

Saanich and Victoria explore amalgamation, with advice from province

The mayors of Saanich and Victoria are encouraging citizens to get educated about amalgamation as the two municipalities explore the idea.

Saanich Mayor Richard Atwell and Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps are crafting a brief joint report for their respective councils after meeting with Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing representatives last week.

article continues below

The mayors requested a meeting to discuss the establishment and funding of a citizen's assembly on amalgamation and were told by the province what next steps they could take.

“We'll brief each of our councils in public on the meeting we had and ask them what next steps we want to take together,” Helps said.

Discussions about amalgamation have involved various configurations of municipalities in the capital region, but Helps said both councils have asked for a process involving Victoria and Saanich.

Sometimes, the first steps are the most important steps, Atwell said on Friday.

“In the 100 years of talking about amalgamation, there hasn't been much that's been an official step other than the referendums held back in the '50s and '60s,” he said. “So, this is an opportunity for this generation ... to play a role, and until there is an official role to play and an official process to participate in, I encourage residents to involve themselves in community discussions ongoing right now.”

In the Cowichan Valley, a 36-member citizens assembly was formed after residents voted to explore the costs and benefits of amalgamating North Cowichan with Duncan.

The assembly, made up of volunteers chosen by lottery, ultimately recommended merging the two municipalities. Residents are to vote in a binding referendum on the issue in June.

If a citizens assembly were struck for a potential Victoria-Saanich amalgamation, it would be after the October municipal election, Helps said.

But the ball is rolling. “We’ve achieved momentum where finally we’re on the path to get the answers we have always been looking for,” Atwell said.

The public wants the opportunity to take part in a process that identifies all stakeholders from the beginning and allows them to participate in the decision-making around amalgamation, he said.

Helps said whatever the process, it “needs to be fundamentally based in community input, citizen engagement.”

She said the municipalities will take clear steps in the next few months “and potentially in the next election, in terms of another question on the ballot — very specific but not binding. But we’ll let our councils give us direction because it has to be led by the councils.”

Atwell concurred: “If we achieve asking a referendum question on the next municipal ballot, we need to have the same question — the councils have to be in synch, the public needs to be in synch, the staff need to be in synch.”

Helps encouraged people to “get involved, get informed.”

Amalgamation Yes is hosting a meeting at Victoria High School from 6 to 9 p.m. on April 25. It will include both mayors and Peter MacLeod, the moderator of the Duncan-North Cowichan Citizens’ Assembly on municipal

amalgamation. The evening will be moderated by CBC Radio's Gregor Craigie.

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