

# Editorial: Amalgamation page left blank

About 20 pages into the provincial government's 234-page report on service integration and governance in the capital region is this note: "This page was intentionally left blank."

It's an apt metaphor for the response by government, past and current, to the issue of amalgamation. In the 2014 municipal elections, 75 per cent of voters in eight of the region's 13 municipalities said they supported a study of some form of amalgamation.

"We will be doing a governance study," then-communities minister Coralee Oakes said in response to the election results. "It's going to be hard work. It's going to be complex. It's going to be very, very difficult, but we're committed to doing that."

Instead, the B.C. Liberals commissioned a modest study on integrated services in Greater Victoria, watering down to homeopathic proportions the promise made by Oakes. The results of the study were released this week. It's not a bad report — it's a useful look at the status quo — but when it comes to a serious look at amalgamation, that page was intentionally left blank.

In a campaign statement to the Amalgamation Yes organization in April, the B.C. New Democrats said the Liberals "were committed to doing a governance study on amalgamation — it was a 'top priority' for them. Yet years later, there is no study and they have no intention to undertake one. This is part of a clear pattern of Christy Clark and the B.C. Liberals is misleading voters and neglecting the things that matter to people."

The NDP statement promised to do better if elected to government: "You can count on B.C. New Democrats to follow through on our commitment to

commission a study, in collaboration with all 13 municipalities, and move this forward.”

But when it comes down to the crunch, the New Democrats have no more appetite for an amalgamation study than the Liberals did. The government is focused on other priorities, says Rob Fleming, education minister and MLA for Victoria-Swan Lake, not perfecting governance in the region.

The strong support given amalgamation questions in the municipal election was not a vote for amalgamation in any way, but a strong indication that voters want more information.

Amalgamation has been talked about for as long as there have been multiple municipalities in the region, but amalgamation is not necessarily the way to go. While the election showed support for studying the issue is broad, there doesn't appear to be wide support for melding the region's 13 municipalities into one entity. Other combinations have been suggested. And perhaps a thorough study will show amalgamation in any form is not the answer. But the questions should be asked and researched.

Each municipality must place its own interests first, sometimes at the expense of regional concerns. That's why provincial leadership is needed, not to force amalgamation on any municipality — the Community Charter does not allow that in any case — but to gather enough information so voters can decide.

The report released this week offers suggestions on what directions to take in sharing services and resources, but it makes no attempt to answer the big question: Will some degree of amalgamation benefit the region?

It's a potentially contentious issue, and it's understandable that the fragile coalition governing B.C. at the moment would want to duck that issue, but pushing it onto the back burner means it will just boil over again in the future.

The people asked for some answers, not pages intentionally left blank.