

Longtime force in Victoria festivals

John Vickers bids city farewell

John Vickers, the outspoken founder of three Victoria festivals and a major force behind the campaign to amalgamate the area's municipal governments, is leaving town.

Vickers is taking a job in Toronto in the security industry. He said he will load his dog into his car on Thursday, and drive to his new home.

“From a career perspective, it's a once-in a-lifetime opportunity,” he said in an interview.

“And the time was right for a change.”

Since arriving in Victoria in the late 1980s, Vickers has been the person behind:

- The Victoria International Buskers Festival, founded in 2011 but since sold to Kamloops. The Downtown Victoria Business Association started its own buskers festival in July.
- The Victoria International Chalk Festival, featuring sidewalk artists creating complex drawings on downtown pavements for five years.
- The Victoria International Kite Festival, which ran for three years along Dallas Road.

Vickers also started Pumpkin Art in 1997, with a display of his own carved pumpkins at his Fairfield home. The annual Halloween display moved to Government House before shifting to Oak Bay, where it is expected to be held this year.

Vickers was on the executive of Amalgamation Yes, formed in 2013. He was

a tireless force in speaking out for greater efficiencies in local government in Greater Victoria by combining at least some elements of municipal services.

After years of surveys and lobbying, Amalgamation Yes convinced eight Greater Victoria municipalities to ask voters amalgamation-related questions in the 2014 elections.

They all worded the questions differently but, with the exception of Oak Bay, most voters were in favour of amalgamation, increased co-operation or studies.

Vickers said he leaves Victoria with no hard feelings. He said he has lived in Toronto before and is well prepared for the change. Also, he said, Toronto is closer to his native New Brunswick, where he hopes to return one day.

“I am very grateful to have served in this area,” he said.

Vickers expressed hope that the kite festival could start up again. Last year, the festival drew more than 800 children and their families who built and flew kites at Clover Point.

Shellie Gudgeon, a former Victoria councillor and the new spokeswoman for Amalgamation Yes, said she believes Greater Victoria’s fragmented local government ultimately defeated Vickers.

Whether it was a buskers festival or chalk art on the sidewalks, his efforts would always run into some agency, a board, a local association or a bylaw, she said. Powering through all that just rubbed some people the wrong way.

Also, forcing local government officials to justify how they do things has offended some people.

Gudgeon said she is saddened to think Greater Victoria, with more logical and coherent local government, might have been able to better channel someone like Vickers with less friction.

Nevertheless, Gudgeon said the region has done well by Vickers and it has been lucky to have had him as a citizen.

“John and I had different opinions on many things but I really applaud where he got us to,” she said. “Victoria is a better place because of him.”

“We need more people like John in our city,” Gudgeon said.

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