

Jack Knox: In Dysfunction-By-The-Sea, policing isn't a pretty picture



Police at the scene of a standoff on Begbie Street in Victoria. Sept. 4, 2019

Photograph By Darren Stone, Times Colonist

When that intoxicated guy staged a one-man rodeo near the Royal Jubilee on Wednesday, smashing into cars before holing up inside a Begbie Street house, VicPD brought in the emergency response team to flush him out.

Except it wasn't that straightforward, was it? No, of course not, not here in Dysfunction-By-The-Sea, where, thanks to our multiplicity of municipalities, nothing is uncomplicated.

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Deploying the Greater Victoria Emergency Response Team means dragging its members away from their regular jobs with the area's four municipal police departments. Calling them in triggers a minor exercise in cross-jurisdictional accounting gymnastics, one we wouldn't have to worry about were the region policed by a single force.

At least the Begbie Street guy stayed in Victoria proper. Things would have been trickier had he scooted over a couple of blocks to barricade himself in Oak Bay. In that case, VicPD would have had to ask Oak Bay police to call out the emergency-response team. Approval of such a request is almost automatic, but the accounting would have got a little more involved, as now it would have been Oak Bay that got stuck with the bill for the callout.

The thing is, the Greater Victoria Emergency Response Team is a bit of a shining light, an example of how inter-departmental co-operation works well. Other integrated police units haven't fared so well. Some have imploded. Some regional police work, no-brainer stuff, simply isn't getting done because we can't get our act together.

We learned this week that the provincial government has refused, again, to finish the job it began in 2003 when it forced the shotgun marriage of the police departments of Victoria and Esquimalt. That wedding was supposed to be the first step toward a regional police force, but since then neither the New Democrats nor the Liberals have had the stomach to take on the parochial politics of Greater Victoria, where those four municipal police departments and three RCMP detachments serve a population of less than 400,000.

The municipalities will never amalgamate departments voluntarily, as none wants the tax hit that comes with sharing Victoria and Esquimalt's disproportionate portion of policing costs. Alas, that leaves the region with fragmented policing, no one looking at the big picture.

To address that problem, we have been given Amalgamation Lite, a

patchwork of integrated units doing specialized tasks on a regional basis. Some — the domestic violence, traffic, youth and mental-health teams — are made up of both municipal and RCMP members. Sometimes the Mounties and munies each have their own units, as is the case with emergency-response and crowd-control teams.

The downside to integrated units is that at best they are cumbersome creatures to operate, and at worst fall victim to the same myopia that bedevils local government in general.

Even when everybody is trying to get along — which they do, for the most part — putting an integrated team together is like building a car with parts from half a dozen automakers. Different agencies have different cultures, record systems, computer programs, chains of command. They have to work out a million mundane details: whose cars will be used, who will house the unit, who buys the photocopier.

It doesn't help that participation in these specialized units is voluntary, and therefore spotty. It took years for Saanich (and by extension Oak Bay, since it contracts with Saanich for investigative services) to sign on to, and therefore benefit from the expertise of, the Vancouver Island Integrated Major Crime Unit — the murder squad. The integrated municipal dive unit went under (as it were) after Victoria, Oak Bay and Central Saanich pulled the plug in 2014.

The regional crime unit collapsed in 2014.

That last one was particularly frustrating. The regional crime unit had a stellar record of picking off the prolific offenders responsible for such a hugely disproportionate amount of property crime. (When the team was formed in 2008, then-solicitor general John Les noted Greater Victoria had nine bad guys who had been charged with 127 offences between them in just the previous six months.)

Originally, the regional crime unit drew officers from every department in the city, but then VicPD pulled out, arguing that its contribution — four cops, plus \$500,000 — was too high. (Victoria announced its withdrawal the same week the regional crime unit played a key role in the area’s biggest-ever drug bust, in which 22.5 kilograms of cocaine were seized.) Sidney-North Saanich and Central Saanich then withdrew, followed by Saanich. With just Sooke and West Shore RCMP left, the unit couldn’t survive.

That tale illustrates what Victoria Police Chief Del Manak sees as a systemic problem. As much as everyone wants to play nicely with their neighbours in the sandbox, police chiefs have a responsibility to place the interests of their individual departments first. That’s their job. On the flip side, nobody has the job of looking out for what’s best for the region as a whole.

As a consequence, Greater Victoria still doesn’t have a regional crime unit. Nor does it have a high-risk offender unit, or a cyber-crime unit, or a region-wide dog team, or a better way of sharing intelligence, or any of the other units you would normally find in a community of close to 400,000.

But then, most cities of that size wouldn’t have such fragmentation of emergency services. Ours isn’t a picture that anyone, given a blank canvas, would paint. The status quo isn’t good enough.

“It’s really just a Band-Aid, ad hoc solution to what’s needed in the region,” Manak says.

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