

Editorial: Regional police a step closer

Saanich has unexpectedly cracked open a door that has stayed stubbornly closed for too long. On the other side of the door is a regional police force. To be fair, Saanich councillors just made the first move toward talking about a regional police force with other municipalities. But given the glacial pace of decision-making in the region, it's significant.

Council voted to have Mayor Richard Atwell write to the other mayors and invite them to talk about a regional police force. And just to add to the momentum, they will ask the provincial government to create and fund a citizens assembly on municipal amalgamation for all interested municipalities.

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Three years after a majority of voters around the region who were asked said yes to the idea of studying municipal amalgamation, not much has happened. The call for an assembly from the region's largest municipality will please the 88 per cent of Saanich voters who voted for a review of its governance and relations with the rest of the region.

In response to that vote, Saanich created a governance review citizen advisory committee to get things moving. Its recommendations were the spur for council's action last week.

Full municipal amalgamation still looks like a distant mirage, given the entrenched opposition of so many councils, but a unified police force might be a more achievable goal.

It is certainly a sensible one. Criminals, as we have often observed, don't respect municipal borders.

Mayors and police chiefs in the City of Victoria have been lonely voices over

the years, calling for a regional force because so many of the region's police problems land in Victoria's lap. For once, another municipality has taken up the cry.

The other local governments have gradually been dragged into "integration" of certain police services, and the province is hiring a consultant to see if there are ways to improve that integration. But they have balked at true amalgamation.

Yet we are part of the way there already. Victoria polices Esquimalt, and Saanich does major-crimes investigation for Oak Bay. Uniting those core municipalities into one force seems like an obvious rationalization of services.

Oak Bay, however, is representative of those municipalities that disagree. Its mayor, Nils Jensen, says regionalization might be good for the large municipalities, but smaller ones could lose out.

"Smaller communities end up paying significantly more for significantly less service," Jensen said.

That's a concern for others, such as Central Saanich, the only other jurisdiction with an independent police force. They fear losing the "no call too small" service they have become used to.

But does it make sense to provide that kind of service with highly paid police officers when there are pressing crime issues that affect everyone in the region? Are those "small calls" the best use of police time in the 21st century?

Pulling together a regional police force would not be easy. In addition to the four municipal forces, three RCMP detachments police the remaining parts of Greater Victoria. Costs vary widely, depending on the size of the community.

Some costs could rise because municipal officers are generally paid more than RCMP officers. When everyone is combined into one department, pay rates usually rise to match those of best-paid existing departments.

Reducing duplication would probably cut some costs, but it would take some serious number-crunching to assess the financial effects. Cost, however, is only one factor. Better policing should be the goal.

So far, the province has been willing to push integration but not regionalization.

Saanich's brave decision to open the door could be the beginning of productive discussions.

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