

How Karen Harper could change Saanich council

Karen Harper's election to Saanich council could change its entire dynamic, possibly giving Mayor Richard Atwell another ally on a council that's often sharply divided.

Harper will be sworn in on Monday, replacing veteran councillor Vic Derman, who died in March at age 72.

She was endorsed by Atwell, which she said might have helped her win the Sept. 23 byelection with 2,340 votes.

Harper said time will tell whether that connection means Atwell will have another ally on a council, where he's often a minority voice.

An endorsement from Atwell appears on Harper's website. "Karen Harper is a highly qualified candidate for Saanich council," it says.

"She also brings a level-headed approach to decision making that involves citizens.

"Her track record of fiscal successes from her public sector work experience would be a valuable asset on Saanich council."

Harper said she is open to having alliances.

"I don't feel that I'm bound to say 'That's so-and-so's idea, so I can't support it,' " she said.

"I think that's part of the tension we've seen on council."

Harper said she will step down as a director for the grassroots Amalgamation Yes group, but will continue to advance her pro-

amalgamation stance on council.

“We need a proper [region-wide] study that reviews the pros and cons of amalgamation so we can present to the public what the various options might look like,” she said.

Harper has spent the past three years attending council meetings and making a list of what she thinks needs to change.

First, she said, homeowners need relief from higher costs of living and rising property taxes. A former member of Grumpy Taxpayer\$ of Greater Victoria, a budget watchdog organization that pushes for fiscal restraint, Harper said the municipality should conduct a review of services in order to find efficiencies.

“I’m not saying do away with services, I’m saying do it better,” said Harper, who worked with the B.C. Pension Corp. as vice-president and chief knowledge officer before retiring.

Harper has also promised to push to rescind the controversial Environmental Development Permit Area (EDPA) bylaw and start over from scratch.

She was endorsed by the Saanich Citizens for a Responsible EDPA, which opposes the bylaw.

It was passed in March 2012 and aims to protect sensitive ecosystems by restricting what more than 2,000 property owners can do to their properties. Only five per cent of private properties in Saanich are within or partially within the Environmental Development Permit Area; 52 per cent of the affected area is on public land, mostly parks.

Harper started looking into the issue when her mother found out her land was included in the permit area. She said properties were included based on a flawed mapping system.

She said she does not want to roll back environmental protections, but to find a more scientifically accurate way to protect environmentally sensitive properties and not “someone’s lawn and shrubs.”

Saanich council has hired a consultant for an independent review of the bylaw. A report is to be presented to council this month.

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