

Victoria, Saanich unite to craft ballot question on amalgamation

A ballot question could read something like: “Do you support spending time and resources to explore the costs and benefits of the amalgamation of Saanich and Victoria through a citizens assembly and technical analysis?”

Victoria and Saanich councils will hold a joint committee meeting to craft a question on amalgamation to be put on ballots for the Oct. 20 municipal elections.

As their Saanich counterparts did Monday, Victoria councillors on Thursday unanimously endorsed holding the meeting.

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Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps and Saanich Mayor Richard Atwell recommended their councils hold the meeting after having met with B.C. Ministry of Municipal Affairs officials to discuss what steps would be needed to set the stage for amalgamation discussions.

The idea is to kick-start a citizens assembly process to explore the pros and cons of a possible amalgamation.

“It’s not pro-amalgamation. It’s not anti-amalgamation. It’s to deliberate about shared values, shared histories, shared goals, challenges, differences and to come up with recommendations on how to best proceed,” Helps said. “I strongly feel this is the way to go.”

The first step in that process, Helps said, is to hold the joint meeting and

decide on a ballot question both municipalities can place on their ballots.

In their joint report, Atwell and Helps said the advice they received from ministry staff is that any process leading to amalgamation should include these elements:

- Must be thorough and objective from start to finish.
- Public engagement is key.
- It's the role of local government with experienced consultants to design, host and steward the process.
- An independent technical analysis should be done in tandem to analyze costs and benefits.

Helps said a ballot question could read something like: “Do you support spending time and resources to explore the costs and benefits of the amalgamation of Saanich and Victoria through a citizens assembly and technical analysis?”

Coun. Marianne Alto said the process does not anticipate any outcome. “I think this is a very sensible way forward. It's easy. It's transparent. It's very clear on what it is that we're hoping to do,” Alto said.

Councillors Pam Madoff and Charlayne Thornton-Joe said it's important that an exploration of costs and benefits is not limited to finances.

“I would feel more comfortable if it was costs, benefits and drawbacks or something [like that],” Thornton-Joe said. “There are pros and cons, and we need to explore all of them.”

Coun. Jeremy Loveday said having the same question on the ballot for both Victoria and Saanich is key to the process.

“I do think that we received a very strong mandate from our constituents to

move forward with these kinds of discussions and I think a citizens assembly is a good format to have a citizen-led process that then guides whoever is the council at the time to make these decisions moving forward,” Loveday said.

When Saanich councillors discussed the issue on Monday, they also emphasized that the process they were endorsing was meant to seek information, and did not presuppose support for amalgamation.

Citing advice from the Ministry of Municipal Affairs, Atwell said: “They were very clear on the fact that a clear mandate from residents was essential to doing anything and that this [input] was not going to just take place once, it was likely to take place several times.”

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