

# Comment: Local governance improving, but there's still work to do



Oak Bay Municipal Hall  
Photograph By Times Colonist

*A commentary by the chair of Grumpy Taxpayer\$ of Greater Victoria, a non-profit, non-partisan unaffiliated advocacy group dedicated to lower taxes, less waste and more accountable municipal government.*

There are some encouraging trends that local governance is evolving for the better in the capital region, albeit at a glacial pace. There are major improvements in communicating with taxpayers.

This fall, South Island residents will be able to subscribe to a brief monthly

report on issues, activities and decisions at the Capital Regional District.

***article continues below***

The so-called Highlights Report will give easy access to information, encourage engagement and assist the CRD in reaching its goals. Residents wanting more detail can quickly go to links and drill down to minutes and reports.

The mysterious CRD is complex and dynamic, manages huge budgets and has considerable impact on our daily lives. Its importance will only increase as our population approaches 500,000 residents.

There's better transparency.

Victoria residents are happy to see the new council dashboard that allows motions, votes and attendance to be easily tracked. It acknowledges a growing view that taxpayers demand quality information in various formats.

It's the first jurisdiction in Greater Victoria to have a voting dashboard (and hopefully Saanich and the CRD will follow suit).

Clicking on a motion links users to the meeting agenda where the report is located, and brings up discussion in an archived webcast. Searches can be conducted using keywords in the motion plus month and year, or by using council members' names or voting type.

Esquimalt is also considering a voting dashboard, along with a highlights report, quarterly council expenses reports and more user-friendly summaries of financial information.

There are commitments to renew deteriorating regional infrastructure for the next generation.

Buildings, roads, sewers — you name it — must be replaced or upgraded to

an extent not seen in generations. Decisions can no longer be kicked down the road to the next council. Inaction will only result in an even greater tax bill.

Perhaps the greatest challenges are in Saanich, where reports identify 10 facilities in critical need of replacement or upgrading.

With public safety at the top of the list, Saanich council finally moved on one priority this summer, approving \$27 million to upgrade Fire Hall No. 2. Studies are underway on the public works yard — ranked top priority — an upgrade likely costing tens of millions. Soil remediation, if needed, may add substantially to the bill.

Oak Bay is setting aside additional funds — a two per cent property tax for asset renewal and an additional one per cent for pavements — just to sustain its infrastructure. As a result, property taxes increased 7.34 per cent this year, one of the steepest hikes in the region.

Across the capital region there's a long list of other critical infrastructure needs — sewer and water pipes, swimming pools, a flyover, crumbling roads — either in the planning stages or under construction.

There are communities starting to think creatively in delivering services.

Added to huge infrastructure-renewal demands are demands for increased union wages and benefits, the provincial downloading of the employer health tax, ever-increasing fixed costs such as utilities, and a unionized RCMP that will soon be making wage demands.

It's encouraging that the Victoria and Esquimalt police board recently released a report outlining plans by the police department to transform its delivery of services and deployment of resources. For example, it's looking at using unarmed members for low-risk tasks.

Increasingly, decision-makers are also building multi-functional facilities,

and consolidating and sharing services.

The new community safety building in Sidney combines fire, ambulance and a hub for the region's emergency preparedness. The proposed Fire Hall No. 1 in Victoria — no public hearing to date — envisions a multi-purpose facility to include fire and rescue, an emergency operations centre, ambulances and housing.

As a result of a co-operative effort, the South Island 911/Police Dispatch Centre was opened in Saanich. The centre houses police call-taking and dispatch for the Victoria, Saanich, Central Saanich and Oak Bay police departments and three RCMP detachments.

It's hoped the 13 municipalities and the electoral area fire departments will give their heads a shake, set aside their parochial interests and eventually reach an agreement on centralizing fire dispatch.

In our view, the most encouraging trend, though, is the Citizens' Assembly process now underway.

Once the terms of reference are established, it's hoped politicians will step aside and let taxpayers have their say.

An evidence-based report exploring the costs, benefits and disadvantages of the amalgamation of Saanich and Victoria is expected in 2020. A specific focus on emergency-services consolidation will be crucial.

If these encouraging trends continue to counterbalance escalating costs and increasing societal needs, taxpayers across the capital region stand to benefit.

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