

## A Brief History of Referendums in Greater Victoria

Canada's federal government has only held three referendums in its entire history, on prohibition (1898), military conscription (1942), and the constitution-altering Charlottown Accord (1992). Among the provinces, British Columbia has been keen to use referendums, holding at least 14 since B.C.'s founding, including votes on prohibition (1916), public health insurance (1937), and whether to give citizens the power to recall MLAs and initiate legislation (1991). In the autumn of 2018, British Columbians will vote — as they did in 2005 and 2009 — on whether to change their “first-past-the-post” electoral system to one of proportional representation.

The greatest use of direct democracy in Canada, however, has been at the municipal level of government. Victoria was once at the forefront of this movement.

For most of B.C.'s history, provincial law required municipalities to get taxpayer approval whenever they borrowed money. Consequently, many referendums in Victoria were votes on major capital projects that determined the course of development of the city — in 1887, for example, residents approved buying a collection of books from the Mechanics' Institute, leading to the creation of Victoria's first public library.

Currently, the provincial [Community Charter](#) and [Local Government Act](#) only require municipalities to get voter “assent” via a referendum for major decisions, such as whether to incorporate (s.4 LGA) or extend municipal boundaries (s. 12 LGA), sell off water or sewer works (s. 28 CC), or add fluoride to the water supply (s. 68 CC). In many other cases, municipalities require voter “approval”, which they can get via a referendum, or the Alternative Approval Process identified in s. 86 of the *Charter*, in which a civic measure is deemed approved unless 10% of eligible voters sign petitions against it. Actions requiring voter approval include granting franchises to private companies to provide services (s. 22 CC), exchanging or disposing of park land (s. 27 CC), removing the dedication of civic property as a public park or square (s. 30 CC), incurring debt lasting longer than five years (s. 175 CC), most loan authorization bylaws, except for legal or emergency needs (s. 180 CC), and using borrowed money for another purpose (s. 190 CC).

Municipal councils may also seek “community opinion” on any matter, under s. 83 of the *Community Charter*, via a non-binding vote (a “plebiscite”).

The following is a list of (most of) the referendums and plebiscites held in greater Victoria over the past century. As you can see, direct democracy has long been a part of Victoria politics, and right up to the present day.

— Ross Crockford  
Originally drafted 2008, revised 2018 and 2021

**January 16, 1908:** Victoria residents approve bylaws to get the city's water supply from Sooke Lake (1,357 votes to 609 against), and to buy an incinerator for the city (1,178 to 589).

**January 13, 1909:** Victorians vote on two bylaw and two referendum questions, agreeing to sewer improvements (many of the city's current pipes date to this decision) and a ban on Sunday shopping, but turn down making \$85,000 alterations to city hall and granting \$7,500 to the local tourist association.

**January 12, 1911:** Five bylaws and three referendum questions are presented to Victoria voters. They approve of acquiring further water rights at Sooke Lake, burying the downtown's telephone lines underground, turning the jobs of police commissioner and licence commissioner into elected positions, and changing the liquor laws so that retail booze may only be sold by hotels. They reject a proposal for a new theatre, to be built by Simon Leiser, at the site of today's Crystal Garden.

**January 14, 1920:** Victorians vote 2,986 to 445 in favour of construction of today's Johnson Street Bridge. A proposal to buy land from the Hudson's Bay Company for a public golf course fails to get enough votes to reach the required 60% majority. (Today that land is the Uplands Golf Club.) Victorians also vote for a "commission" form of municipal government, using proportional representation, but the results are not binding.

**December 29, 1923:** Following a massive advertising campaign in the press and local cinemas, Victorians vote 2,909 to 352 in favour of an agreement between the City and the Canadian Pacific Railway, allowing the latter to build the Crystal Garden and operate it for 20 years. The CPR gets free water for the facility, leases the land for \$1 per year, and pays no property taxes.

**December 8, 1927:** Victorians approve upgrades to the Ogden Point grain terminal, and authorize a financial guarantee for construction of a textile mill on Montreal Street.

**December 12, 1935:** Victorians turn down a proposal to switch to daylight savings time (1,943 in favor to 2,625 against) because neither Vancouver or Seattle have instituted it, even though many citizens expressed a desire for "more leisure during the hours of daylight."

**December 8, 1938:** Victorians approve borrowing \$150,000 from the Dominion government for construction of a civic auditorium and sports arena, and agree to continue streetcar service in the city for another five years.

**December 10, 1943:** Oak Bay residents reject chlorination of their municipal water.

**December 15, 1944:** Victorians approve borrowing \$150,000 to build Memorial Arena after the Willows Arena burned down earlier in the year. The project later runs out of money, and voters have to approve two more borrowing bylaws – for \$325,000 in May 1948, and \$265,000 in December 1948 – to finish the building.

**July 26, 1946:** Victorians approve spending \$108,000 on waterworks improvement and \$108,000 on street lighting, but turn down a bylaw to authorize sale of the Willows fairgrounds to Colwood Park Racing Association for \$100,000 (12.3% voter turnout).

**December 12, 1946:** Victorians reject a plan to replace the city's streetcars with buses. Oak Bay votes in favour of spending \$65,000 to buy Uplands Park and Cattle Point.

**June 19, 1947:** Victoria, Saanich, Oak Bay and Esquimalt residents approve a new transit scheme removing the city's streetcars and replacing them with buses. The votes total 11,847 in favour to 1,225 opposed.

**December 4, 1947:** Victorians approve construction of a new city hall in the block bounded by Blanshard, Cormorant, and Pandora. Victorians also approve negotiations to amalgamate with other municipalities (6,097 votes to 585) and agree, along with Oak Bay and Saanich voters, in favour of formation of a metropolitan water board.

**December 18, 1948:** Saanich voters shoot down a proposal to turn the Gordon Head military base (today's UVic campus) into an "airpark" for light planes, 3,437 votes to 1,706. Oak Bay residents approve spending \$120,000 to buy the Willows fairgrounds.

**December 8, 1949:** Victorians approve creation of the position of city manager, and spending \$350,000 for renovations to the Carnegie Library.

**May 30, 1950:** Led by church and temperance groups, Victorians vote 11,033 to 8,628 against the sale of beer by the glass, the fourth time voters refused to allow beer parlours in the city, following similar referenda in 1924, 1931 and 1939.

**June 10, 1950:** Saanich residents vote 1,684 to 1,104 in favour of allowing the district's rural Ward Six to secede — effectively creating the new municipality of Central Saanich — with Ward Six residents themselves 386 to 146 in favour. Saanich residents also vote 1,507 to 1,266 in favour of letting Ward Five separate (including Cadboro Bay, Royal Oak and Prospect Lake), but Ward Five residents vote 480 to 292 against it, and thus remain part of Saanich. Despite the consequences of the outcome, voter turnout is only around 20%.

**December 16, 1950:** Oak Bay residents vote 1,265 to 1,039 against extending their municipality's boundaries to include Gordon Head and Ten Mile Point, despite entreaties from those neighbourhoods (who fear that a now-smaller Saanich will amalgamate with the City of Victoria) and the unanimous recommendation of Oak Bay's council.

**December 13, 1951:** Victorians vote 7,056 to 1,499 to reduce the number of city councillors from 10 to eight.

**December 14, 1952:** Saanich voters approve construction of a \$2.5-million race track and exhibition buildings in the Strawberry Vale area.

**December 15, 1956:** Voters in four municipalities turn down a \$5.6-million school construction program. Saanich residents vote to refinance their waterworks, and build another library. Oak Bay voters approve construction of a new municipal hall, and ban the sale of raw milk.

**December 12, 1957:** Victorians approve a new library agreement with surrounding municipalities, and establishment of a royal commission on amalgamation. The *Colonist* notes that “The Junior Chamber of Commerce asked for the referendum and sought referendums in adjoining municipalities too. But when the municipal councils hung back and rejected the idea, the junior chamber indicated it would seek to obtain names on petitions for a royal commission through the area, and take the petitions directly to the government.”

**December 11, 1958:** Victoria residents vote 3,992 to 1,994 in favour of negotiating amalgamation with Saanich, but Saanich residents are 65% opposed, 5,090 votes to 2,731. Victorians also approve construction of the View Street parkade and pedestrian malls. “This bylaw will insure the future health of our city,” says mayor Percy Scurrah, “and it places us first in Canada to install malls and among the leaders in this field on the North American continent.”

**December 10, 1959:** Although numerous dentists call for adding fluoride to the city’s water, Victorians vote against it, 6,833 to 4,031. A week later, Saanich, Esquimalt and Oak Bay residents also refuse fluoridation.

**December 7, 1961:** Saanich residents approve sale of beer by the glass. (A previous vote failed in 1954.) Sidney residents vote to extend the town’s boundaries.

**December 7, 1962:** An amalgamation referendum fails in Saanich again, but by a smaller margin than in 1958, with 55% against. (Mount Tolmie, Cadboro Bay and Gordon Head neighbourhoods vote in favour, but north and western districts of Saanich are strongly opposed.) Central Saanich voters approve spending \$40,000 to build a new municipal hall. Sidney residents approve more boundary extensions and a waterfront park dedication, but reject a regional library.

**December 14, 1962:** Victorians approve spending \$950,000 to create the Centennial Square civic plaza, including renovations of city hall, conversion of the Pantages Theatre (now the Macpherson Playhouse), and construction of a seniors’ centre (Silver Threads).

**December 13, 1963:** Victorians approve the \$375,000 reconstruction of the Fisgard Street police station.

**December 13, 1964:** Esquimalt residents vote 1,137 to 351 in favour of amalgamating the “panhandle” region of View Royal into their municipality, even though people living there vow to fight it.

**June 18, 1965:** North Saanich residents approve beer parlours, cocktail lounges and liquor in restaurants and dining rooms. The referendum stems from an application for full liquor privileges by the Deep Cove Chalet.

**December 11, 1965:** Voters in five out of the region's seven incorporated municipalities reject creation of a regional hospital district, limiting the power of the new Capital Regional District. Oak Bay residents vote 58% in favour of fluoridation of their water, not enough to pass the 60% requirement.

**December 11, 1966:** Oak Bay votes 52.3% in favour of fluoridation of its water, again not enough to pass. Residents of View Royal's "panhandle" reject amalgamation with Esquimalt. Sooke voters approve spending \$2 million on school construction.

**December 9, 1968:** Saanich voters approve year-round weekly garbage collection.

**December 6, 1969:** Citizens of Esquimalt, Oak Bay, Saanich and Victoria approve of paid-admission sport and entertainment being allowed on Sundays. Oak Bay voters approve construction of a new recreation centre.

**December 14, 1970:** Victorians reject spending \$2 million to buy waterfront land on Wharf Street, allowing the controversial Reid Centre development to continue. Colwood voters reject a proposed ice arena. Sidney voters reject a \$40,000 swimming pool but approve a \$55,000 seniors' centre.

**November 29, 1971:** Saanich voters approve an increase of municipal grants to local tourist promotion agencies. Sidney authorizes Sunday sports and entertainment.

**November 20, 1978:** Saanich voters approve construction of an industrial park, choosing Royal Oak over Interurban as a preferable area. Colwood, Langford, and Metchosin residents vote against incorporating their districts as municipalities.

**November 15, 1980:** After the province leaves it up to municipalities to determine their own "blue laws," Saanich voters turn down Sunday shopping (7,158 votes to 5,704) while Central Saanich, Colwood, Esquimalt, Langford, Metchosin, Sidney, Sooke and View Royal residents all vote in favour.

**May 3, 1981:** Victorians vote 71% in favour (8,488 to 3,438) of Sunday shopping (29.4% turnout).

**November 23, 1981:** Saanich voters approve construction of a new police building, and changes to garbage pickup. Oak Bay residents agree to allow Sunday shopping.

**November 20, 1982:** Saanich, Oak Bay and Victoria residents all vote overwhelmingly in favour of telling the federal government to push for global nuclear disarmament, following similar municipal referendums across Canada. Victorians also approve borrowing \$21 million for a major update of its underground services and roads. Saanich voters reject a bid to change the garbage collection system. East Sooke voters turn down an \$80,000 firehall for their community.

**November 18, 1989:** Victorians vote 56% against a \$54-million capital works program that would include a new police station, firehall, and upgrades to City Hall and Memorial Arena.

**November 21, 1992:** In a non-binding vote, Capital Region residents are given three options for sewage treatment: A) source control, at the annual taxpayer cost of \$4 per \$100,000 of assessed property; B) primary treatment at \$231 per; or C) secondary treatment at \$336 per. Option A gets 57% of the vote region-wide, B gets 21% and C gets 22% — effectively killing the CRD's treatment project, and drawing nationwide criticism. Victoria residents also vote in favour of building a new \$18.5-million police station and spending \$6.15-million to prevent shoreline erosion, but oppose \$9-million in upgrades to City Hall, Memorial Arena, Crystal Pool and Craigdarroch Castle.

**September 25, 1993:** In a two-ballot vote, Highlands residents decide to incorporate as a municipality, 479 to 225, and to do so independently of Langford (which had incorporated the year before), 525 to 170, largely to prevent major rezoning and greater housing densities. Saanich mayor and CRD chair Frank Leonard opposes the incorporation, arguing that the growing number of small municipalities will impede regional planning. "We've probably got 70 communities within Saanich the size of the Highlands," he tells the *Times Colonist*. "Are they going to form their own municipalities? Is this provincial government going to realize they are going to be creating chaos at the local government level with their policies?"

**June 12, 1999:** Sooke residents decide to incorporate as a municipality, 1439 votes to 937, with approximately 40% turnout. Sooke officially incorporates as a District on December 7 that year.

**November 21, 1999:** Voters in six CRD municipalities agree in a plebiscite to a 10-year, \$10-per household levy to acquire regional parkland. North Saanich residents approve connecting to a new peninsula sewer system.

**December 7, 2001:** Western Communities voters reject borrowing \$8.5 million for water-system upgrades (less than 10% turnout).

**April 20, 2002:** Victorians vote 71.5% in favour of replacing Memorial Arena, borrowing \$30 million and creating a partnership with RG Properties to build a new arena (27.65% turnout). Oak Bay voters approve borrowing \$4.6 million for upgrades to the Oak Bay recreation centre.

**November 16, 2002:** Colwood and Langford residents approve a \$12.8-million Westshore arena, but Metchosin voters reject it, killing the plan. The region quickly regroups and builds Bear Mountain Arena, now called The Q Centre, for \$10.5 million.

**October 5, 2003:** Esquimalt voters approve upgrades to the municipality's sewers.

**December 13, 2003:** Sooke approves borrowing \$8.8 million for sewers and secondary sewage treatment.

**June 19, 2004:** Sidney rejects spending \$800,000 to put power lines underground along a five-block section of Lochside Drive (10% turnout).

**November 6, 2004:** North Saanich residents approve of putting slot machines at Sandown Raceway, voting 2,102 to 1,641 (48% turnout).

**January 23, 2005:** Sooke voters reject spending \$2.6 million to upgrade local roads.

**February 5, 2005:** Residents of Sooke's outlying rural areas overwhelmingly reject joining the District of Sooke, largely out of fear that their taxes will increase without much representation at the council table. In East Sooke the votes are 198 in favour and 547 against, and in West Sooke (including Otter Point and Shirley) the votes are 180 in favour and 772 against.

**November 19, 2005:** Langford residents reject borrowing \$750,000 to build a public outdoor ice rink at Bear Mountain, but approve borrowing \$750,000 to equip the new Happy Valley elementary school and the new Eagle Ridge Arena as emergency reception centres, and borrowing \$1.9 million for soccer fields and softball diamonds in the new City Centre Park. Sooke voters approve annexation of Kemp Lake and Gillespie Road areas. Sidney and North Saanich voters agree to borrow \$2.5 million to upgrade the Panorama recreation centre. Sidney residents vote in favour of slot machines at Sandown.

**November 15, 2008:** Central Saanich residents approve contributing financially to the expansion of the Panorama rec centre and giving priority to a new public safety building, but reject higher property taxes to maintain current municipal services or build infrastructure. Colwood and Langford residents resoundingly agree that governments should pay for upgrades to the E&N railway tracks and that BC Transit should provide commuter rail service. Sooke residents approve directing the CRD to allocate funds to the Sooke Region Museum.

**November 20, 2010:** City of Victoria residents approve borrowing \$49.2 million to replace the Johnson Street Bridge, 10,020 votes (60.6%) to 6,522 (39.4%). The referendum was required because 9,872 residents (15% of eligible voters) signed petitions in late 2009, opposing the City's attempt to borrow \$42 million for the project via the Alternative Approval Process.

**November 24, 2012:** View Royal residents vote 1,677 to 924 (33.8% turnout) in favour of building a new firehall, even though some 1,300 residents (16.9% of the population) had signed a petition forcing the referendum in the first place — a second example in the region, after the Johnson Street Bridge, of a strong petition for the referendum and then the public voting to borrow for the project anyway.

**November 15, 2014:** On this year’s civic election ballots, most Victoria municipalities include non-binding questions relating to amalgamation. Nearly all the results are in favour of exploring amalgamation, from Saanich (“Do you support council initiating a community-based review of the governance structure and policies within Saanich and our partnerships within the region?” Yes: 21,437 No: 2,780) to Langford (“Are you in favour of the City of Langford being amalgamated into a larger regional municipality?” Yes: 2,222 No: 2,209). Oak Bay is the only municipality where voters reject the question (“Are you in favour of the District of Oak Bay being amalgamated into a larger regional municipality?”), with 2,184 voting Yes and 3,594 voting No. (Amalgamation questions were not asked in Colwood, Highlands, Metchosin, Sooke, or View Royal.) Sooke residents vote in favour of developing community-centre facilities, and oppose the expansion of oil-tanker traffic along the B.C. coast.

**September 9, 2017:** Salt Spring Island residents vote against incorporating as a municipality, 3,916 to 2,402, and thus remain a rural area administered by the Islands Trust and the Capital Regional District.

**October 20, 2018:** Victoria and Saanich add an identical plebiscite question to their municipal ballots: “Are you in favour of spending up to \$250,000 for establishing a Citizens' Assembly to explore the costs, benefits, and disadvantages of the amalgamation between the District of Saanich and the City of Victoria?” Victorians vote 18,343 Yes and 9,253 No; Saanich residents vote 16,852 Yes and 13,274 No. As of May 2021, the Citizens’ Assembly has yet to convene.

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