

The Case for a Saanich Peninsula Municipality Amalgamation Study



Prepared by:
Capital Region Municipal Amalgamation Society
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Better is Possible!

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ON THE SAANICH PENINSULA

The following does not represent an exhaustive study of the potential gains or losses, synergies or efficiencies that might result from amalgamating the three Saanich Peninsula municipalities. It is intended only to provoke a discussion of the possibilities.

TWO DISTRICTS AND A TOWN

The three Saanich Peninsula municipalities consist of approximately 10,411 hectares:

- Central Saanich 5,007
- North Saanich 4,691
- Sidney 713

Of this, approximately 3,906 hectares are within the Agricultural Land Reserve, comprising approximately 38% of the total area of the three municipalities.

The 2016 combined population of the three municipalities is 39,735:

- Central Saanich 16,814
- North Saanich 11,249
- Sidney 11,672

Sidney is the most densely populated and has the largest concentration of businesses serving area residents. Smaller commercial areas are located in Brentwood Bay and Saanichton. Central and North Saanich are primarily rural, with urban pockets and light industrial parks at Keating Business District and the Victoria International Airport lands (shared with Sidney).

The Peninsula is the main transportation hub for southern Vancouver Island, hosting the BC Ferries terminal at Swartz Bay (North Saanich), the Victoria International Airport (North Saanich and Sidney), the BC Ferries terminal at Brentwood Bay (Central Saanich) and the Washington State Ferries Terminal (Sidney).

FIRST NATIONS

There are four First Nations on the Peninsula: the Tsartlip, Tsawout, Pauquachin, and the Tseycum, for a combined 2016 population of 2,937. Their lands encompass approximately 905 hectares. Central and North Saanich have good working relationships with their First Nations neighbours.

COMMONALITIES

The three municipalities have more in common than any of the other 10 municipalities in the Capital Region District (CRD).

- They cost-share the Panorama Recreation centre and the Saanich Peninsula Wastewater Treatment Plant (both located in North Saanich)
- Bulk water is purchased from the CRD and the distribution and administration responsibilities are managed by the Peninsula Water Commission
- Three municipal fire departments have mutual aid agreements and a shared Emergency Management Plan for disaster response
- Central and North Saanich residents value their rural ambiance and share similar values for land use planning
- Central and North Saanich have pockets of contained development, while Sidney is the most densely populated of the three
- The CRD provide contracted curbside recycling for all municipalities, while garbage and food scrap collection is privatized in all three. Amalgamation would not require any change in these arrangements

ADMINISTRATIVE AND OPERATIONAL SERVICES

The integration of municipal services on the Peninsula has reached a point where another alternative deserves serious investigation -- municipal amalgamation. The three municipalities provide similar services to the residents of their respective municipalities including, but not limited to: finance, payroll, administration, corporate services, planning, engineering, public works, parks, building inspection and bylaw enforcement. Although department nomenclature may vary, their functions are similar.

Sidney and North Saanich provide annual grants to the Sidney and North Saanich Memorial Park Society, which, among other things, operates the Mary Winspear Centre.

9-1-1 and Police Dispatch service for the three municipalities, currently provided by Westshore RCMP, will be moving to a new CRD facility in early 2019.

PROTECTIVE SERVICES

Each municipality has a volunteer fire department, with a paid chief and a few paid personnel. These departments have mutual aid agreements. Sidney is currently building a

new fire hall, Central and North Saanich have two fire halls, and as mentioned earlier, the three share a common Emergency Disaster Response Plan.

One of the few significant differences is in the provision of police services. Sidney and North Saanich contract with the RCMP, with Sidney providing the public safety building and North Saanich renting a share of that facility. Central Saanich has its own municipal police service and a police board.

The three municipalities have similar crime rates. Policing, while a municipal responsibility, must comply with the BC Police Act. The concept of regional policing has been raised many times in the past, including via the British Columbia *Missing Women Commission of Enquiry*, led by Wally Oppal, QC.

There is a potential for future RCMP costs to rise if RCMP members create a union. In 2015 the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled that RCMP officers have the right to collective bargaining. The spectre of increased salaries and increased numbers of RCMP members will push municipal costs upward.

The District of Matsqui and the City of Abbotsford merged in 1996. Matsqui's municipal police service was renamed the Abbotsford Police and the RCMP withdrew from policing the former City of Abbotsford.

Saanich and Victoria are currently considering a merger of their police services (the Victoria service includes Esquimalt), and this could trigger a Provincial review of policing services in the CRD.

MUNICIPAL FACILITIES

Central Saanich has a small municipal hall and police office that will require a significant capital outlay in the future. Sidney has a relatively new police office, for which North Saanich pay a portion of the operating and overhead costs as their share of the RCMP component.

The Sidney municipal hall has been renovated in recent years, but is dated and will eventually need to be upgraded. North Saanich has renovated its municipal hall since the last local elections in 2014, and now has the largest council chambers.

Central Saanich recently built a new fire hall and maintains a second hall co-located with the municipal hall. North Saanich has two fire halls and Sidney is currently constructing a new hall.

The three municipalities have separate public works yards and equipment. An amalgamation study would need to consider how existing buildings and yards could be fairly repurposed and what, if any, new facilities might be needed.

POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES OF UNIFYING THE PENINSULA

Potential advantages include, but not be limited to merging of administrative functions: finance, payroll, human resources, information technology, corporate services as well as planning, engineering and public works operations.

An amalgamated or unified Peninsula municipality could more effectively operate facilities that have been funded solely by the people of the Peninsula, but which are currently delivered by the CRD. These include the Panorama Recreation centre and the Saanich Peninsula Wastewater Treatment Plant. If the Peninsula municipalities merged, the new municipality might find it operationally and financially more feasible to operate these facilities themselves. (Oak Bay and Esquimalt own and operate their own recreation centres and Sooke owns and operates its own wastewater treatment system).

A WAY FORWARD

Amalgamation is not a panacea for all challenges faced by municipalities, but it can have a positive outcome. In 1995, the District of Matsqui and the City of Abbotsford merged and their experience has been positive. The key to whether or not to consider amalgamating can and should only be made **after a comprehensive study** of the implications, pros and cons of such a merger. The key is to ensure that affected citizens are fully involved in deciding how their local government is constructed, and that they have an opportunity to vote on the matter in a binding referendum. Objective and impartial information is needed before councils can hold binding local referendums to gauge public support. In British Columbia, forced amalgamations are prohibited under the Community Charter, Section 279.

The majority of residents in the three Peninsula municipalities asked for an amalgamation study during the 2014 local elections: 71% in Central Saanich, 68% in Sidney, and 63% in North Saanich. The respective councils of each municipality then wrote to the Province to fund a study of Peninsula amalgamation.

Later, the Province produced a summary report of municipal and integrated services, the *Capital Integrated Services and Governance Initiative* (CISGI). This report did not examine the case for a Saanich Peninsula amalgamation as requested by the majority of voters.

In contrast to the Peninsula, the District of North Cowichan and the City of Duncan posed similar amalgamation study questions on their 2014 ballots, then created a Citizens' Assembly to study the pros and cons. The Assembly consisted of 36 citizens, 12 from Duncan and 24 from North Cowichan. They met over a period of several months in 2016 and 2017, interviewed a wide range of people with expertise, and presented their report to the two councils in May 2017. The consensus of the report was a recommendation that the two municipalities amalgamate (or reunify, as they were one municipality prior to 1912).

Part of the Duncan - North Cowichan Citizens Assembly considerations included a Technical Report prepared by consultants Urban Systems. The two councils accepted the report and its recommendation and are currently working towards holding a binding referendum in 2018. Section 2 of the *BC Local Government Act* requires that residents in each municipality approve any change prior to the Province of BC issuance of new Letters Patent. In other words, no change can occur without the consent of the electorate in the affected municipalities, by way of binding referendums.

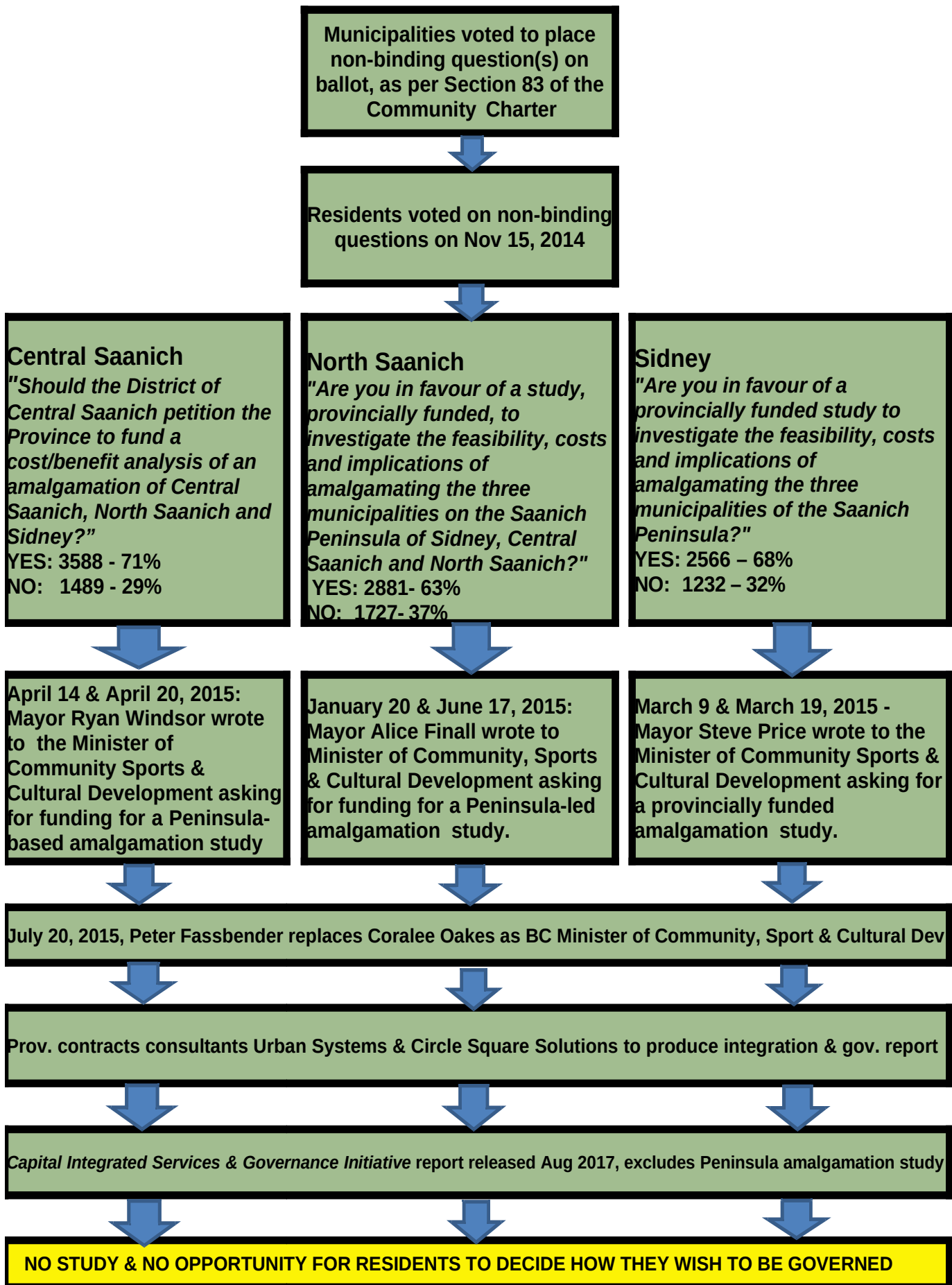
A Peninsula citizens' assembly would be an impartial means to facilitate a participatory study to obtain objective information. This would include consideration of the state of each municipality's financial obligations and assets, as well as the quantity and quality of infrastructure, all information that Peninsula residents would require before deciding whether or not unification would be positive or negative for their municipalities.

The Mayor of Sidney, Steve Price, wrote to the BC Minister of Community, Sport and Cultural Development on March 19, 2015:

"While all three questions specified that the study was to be funded by the Province, each was silent on who would carry out the study. From the Town of Sidney's perspective, it would certainly impact the impartiality and credibility of an amalgamation study if the local governments themselves were to undertake it, nor do we have the expertise or the available resources to carry out such a study."

The Mayor supports the idea of an independent group to study amalgamation. A Peninsula citizens' assembly would be an appropriate means of carrying out a thorough examination of the pros and cons of amalgamating and would strengthen citizen involvement in local government.

Simplified Peninsula Amalgamation Flow Chart



It's time to hold local and Provincial officials accountable for the strong electoral support shown for a Peninsula amalgamation study. Local elections will be held on October 20, 2018, providing an opportunity to challenge council candidates to act on the results of the 2014 referendum questions. Councils must follow through on the results of the 2014 referendum.

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REFERENCES

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Local Government Statistics and Information:

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North Saanich ALR Report:

https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/agriculture-and-seafood/agricultural-land-and-environment/strengthening-farming/land-use-inventories/northsaanich2009_aluireport.pdf

Central Saanich Official Community Plan:

https://www.centrsaanich.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/bylaws/bylaw_ocp.pdf

North Saanich Official Community Plan:

[https://www.northsaanich.ca/document-store/1130 Official Community Plan Bylaw 2007 CONSOLIDATED August 2017.pdf](https://www.northsaanich.ca/document-store/1130%20Official%20Community%20Plan%20Bylaw%202007%20CONSOLIDATED%20August%202017.pdf)

Sidney Official Community Plan:

<http://www.sidney.ca/Assets/Development+Services/Bylaws/1920+OCP+2017.pdf>

Duncan - North Cowichan Citizens Assembly on Municipal Amalgamation report:

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