shared services — each one voluntary. There is a high of 88 per cent participation by Oak Bay and a low of 38 per cent participation by the RCMP.

Even if we leave the RCMP out of it — they have their own national- and provincial-level entanglements — why do we need so many chiefs?

How about if we use those four salaries to pay for one chief with a handful of top-drawer executive leaders to run one police department for Victoria, Saanich, Esquimalt, Oak Bay and Central Saanich?

Fire protection

Does anyone think we need four separate professional fire departments and multiple volunteer fire departments populating 14 committees to co-ordinate their efforts, and with six mutual-aid agreements pledging that they will share their resources?

Costs for the current mishmash range from \$70 to \$90 per person for those places with volunteer departments, to \$210 and \$215 per person in Oak Bay and Esquimalt where they have their own full-blown departments.

Again, why so many chiefs? How about one superbly resourced fire department that actually covers all of the Capital Regional District, not just most areas?

Emergency response planning

Next up, 11 local emergency programs each with its own plan about how to respond in an emergency and no co-ordination among them. It's a good thing earthquakes follow municipal boundaries.

Then there is CREST (Capital Region Emergency Service Telecommunications), the subject of one of my favourite quotes from the report: "The CRD and municipalities in the region also participate in CREST, which provides emergency radio communications for 50 emergency-response agencies in the capital region. This includes fire departments, police departments and ambulance services."

We need a whole organization to ensure 50 emergency-response agencies can communicate with each other. When the big one comes, are we sure they can communicate?

Emergency dispatch

Here's another quote: "Emergency dispatch (911) for first responders is a shared service with seven dispatch centres in the capital region; including three for fire [Saanich, Victoria and Langford, operated by the CRD out of the Langford fire hall), three for police (Saanich, Victoria and Westshore RCMP) and the B.C. Ambulance Service dispatch, also operated in Langford."

The CRD is planning a centralized emergency-dispatch centre. Good. Dispatchers can sit together and try to decide which police department or fire department they have to contact. Dispatch might be easier, cheaper and less risky with one fire department and one police department. Integrate the service providers, not the dispatch centre.

The authors could not identify a single municipal service that is provided the same way for the same cost across this region. This is the best evidence we

have ever had that we need better governance through fewer governments. No one can read this report and think that what we have is not badly broken.

So, what now?

Option 1: Local governments fix it themselves. They have had a long time to do this — and here we are.

Option 2: The province steps in with some detached and capable leaders, a credible process and a deadline and we'll see if we can get more than a sewage plant out of it this time.

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