

Comment: Time to move ahead with amalgamation study

With the 2018 municipal elections on the horizon, Amalgamation Yes is reviewing the progress that has been made since the 2014 election as a result of the overwhelming support that voters in this region showed for a provincially funded study on amalgamation.

Unfortunately, only Saanich has acted on its residents' wishes and conducted a governance review. That review had 30 recommendations, including one urging Saanich to take a leadership role on amalgamation. Amalgamation Yes recently congratulated Saanich on its governance review, and offered our support moving forward with those recommendations.

Amalgamation Yes continues to advocate for this provincially funded study. We strongly believe it is needed to build an improved decision-making framework for the region and that better is possible. The data a provincial study would generate would give civic leaders a better understanding, based on fact, not rhetoric, of what the issues are, and develop strategies to address the issues. Our residents deserve governance that is accountable, fiscally responsible and responsive to the region's needs.

Amalgamation Yes board members closely monitor current events by attending Capital Regional District and various council meetings, and reviewing their documents. As well, we frequently meet with local politicians, organizations and business leaders to continue advocating for the procurement of the provincially funded study.

Our research finds there are several important issues, imminent in nature, that need to be addressed throughout the region, including how Saanich proceeds with the recommendations from its governance review. Of particular concern are the significant capital expenditures forecasted in

many of our region's municipalities that the electorate should be made aware of as the 2018 elections approach.

Using Victoria and Saanich as examples, each needs to examine the long-term strategic approach to major capital expenditures. Victoria has decisions to make on Crystal Pool, the main fire hall and seismic upgrades to city hall, just to name a few. Meanwhile, Saanich needs to upgrade no less than 10 major facilities, including fire halls, police stations and recreation centres. Additionally, the district needs to upgrade or relocate the large public works/parks yard on McKenzie Avenue, and expand and upgrade the municipal hall and annex.

From our perspective, the similarities are impossible to ignore. Both municipalities have virtually identical needs, simultaneously. Not coincidentally, many of those needs mirror or affect issues that the provincially funded study would assess. Amalgamation Yes advocates that it is time to convene a citizens' assembly composed of Victoria and Saanich residents. Information from such an assembly would complement the study.

The Citizens' Assembly on Municipal Amalgamation would be a unique exercise in local democracy to provide residents with an opportunity to develop and evaluate the case for amalgamating two municipalities. The assembly would be an arms-length process that can be commissioned by the elected councils of both municipalities. This would emulate the process that is occurring in Duncan and North Cowichan.

Recent developments in the region suggest that Victoria and Saanich are open to considering amalgamation. Additionally, the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce has recently advocated for amalgamating Victoria and Saanich, saying that if the region's two largest municipalities unite, then others will follow.

The Grumpy Taxpayer\$ of Greater Victoria continue to provide evidence of fiscal mismanagement. At the group's recent annual general meeting,

several politicians from multiple municipalities, including Saanich and Victoria, were in attendance. Clearly the A-word and the issues that make it relevant are on the mind of our politicians.

Is this coincidence? Are our officials truly open to amalgamation or are they posturing for election season? Do they recognize the opportunity to correct a 111-year mistake and unite their municipalities, or are these politicians hedging their bets as the 2018 elections approach?

There are some who would have you believe that amalgamation has a negative connotation and have spent significant effort trying to discredit the notion of amalgamation. We remind you that the definition of amalgamation is, according to the Merriam and Webster's dictionaries, the process of uniting separate entities.

At Amalgamation Yes, we fervently believe in that vision. Our cities are divided in name only — the majority of us identify as Victorians.

It's time to unite and press our elected representatives into action.

Accordingly, we urge leadership by the mayors of Saanich and Victoria to secure respective council support for a formal request to the province of a need to fund a study of the common interests that the majority of our urban-residents share.

John Ellis and James D. Anderson are Amalgamation Yes board members; Shellie Gudgeon is chair.

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