

# Comment: Province should honour amalgamation-study pledge

A new report has confirmed in minute detail what many taxpayers have known for a long time: Municipal governance in the capital region is fragmented, dysfunctional and unaccountable to those paying the bills.

The solutions proposed in the Capital Integrated Services and Governance Initiative are unlikely to bring about improvements. More inter-municipal government agreements will not solve the long-term issues in transportation, housing, policing and emergency response, to mention just a few. Nor will they overcome the tendency to choose local over regional whenever there is a conflict.

The election of some of the members of the Capital Regional District board will not make it directly accountable to the taxpayers unless there is a significant change in the responsibilities and authority of the CRD. The report does an excellent job of documenting the existing municipal nightmare, but it offers no solutions that are likely to bring about real, lasting improvements.

The current broken municipal system is expensive and an unnecessary financial burden on the taxpayers of the capital region. Our per-capita municipal expenditures are 50 per cent higher than similar municipalities on the Lower Mainland. Indeed, when the full cost of the new sewer system is added, our per-capita municipal expenditures are likely to be close to 100 per cent higher.

It is expensive to have 13 fully staffed city organizations serving a population of 350,000. We must find a better way.

Building upon the data in the report, what is required now is a comprehensive study of the options for improving governance in the capital

region. Such a study would look at all the options and identify the costs and benefits of each option.

The study would provide a basis for public discussion and input to the narrowing of the options to those that best meet the community needs. It would identify the funding required from the provincial government to ensure a smooth transition from the current organizations to each option.

The New Democratic Party promised, in writing, before the May election to undertake such a study. Sadly, Premier John Horgan and Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Selina Robinson are refusing to honour that promise.

This is very disappointing to the 75 per cent plus of those who voted in the 2014 municipal elections who clearly indicated that they want a governance study and an opportunity to discuss the results. The vote has been supported by public opinion polls.

I chair the board of the Capital Region Municipal Amalgamation Society, also known as Amalgamation Yes. Our objective is to bring about efficient, effective and accountable governance in the capital region.

We will continue to pressure the provincial government to honour its campaign pledge and undertake the urgently needed governance study. We urge the taxpayers to write to their MLAs and the premier, urging them to honour their promise to undertake the requested study.

The economy, environment and social opportunities in the capital region are being affected negatively by the current ineffective municipal-governance system. We can, and must, do better.

Shellie Gudgeon is a business owner and former Victoria city councillor.