

Saanich takes lead role in exploration of regional police

Saanich is receiving kudos for taking a regional leadership role that includes plans to start a new conversation on policing.

Council has agreed to have Mayor Richard Atwell write his mayoral counterparts in the region, inviting them to meet to explore the idea of a regional police force.

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Saanich, in considering recommendations of its governance task force, will call on the province to establish and fund a citizens assembly on amalgamation with all interested local municipalities.

“It was heartening to watch. They all participated and understand the need for regional leadership from a municipality,” said Amalgamation Yes president Shellie Gudgeon. Her group is a non-partisan, non-profit organization dedicated to bringing about a referendum on the issue of municipal amalgamation in the capital region.

“With an election looming in under a year, I think we will see some action,” said Gudgeon, who is a former Victoria city councillor.

“I think the provincial government will be receptive to this. I actually think they will embrace the suggestions that are put forth, especially on the policing side.”

In the capital region, only Saanich, Victoria, Oak Bay and Central Saanich maintain their own municipal police forces. All other capital region local governments contract police services through the RCMP.

Saanich created the governance review citizen advisory committee after 88

per cent of Saanich voters in the 2014 municipal election supported a review looking at Saanich's governance structure and its partnerships within the region.

Victoria supports regional policing and its mayor, Lisa Helps, welcomed Saanich taking the initiative.

She said it will build on police service integration efforts that have been in process for the past two years.

Local mayors have agreed on a terms of reference and the province is hiring a consultant to look at better integration of shared services, Helps said.

“We all don't need to do canine or we all don't need to do cyber-crime. We'll try to think of things that are specialized and not each have our own units ... after two years of discussion, everyone has agreed,” she said.

Helps said a logical first move would be to amalgamate the Victoria and Saanich police departments. With Victoria now policing Esquimalt and Oak Bay already contracting with Saanich for major crimes investigations, that would essentially cover the core municipalities, Helps said.

Oak Bay Mayor Nils Jensen said he supports current integration initiatives but is not as enthusiastic about regionalization.

“There are significant issues for smaller communities for a larger regional police force. Smaller communities end up paying significantly more for significantly less service,” Jensen said.

The Oak Bay Police Department has a “no call too small, we attend them all” policy that would be lost with regionalization, he said.

While the capital region has four municipal police forces and three RCMP detachments serving a population of 335,256, provincially there are 11 independent municipal forces and the RCMP handling policing.

Policing costs vary considerably depending both on the size of the municipality and whether it is serviced by its own police force or the RCMP.

Taxpayers in municipalities with their own police forces pay 100 per cent of policing costs — often accounting for about 30 per cent of municipal property taxes.

Municipalities policed by the RCMP operate under three provincial funding models. Those with more than 15,000 population pay 90 per cent of the cost, municipalities between 5,000 and 15,000 pay 70 per cent, and municipalities with under 5,000 population pay less than 50 per cent of the cost.

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