

Some Saanich councillors past ‘best before date’: review

Some Saanich councillors have passed their “best before date” and should be limited to two terms, says a governance review led by Saanich citizens.

The review was supposed to be Saanich’s nod to the regional amalgamation issue, but instead kicked the question back to the province. The 38-page report, which was leaked in advance of its public release on Monday, focused primarily on leadership issues within Saanich council.

The governance review citizen advisory committee recommended setting a two-term limit for councillors — a change it said “would permit fresh ideas and perspectives more frequently, and prevent what amounts to career politicians in Saanich.”

Mayor Richard Atwell supports term limits, but said three terms would be more reasonable.

Incumbents have an inherent advantage during elections because of name recognition and experience, Atwell said, so introducing term limits would create a more level playing field for a more diverse pool of candidates.

“To keep the government vibrant and to keep us focused ahead, we do need to have new people look at things a different way,” he said.

“Because the longer we spend in government as local politicians, the more interest we have in protecting the decisions that we’ve made in the past.”

When Coun. Judy Brownoff, who has been on council since 1994, saw the report’s reference to career politicians, she thought: “That’s an interesting way of describing experience and knowledge.”

She disagrees with the idea of term limits. “If the voters elect you back in,

you must be doing something right,” she said.

Committee chairman John Schmuck said the recommendation on term limits is not meant to be an indictment of long-serving Saanich councillors.

“Those people are dedicated people; they attend long meetings,” he said.

“The point we’re making is we need to have regular turnover of councillors to keep it vibrant.”

Esquimalt Mayor Barb Desjardins, who has served one term as a councillor and is in her third term as mayor, doesn’t support the idea.

“There are many people I know that have been on councils several terms and are still bringing forward amazing, wonderful ideas, as well as bringing forward a perspective of continuity of things that have been done in the past,” Desjardins said.

It’s up to individuals and voters to decide when enough is enough, she said.

“I think we all have to examine before we run if we’ve reached our best before date,” Desjardins said. “You wouldn’t want someone going forward that isn’t prepared to look at things differently and bring new ideas or review ideas.”

Longtime Victoria Coun. Geoff Young said he would prefer to see shorter council terms rather than a limit on number of terms served.

“The great thing about elections is you get a report card every few years,” Young said.

“I am becoming fairly firmly of the view that the four-year term is too long. I think the three-year term was perfectly adequate. I could even see going back to two years.”

Shorter council terms and the resulting more frequent elections provide a

kind of “check back” that is needed to make sure councillors stay in touch with the people, he said.

First-term Victoria Coun. Jeremy Loveday also had doubts about term limits.

“Term limits might be a blunt tool, and, although I think it’s an interesting discussion, it’s not an idea I would be able to endorse at this time,” Loveday said.

“I think we have to find some way to get new energy and new ideas onto councils. There is a real incumbency factor in elections, but, that being said, having a mixture of people on council, [including] some with the necessary governance experience, is very valuable.”

The committee solicited feedback from citizens through online surveys and public meetings; however, less than one per cent of Saanich voters responded.

The review was initiated after 88 per cent of Saanich voters in the 2014 municipal election supported a review looking at the District of Saanich’s governance structure and its partnerships within the region.

Other municipalities, such as Victoria and Esquimalt, asked taxpayers whether they favoured reducing the number of municipalities in Greater Victoria through amalgamation.

Many people told the Saanich committee that the ballot question was “ambiguous and designed to avoid directly addressing the amalgamation topic” and suggested a more specific question on the ballot in 2018.

The review called on the province to create and fund a citizen group on amalgamation. A decade after that is established, Saanich should create a second citizen-led governance review committee, it said.

The report recommends that Saanich “be receptive to any initiatives for the creation of a regional police force.”

Victoria police have long championed a regional police force, but such a move has faced pushback from smaller departments.

The B.C. NDP government said in August that the amalgamation of police departments and municipalities in Greater Victoria is not a priority.

Atwell said that doesn’t surprise him.

“The province has looked at it from a political angle, whether it’s going to win them or lose them votes,” he said. “I think it’s perceived as a vote loser.”

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