

Catherine Holt: Businesses have questions for candidates

Local governments have more influence in our daily lives than any other level of government. They shape our homes, businesses, neighbourhoods and environment. And though municipal elections are notorious for low turnouts, it's vital for all of us who care about our community to help choose who will represent us for the next four years.

The Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce is doing its part to help you parse the mayoral candidates in your municipality.

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We have sent a list of questions to everyone who might occupy the top spot on their local council. Here are the questions, and why we chose them.

Question 1: Will you narrow the gap between business and residential property taxes?

Businesses are burdened by property taxes that grow at a faster rate than residential taxes. They are now between three and six times higher, depending on the municipality. Only Langford, Victoria and Oak Bay try to control the gap.

As senior levels of government offload costs onto municipalities — the employer's health tax being added to municipal payrolls, for example — councils squeeze more out of businesses by raising their property taxes.

The reason comes down to votes: Businesses don't have them and residents do. Taxation without representation has led to revolutions in other places.

We don't want that — we just want to help businesses survive by having

them pay the same amount for the same service as residents.

Question 2: Do you support improving transportation through regional governance, funding, planning and delivery?

From commuting from the West Shore to downtown parking, transportation transcends local borders. All 13 municipalities stumble over each other trying to make our transportation work. The bus is the only functional transportation service we have because it's run by its own regional commission. We need the same thing for all transportation management.

Without it, things are only going to get worse.

Question 3: Do you support a citizens' assembly process that empowers the public to decide whether to reduce the number of municipalities in our region?

Saanich and Victoria have agreed to ask their voters this question, which is a tentative step toward creating a bigger and better municipality — a win-win outcome. If voters agree to the idea, a citizens' assembly takes the process out of the hands of politicians and staff with a self-interest in maintaining the status quo. If the citizens' assembly recommends a merger, voters would still have to formally approve.

There is more than enough evidence that combining Saanich and Victoria would create a great new municipality with more resources and a higher profile. We like to call it better governance through fewer governments.

The cost of the process is estimated to about the same as one latte per voter.

We think it's worth it.

Question 4: Businesses in Greater Victoria are having trouble attracting and retaining employees due to the lack of affordable housing. What would you

do to help solve this problem?

This is perhaps the biggest issue facing employers in our region and one of the greatest risks to our long-term economic health. Greater Victoria is a desirable place to live, work and visit. We have done well to attract the best and the brightest, and our tech sector continues to blossom. We are a world-class tourist mecca, and our public-service workers provide a bedrock for an economy that has helped turned real-estate investment into a primary industry.

However, there is a flip side to our success. The average salary no longer buys the average home. We need lots of creative non-market solutions that detach the idea of home from the idea of wealth creation.

Question 5: What would you do to improve the relationship between municipalities in our region and the provincial and federal governments?

Victoria is the seat of British Columbia's government, which potentially gives local politicians tremendous access to the levers of provincial power. And few major infrastructure projects get off the ground without financial support from Ottawa. We need politicians who know how to work those levers to ensure the region gets its fair share of investment.

Question 6: Do you support secure and long-term funding for tourism marketing and sales through the Municipal and Regional District Tax system?

We're asking the last question on behalf of our community partners at Destination Greater Victoria. The chamber has long recognized the value of the tourism sector to our region. In fact, the local tourism bureau started as a committee of the chamber. We want to know if candidates are committed to providing long-term support for tourism through the lucrative revenue provided by the Municipal and Regional District Tax paid by visitors to our region.

As the answers come in, we will post all of them on our fresh new website at victoriachamber.ca. Make sure to visit, read the answers and please vote on Oct. 20.

Catherine Holt is the CEO of the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce.

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