

Editorial: Province could save region from itself

Teachers and school trustees in Greater Victoria want Victoria police to bring back the three liaison officers who were pulled from area schools. The decision was made by Police Chief Del Manak, after Esquimalt municipal council refused to pay its share of the costs for six additional officers he said the force needed. Esquimalt and Victoria jointly operate the local police force.

After Esquimalt declined, Manak redeployed the liaison officers, an intelligence officer, a reserve constable and a community services officer. The cost to the township for all six new officers would have been \$40,778.

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There are several disturbing aspects in the way this matter was handled.

For a start, the president of the Greater Victoria Teachers' Association has said there are many incidents each year that require assistance. He fears students in crisis will suffer most if the liaison service is not restored.

Then again, Esquimalt's budget is about \$40 million. Couldn't council find an extra 0.1 per cent for additional officers?

Next, there was the buck-passing that went on. According to Esquimalt Mayor Barb Desjardins: "Absolutely, I don't see that Esquimalt council is culpable." And she went on to blame the police chief, saying he was responsible for allocating resources.

So council won't pay for the service, but it's Manak's fault? As an excuse, that ranks right up there with the dog ate my lunch.

However, the larger issue is the mindset underlying this petty-mindedness

and the consequences for law enforcement. If Esquimalt council can't focus its thoughts clearly enough to see the merits of additional officers, should it really be running a police service?

Of all the responsibilities that governments bear, law enforcement is both one of the most important, and one of the most delicate. Police officers have the authority to patrol our streets, conduct arrests and take suspects into custody. These powers have the potential to alter people's lives and shape the character of the community.

It could very well be argued that small municipalities should not be making decisions about these functions. They have too many other issues to absorb their attention and too few councillors with the training or expertise to handle such a responsibility.

We saw evidence of that in the way Victoria's mayor, Lisa Helps, and Desjardins bungled the inquiry into former police chief Frank Elsner. Elsner was accused of serious misconduct, but the two mayors, who chair the police board, let him off with a disciplinary letter.

The police complaint commissioner had to step in, and Elsner resigned.

However, it soon became apparent that neither mayor had sufficient know-how to deal with the matter. Helps later admitted: "We're mayors. We're not experts."

Despite that, if policing is to remain a municipal responsibility, the time is long past when all the police departments in the capital region should be amalgamated.

Esquimalt's refusal to fund school liaison officers is merely one symptom of a broader dysfunction. We cannot have such a critical function as law enforcement subject to petty money-grubbing and interregional squabbling.

Ironically, if a merger took place, the savings from having one police chief

rather than four would pay for a whole squad of liaison officers.

But the issue is larger than money. There's something faintly ridiculous about a small district such as Central Saanich, population about 18,000, having its own police force. Or Oak Bay, population 20,000.

Dispersing scarce resources in this manner almost guarantees that critical pieces of information fall through the cracks. It also means that none of the forces can afford the most up-to-date technologies, in a field where technology is becoming increasingly important.

The provincial government is reviewing Esquimalt's decision to withhold funding for the additional officers, with the power to reverse it. Why stop there?

It has been evident for years that the capital region requires a unified police service. But that will only happen if the province steps in and saves our municipalities from themselves.

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