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Les Leyne: Despite MLAs' advice, regional police force a long way off

Committee of MLAs has zero power to do anything with their recommendations.

Les Leyne about 8 hours ago

“Amalgamate south Island police.”

An all-party committee of MLAs uttered the words in an unanimous report. Moved, seconded, carried.

Right then. We're on the way. All that's left is to design a Greater Victoria Police Department logo and start enjoying all the efficiencies and savings.

If only it was as simple as that. The committee took almost two years to cover all police issues in B.C., an indication of the time frame these big reform ideas can take. There was heightened anxiety about police conduct at the time, related to accusations of systemic racism and police involvement in mental health and addiction calls. So the committee was designed – with the best of intentions – to function as a sponge. It soaked up all the complaints and delved into all the other longstanding issues to illustrate that the government was concerned about them.

But it has zero power to do anything about them. Its only job was to listen and make recommendations. The legislative library is full of similar reports that governments have received and filed over the years.

Still the backbench NDP MLAs and opposition critics who did the work deserve credit for using their imaginations. They were urged to be bold, and they were.

The biggest idea is to start a new provincial police force to replace all the RCMP detachments in B.C. In terms of policy recommendations, that's the most audacious moonshot concept in ages. It will take a year just to digest the idea, particularly the off-hand reference that “such a move will have fiscal considerations for provincial and local governments.” Translation: A provincial force would cost a fortune.

More pertinent to Greater Victoria in the here and now is the regional amalgamation idea. Specifically, it recommends “amalgamating police services on a regional basis where there are opportunities to address fragmentation, ensure equitable access to policing and public safety, and improve efficiency and effectiveness.”

The report specifically recommends it for the south Island. The capital is the shining opportunity, there for the taking. Five separate municipalities with four separate police departments (plus a military one) that are historically entrenched in a region that

outgrew that policing template decades ago. Three RCMP detachments serving eight more municipalities. There are some integrated units, but they are eroding, not growing.

The only big step taken in the direction of common sense was the Victoria-Esquimalt merger 19 years ago. It was supposed to be the soft launch of a much bigger reorganization. But the inordinate level of bickering stalled out any subsequent moves.

The MLAs on the committee ran through a list of problems associated with jurisdictional issues and, as far as the capital is concerned, you can tick off every one as applicable.

“Difficulties associated with having police services structured according to municipal boundaries given that crime does not respect these boundaries. This has led to gaps in communication and administration as well as fragmented service delivery.”

Amalgamation would provide consistency in service delivery, says the report, and improve efficiency and effectiveness when it comes to services that are highly technical, expensive and specialized.

It would share resources throughout a region and improve equitable access and first response times. “In addition, regionalization can offer a career path for officers to remain in community which also enables ongoing, meaningful community connections.”

The recommendation responds directly to submissions made by Victoria and Esquimalt mayors Lisa Helps and Barb Desjardins, as well as Victoria Police Chief Del Manak.

He urged the province to take a leadership role in fixing the “inefficient and unfair” status quo.

One thing that fosters hope this idea will go somewhere is the environment in which it lands. The report comes down just as the wider amalgamation study in Victoria and Saanich is flickering back to life after a pandemic timeout.

The provincial government last month matched the \$250,000 that Victoria and Saanich put up, as mandated by voters three years ago to fund a citizens assembly that will scrutinize the idea.

So there is \$750,000 available for a serious, impartial study of the concept, which will start after municipal elections in October.

Policing is the first topic whenever amalgamation comes up. The committee report is a solid endorsement for the citizens to consider when they assemble.