

Do special roles and obligations really differentiate Victoria and Saanich?

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Some critics of a possible Saanich – Victoria merger argue that each municipality is special, and residents risk losing their unique values and responsibilities. Some even argue that their residents are more committed to preserving the values and characteristic that make Greater Victoria a special community. And others even go so far as to talk about the “death of Saanich”.

Lets take a look at this. Consider the natural features, urban and cultural assets treasured by residents in various neighbourhoods, and their expectations that their council will take special steps to provide and protect. Residents call for, and support, regulations and funding measures designed to protect those features and values.

Because of its much larger physical size and population, Saanich has urban and suburban neighborhoods as well as a large rural area. The latter is comprised of both forests and farmland. To protect this rural character, Saanich has taken special measures to define an urban containment boundary to prevent the expansion of residential areas, i.e. urban sprawl. The Saanich Official Community Plan (OCP) designates and protects these areas. Furthermore, farmland parcels are protected by inclusion within the British Columbia Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). It is important to note that the ALR is the legal framework that protects certain farmland in British Columbia from subdivision, whereas the Saanich OCP is a policy document with no legal enforcement.

And when Matsqui amalgamated with Abbotsford in 1994, over 60% of Abbotsford was, and remains, within the ALR.

The OCP also designates protection of a major watershed, Colquitz Creek, with headwaters in Elk/Beaver Lake Regional Park (CRD).

Furthermore, Saanich protects and offers public access to popular natural areas such as the Swan Lake and Christmas Hill Nature Sanctuary, Mount Tolmie Park, Cadboro-Gyro Park, and Mount Douglas Park.

Currently Saanich has numerous sites where mixed-use urban development can accommodate significant growth in increased population. Examples include Tillicum and University Heights areas.

In contrast, urban Victoria is fully built out and has fewer undisturbed natural areas to protect. Any growth in population can only be absorbed by means of increased residential density. Several commercial and retail sites are being re-developed as multiple use, e.g. the downtown core, Cook Street Village, Quadra Village, and Vic West.

The City of Victoria is the historical heart of the CRD with over 150 years of settlement, and has taken several steps to protect valuable natural, heritage and cultural assets. This legacy gives Victoria its national and international identity as an attractive tourist destination and makes Victoria unique among all other Canadian cities.

First, it has the seashore – a scenic and economic feature seen from land and sea. Residents of the CRD and visitors treasure the extensive Dallas Road waterfront and adjacent Beacon Hill Park. And the Inner Harbour is an indelible part of the economic and social fabric of downtown.

Second, as the focus of early settlement there is a legacy of historic buildings such as Government House, Craigdarroch Castle, Crystal Gardens, the Empress Hotel, Chinatown and several cathedrals. Numerous residential and commercial buildings are designated heritage buildings and benefit from tax concessions. The Province of British Columbia Legislative Buildings and the Royal BC Museum are prominent features of the Inner Harbour.

The City of Victoria Council and residents are strong champions and supporters of public measures to preserve heritage buildings and maintain a pedestrian character of downtown. Ships Point, Fisherman's Wharf, Bastion Square, Market Square, and Centennial Square all serve as public gathering places and adjacent streets are the focus of numerous parades and festivals.

Additionally, residents and visitors to the City are well aware of the special effort to beautify city streets with flower baskets and seasonal festive street lighting decorations. In particular, the city incurs considerable costs to maintain Beacon Hill Park, the waterfront and community facilities such as Save on Foods Memorial Arena (SOFMA), the Royal Theatre, Victoria Art Gallery, and Victoria Convention Centre – all attractions to serve both residents and tourists.

These places don't belong to Victoria residents; they are representative of the natural, social and cultural features valued by the broader urban community and shared by all residents of the CRD.

Residents of Greater Victoria collectively love the urban amenities that we share with a common mailing address. At the same time, we particularly identify with local neighbourhoods and live – not in Victoria or Saanich – but in Fernwood, James Bay, Rockland, Royal Oak, Quadra Village, Cadboro Bay, Cordova Bay, Cook Street Village, etc. Each neighbourhood has its distinct features, amenities, and services, often defined by local parks and community schools. These are identified in the OCPs and more particularly in Local Area Plans (LAP).

So the lessons are evident: residents of Victoria and Saanich BOTH treasure the character of our city and the bucolic rural lands around it, and insist that both Councils provide regulatory and financial measure to protect those places and assets that make the city special.

A merger will not in any way effect these designations, nor suffer a loss of our collective identity. A new unified Council will be obligated to protect those values.

