

Victoria, Saanich councils to ponder referendum question on amalgamation

Joint meeting Tuesday to set sights on autumn ballot

Victoria and Saanich councils will meet Tuesday in a special joint committee meeting to consider a referendum question on amalgamation.

Saanich Mayor Richard Atwell and Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps are recommending each municipality put the same referendum question on the Oct. 20 municipal ballot.

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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?”

Saanich councillors this week agreed to a joint meeting, to be held at the Capital Regional District boardroom June 26 at 7 p.m., and to a format that will allow citizens three minutes each to address the councils.

However, some stressed that public input should be received before any proposed ballot question is considered.

“Maybe our public might say: ‘We don’t want this in the question,’ or: ‘We want you to put how much money this is going to cost us,’ ” said Coun. Judy Brownoff.

Coun. Colin Plant agreed, saying: “I just think there is merit to not putting a question out before we’ve heard public input.”

Atwell said the proposed question he and Helps drafted is just a suggestion.

“Our intention was that the discussion around this would happen at that joint meeting,” Atwell told his council Monday, noting that the recommended question stems directly from an earlier council decision to set a ballot question.

“The decision has already been made to set a ballot question,” he said. “How that actual question ends up landing is going to depend on 18 people getting together and coming to a majority agreement between the two councils.”

Victoria councillors will consider the report Thursday.

Helps called the joint meeting “exciting,” but noted that any decision made will still have to be ratified by each of the councils.

“The question is clear so, hopefully, we’ll get through next Tuesday and have the majority of both of our councils support the question,” she said. “Then it’s up to the public on Oct. 20 whether they want to pursue this any more.”

In the 2014 municipal election, 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 go to referendum on the possibility.

In their report, Atwell and Helps note that the Duncan-North Cowichan Citizens' Assembly on Municipal Amalgamation, which led to this weekend's referendum in those communities, can serve as a model for Saanich and Victoria.

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