

Province has no plans to amalgamate Greater Victoria police forces

Amalgamation of police departments in Greater Victoria is not a priority for the NDP government, Solicitor General Mike Farnworth says.

“I don’t have any plans for regionalization of police forces at this time,” he told the Times Colonist. “The [Public Safety Ministry] file is large enough with a lot of public-policy issues right now that there are no plans for regionalization.”

Farnworth said specialized teams such as the Integrated Homicide Investigation Team on the Lower Mainland and the Integrated Child Exploitation Team already do a good job of sharing crucial information across police agencies. “That said, if local governments are interested in combining their police services, such as Victoria and Esquimalt have done, I will support them in determining if this would be an effective way to meet their policing needs.”

Supporters of a regional police department say it would be more efficient, and help to rein in criminals who bounce from one jurisdiction to another.

“If you’re an advocate, as I am, on sensible policing, this is not good news,” said Rob Gordon, a criminologist at Simon Fraser University. “Nobody seems to have the drive, the political will to move it forward. And that’s because it’s not a vote-getter at the moment.”

Gordon said he has studied regional police forces all over Canada and they usually came about after the amalgamation of municipalities.

Victoria Police Chief Del Manak said his department carries a larger burden because Victoria is home to the bulk of the region’s bars as well as social services for those struggling with addiction and mental-health issues.

“I believe wholeheartedly that a regional approach is the way to go with policing, especially in the Capital Regional District with so many police departments,” Manak said. “There’s no secret that the Victoria Police Department is policing regional issues without having the regional resources from which to draw.”

Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps said she can understand why Farnworth does not want to impose a police amalgamation, because “forcing people into a unit together doesn’t work.”

The region’s mayors are talking about how police services can be better integrated, such as developing integrated units for canine teams, forensic identification or cyber crime, Helps said.

Greater Victoria’s four municipal departments and two RCMP detachments share resources through specialized integrated teams for issues such as traffic, domestic violence, major crime and tactical response.

Police departments are not, however, required to contribute to an integrated unit. For example, the Regional Crime Unit, which targeted prolific offenders who operate across borders, collapsed in 2014 after Victoria police pulled its funding and other departments followed suit.

“The Regional Crime Unit is a perfect example of something working well, but unfortunately there’s no governance model that says you can’t just walk away,” Helps said.

Colwood Mayor Carol Hamilton cited the Capital Regional District’s consolidated police dispatch centre as an example of successful integration. The centre, to be in Saanich, will be in operation by 2018.

“We’re getting better tools in the toolbox with the advancement of technology,” she said. “So I think, where we can, we are making headway.”

Farnworth said more pressing issues for the ministry include introducing a

cannabis-distribution model before the federal government legalizes marijuana in July 2018, addressing the shortage of courthouse sheriffs to prevent further backlogs in the legal system and establishing a province-wide restorative-justice program.

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