

Island Voices: Yes, Victoria can learn from Halifax on amalgamation

Recent letters to the Times Colonist have used Halifax as a comparison with Victoria when discussing councillors' stipends. The two cities are indeed similar in many ways. They are provincial capitals of comparable (regional) size, and both are older, coastal cities historically associated with the navy and shipbuilding.

Unlike Victoria, however, Halifax underwent a government-imposed amalgamation more than 20 years ago. Although it was not an overwhelmingly popular decision at the time, and certainly costlier than anticipated to implement, amalgamated Halifax today appears to be thriving.

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Its economy is growing as fast as Victoria's, its services from police to planning and waste collection are all fully integrated and it is financially healthy. It seems timely, therefore, to examine the contrasting governance structures in the two cities before comparing the relative salaries of their councillors.

Halifax Region Council comprises 16 councillors, each representing one of 16 districts into which the region is divided, plus a mayor elected at large. Neighbouring districts are grouped together to form three community councils composed of those councillors representing the five or six districts involved. It is the community councils that receive public input, consider local issues and make recommendations to the regional council, which then has final authority and accountability on all decisions made and legislation enacted.

Two striking differences from Victoria's model of governance are

immediately apparent. First, even though the Halifax region has a slightly larger population, just 17 elected representatives successfully manage its affairs, compared with 94 mayors, councillors and electoral-area directors governing the various parts of Greater Victoria.

Second, ultimate authority and accountability rests with the regional council in Halifax, unlike the CRD, where board members are primarily representing their own municipalities rather than the region, as we have seen with the failure of the board to reach decisions on sewage treatment, regional transport and planning, and the collapse of integrated services when some municipalities deem their contributions too costly.

Could the Halifax model be transplanted to the capital region? Certainly, electing a regional mayor and a single district councillor to represent one's locality is an attractive alternative to choosing half a dozen or more councillors from a long list of candidates, sometimes more by name recognition than knowledge of their qualifications.

It is arguable that the sheer number of elected officials in this region dilutes the level of fiscal expertise, planning knowledge and management skills available to councils, which are often dealing with "big city" rather than "small town" projects and problems.

Moreover, it should not be too difficult to divide the region into four or five community council areas that reflect modern reality rather than irrational municipal boundaries. A possible division is: West Shore; Victoria West (Vic West, Esquimalt, View Royal, Burnside, Tillicum); Victoria Centre (James Bay, Downtown, Fernwood, Oaklands, Quadra); Victoria East (Fairfield, Rockland, Oak Bay, Gordon Head); Peninsula (north of McKenzie/Blenkinsop/Mount Douglas).

If each "community" were then subdivided into five districts, on average, Victoria Regional Council would consist of 25 councillors and an elected mayor, somewhat more than Halifax but a huge reduction from current

numbers.

Some neighbourhood associations are concerned they would lose accessibility to local councils under amalgamation. But with each district covering just two or three of those neighbourhoods, they would have direct contact with their district councillor and through him or her to the local community council, which would take neighbourhood plans and proposals to the regional council for a final decision based on a regional perspective.

With the increased responsibility of managing a regional city of 400,000, a good case could then be made for raising councillors' salaries to the level of those in Halifax. And Victoria would finally have a mayor to represent us on the national stage, where we should be staking our claims alongside other Canadian cities of similar size, rather than competing among ourselves.

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