

Catherine Holt: Citizens' assembly is right approach to explore amalgamation

When residents of Victoria and Saanich head to the polls this fall, they're likely to have an unusual opportunity to vote for a better future. Not in the form of a candidate, at least not yet, but in the form of a question asking if they want to start down the road of amalgamating the two municipalities.

This is a great development for our region. Remember the Capital Integrated Services and Governance Report released by the province last year? It describes 16 types of local government services by municipality, including what the service is, what parts are shared with other governments, the different ways it's delivered, what it costs per capita, how decisions are made and who pays.

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The authors could not identify a single municipal service that is provided the same way for the same cost across this region. That's not good for citizens or for business.

The need for better governance through fewer governments has been a theme for some time here at the chamber. Victoria was incorporated in 1862. The chamber was established in 1863. I'm going to assume things were well aligned until 1906, when Saanich and Oak Bay were incorporated. Chamber lore has it that that's when the chamber's campaign for amalgamation began.

And finally a ray of light, thanks to the citizens' advisory committee that recommended that Saanich invite all willing municipalities to participate in a citizens' assembly on amalgamation.

At first glance, the fact that only one other municipality — Victoria — stepped up might be disheartening. In reality, it has created a chance to get this done. We need the leadership of our region's two dominant municipalities. And we know from experience that the more municipalities involved, the more difficult it is to make a decision.

Let's start with two. We can always add more later — or not. It's a big win either way.

Between them, Saanich and Victoria make up more than half the population of our metropolitan area. They have the bulk of our region's businesses and the largest tax bases, police services and municipal services. These are highly integrated communities, and it's not difficult to imagine them as a single city. In fact, most citizens don't pay much attention to where one ends and the other begins, as they go back and forth.

Together, they would be a magnificent new metropolis with the size and clout to compete for funding and opportunities out of reach of either one, and the combined resources to provide an even better level of public service.

Of course, change is never easy and few issues are as close to home — quite literally — as transforming the community in which we live.

We have current evidence that a citizens' assembly can work because it was used last year by North Cowichan and Duncan, a region that has also had a protracted dance with amalgamation. A civic lottery conducted by Canada Post ensured the assembly was made up of a broad cross-section of residents who reflected the area's population.

The process was well-defined, with the 36-member assembly spending six of their Saturdays diving deep into the issues over the course of four months. In the end, the group emerged with a clear recommendation to strengthen both municipalities by amalgamating.

It was a credible process and outcome because it was taken out of the hands of those with an interest in the status quo and placed in the hands of engaged citizens.

With the mayors and councils of Saanich and Victoria publicly supporting a citizens' assembly, we have an incredibly rare window of opportunity to explore the public's interest in building a remarkable core city for our region.

The single most critical factor will be to avoid any sense that the outcome creates a winner and a loser, but rather a great new municipality that benefits everyone. The second critical factor will be patience. Experience shows that amalgamations need 10 years to work out the bugs and deliver on their promise.

Victoria has a jewel of a downtown, and Saanich is cherished for its neighbourhoods, parks and recreation. Combined, we will have a truly spectacular world-class city and a bigger voice on the national and international stage.

Municipal elections are Oct. 20, and we look forward to citizens of Saanich and Victoria having a clear question on the ballot offering them a chance to dream big.

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

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