

Catherine Holt: Province needs to ask: 'What is missing?'

Two reports show how governments can avoid acting on uncomfortable recommendations.

ICBC is in financial crisis, and big changes need to be made to stop the bleeding. This was anticipated by consulting firm EY (formerly Ernst and Young) in 2014, when the province asked it to review the corporation.

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Recently, it has come to light that seven pages of the report with recommendations to save hundreds of millions of dollars were removed by the former government and not acted on, likely to delay the financial hit on drivers (“B.C. Liberals scrubbed 2014 report on ICBC financial crisis,” Jan. 14).

In 2016, the province commissioned a report called the Capital Integrated Services and Governance Initiative from Circle Square Solutions and Urban Systems Consultants to gather “facts about current service delivery, increasing understanding about service delivery best practices and exploring further the opportunities to better integrate services and governance in the capital region.”

The outcome of that study was not released by then-minister Peter Fassbender, who hired the consultants, despite a number of freedom of information requests, including the Chamber’s. It was eventually released by the current minister, Selina Robinson.

The report is a strange mix.

On one hand, it’s an exhaustive and exhausting description, like none other,

of the crazy world we live in when it comes to local government services. It tackles 16 services and describes each thoroughly by municipality, including what the service is, what parts are shared with other governments, the different ways it's delivered, what it costs per capita, how decisions are made and who pays.

The authors could not identify a single municipal service that is provided the same way for the same cost across this region. It provides the best evidence we have ever had that we need better governance through fewer governments. No one can read this report and think that what we have is not badly broken.

For example, we just had a tsunami scare, and there was a wide variety of responses across our many communities and no sense that they were talking to each other.

Here's what the report said about emergency response planning:

“Each municipality in the CRD has a local emergency plan. These plans are generally autonomous, and there is a limited degree of co-ordination across jurisdictions. These plans provide basic tools to help governments and emergency-service providers respond to emergencies in the region. Ideally, these plans will assist decision makers to identify refuge areas, shelters for displaced people, distribution of emergency supplies, etc. In the CRD, there are currently 11 local emergency programs that would respond during an emergency situation.”

Then there is CREST (Capital Region Emergency Service Telecommunications Inc.), the subject of one of my favorite quotes from the report: “The CRD and municipalities in the region also participate in CREST, which provides emergency radio communications for 50 emergency-response agencies in the capital region. This includes fire departments, police departments and ambulance services.”

Did they communicate about the tsunami? All 50 of them? It boggles the mind. Having 50 response agencies is probably the biggest risk we have to public safety.

On the other hand, despite the catalogue of shortcomings, readers awaiting the insights of the very experienced consulting group were astonished that they made only three bland recommendations:

1. Build on in-progress regional service initiatives (or “Continue what you’re doing”)
2. Create a regional framework for discussing service delivery and integration (or “Talk among yourselves”)
3. Evaluate new opportunities for improving service delivery and integration (or “Talk about some new things, too”)

It is discordant. All that detail on the problem and no recommendations for action.

There are two ways for government to avoid uncomfortable recommendations that require bold action:

- a) Delete them from the report, as happened with the ICBC review, or
- b) Make sure they never show up in the first place, which is what happened with the governance report.

The tsunami adventure was the most recent in-our-face warning that we are in disarray when it comes to managing issues as important as public safety.

There is no way the consultants, with their many years of senior-government experience and all the information they gathered, do not have a whole lot more to say about how to fix our problem.

Robinson has an opportunity and a responsibility to ask the consultants to

provide her with a more pro-active set of recommendations on this risk, including any recommendations they wanted to include in the governance report, but that have never seen the light of day.

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