

Don't sacrifice community identity

Re: "Making the case, once again, for amalgamation," comment, Sept. 14.

Catherine Holt, Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce CEO, discusses the need to amalgamate public-service delivery in the capital region, suggesting there are vast veins of redundancy just waiting to be mined, to the taxpayer's benefit. Noting the presence of four police chiefs, she asks, "How about if we use those four salaries to pay for one chief with a handful of top-drawer executive leaders to run one police department?"

Wow, can't you just feel the savings?

Amalgamation or service consolidation always feels right to business thinkers. Quantitative arguments are marshalled in support of efficiency and savings, never particularly specific or analytical, because their purpose is essentially emotional.

On the flip side, questions and suggestions about added social investment by the private sector are always blunted by business's claims about the priority of healthy profits and the never-ending costs of risk management.

Municipal identity is a fragile thing. We need always to be careful that what pushes us into the future doesn't push us out of the past. You start by "rationalizing" services, thinking you're eliminating redundancy and saving money. So often, though, you're lucky to save a thin dime while producing an incalculable social loss by increasing the distance and disconnection between services and the served through a regionalism that simply intensifies placelessness, reduces cultural memory and further disempowers the skills, responsibilities and arts of localism, of community.

Inattention and poor choice can irreversibly change a place: a large Victoria one minute, a small Vancouver the next.

And by the way, adjustments in public-service delivery are always being made, but as a matter of normal practice, not through an infatuation with market ideology and values.

Gene Miller

Victoria