

Victoria, Saanich councils meet today to discuss amalgamation question

The mayors of Victoria and Saanich and their councils meet Tuesday to consider a referendum question on amalgamation, undaunted by Duncan's decision on the weekend to reject such a union with North Cowichan.

On Saturday, voters in North Cowichan voted 59 per cent to amalgamate with their southern neighbours.

article continues below

However, in Duncan, 68 per cent of voters were against the initiative, killing the idea.

That result does not affect the Victoria-Saanich question, according to the Saanich and Victoria mayors.

Regardless of the outcome, the citizens had their vote "and there's some finality to that — it's good for democracy," said Saanich Mayor Richard Atwell.

"It's not relevant to us. We have to give our citizens a chance to have their say — that's what matters here."

Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps said Duncan and North Cowichan voters have spoken and her only concern was the low participation. "I was very surprised at the low voter turnout, only 30 per cent of people in Duncan."

For Victoria and Saanich, the mayors will recommend each municipality put the same referendum question on the Oct. 20 municipal election ballot.

Their suggestion: "Are you in favour of establishing a citizens' assembly to explore the costs, benefits and disadvantages of the amalgamation

between the District of Saanich and the City of Victoria?”

The format for the joint committee meeting, at the Capital Regional District boardroom tonight at 7 p.m., will allow citizens three minutes each to address the councils.

Victoria’s mayor wants it to be clear that the recommended question is about whether to explore the pros and cons of amalgamation, not a vote whether to do it. “I really hope that the Oct. 20 vote isn’t seen as for or against amalgamation,” she said.

“What happened in Duncan and North Cowichan is a good example of that. Their citizens’ assembly recommended amalgamation and their voters decided not to.”

Helps sees the possible vote on Oct. 20 as a chance for people to support a citizens’ assembly to explore costs, benefits and disadvantages of amalgamating Saanich and Victoria.

In the 2014 municipal elections, eight of 13 capital region municipalities put some sort of question about amalgamation on the ballot.

Victoria residents voted 80 per cent in favour when asked: “Are you in favour of reducing the number of municipalities in Greater Victoria through amalgamation?”

Saanich residents voted 88.5 per cent in favour when asked: “Do you support council initiating a community-based review of governance structures and policies with Saanich and our partnerships within the region?”

Saanich followed up by establishing a citizen advisory committee, which made several recommendations, including calling on the province to fund a citizens’ assembly on amalgamation with interested municipalities and to hold referendum on the possibility.

In a report, Atwell and Helps noted that the Duncan-North Cowichan citizens' assembly could serve as a model for Saanich and Victoria.

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