



February 22, 2021 Press Release

THE CITIZENS ARE THE ELECTORATE – YOU CAN'T IGNORE ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER

As chairpersons of Amalgamation Yes for over a decade we have collectively led a campaign that “13 is too many” and “better is possible”.

Municipal elections in both 2014 and 2018 confirmed voter support for independent public review to study options and choices for municipal reform. Several public opinion polls, including an Angus Reid Poll in June 2014, have confirmed strong public support across the Capital Regional District but our elected officials continue to ignore the wishes of their residents.

The “Capital Integrated Services and Governance Initiative” (CISGI) that occurred as a direct result of the 2014 local elections, purposely ignored any study of Structural reform or Amalgamation possibilities, because the Mayors at that time drove the Terms of Reference of that study (See the Executive Summary, which stated that “This initiative is not about amalgamation”). The CISGI report contained some “opportunities” for further cooperation, but most Councils did not even “table the report”. The only opportunity for general public input was through the website “Placespeak” and only few people participated. Thus, the underlying challenges of municipal fragmentation were never given proper consideration.

We express our concern and disappointment at the ongoing failure and delay by the Councils of Victoria and Saanich to follow through upon the direction of their electorates. We remind them that in municipal election of 2018 your residents approved funding to implement a Citizens’ Assembly process. After almost 30 months no proposal has yet been submitted as per Provincial requirements outlined in the Minister of Housing & Municipal Affairs letter of instructions dated March 8, 2018.

After the referendum, it took over eleven months of tedious deliberations for both Councils to finally agree on joint Terms of Reference for a Citizens’ Assembly, when Saanich Council gave final approval on January 28, 2020. It was not until April 20, 2020 that, after Mayor Fred Haynes proposed a failed motion to cancel the Citizens Assembly, that Saanich Council finally directed senior municipal staff to meet with Victoria officials to prepare a joint application to the Province. After 9 months no progress has been to submit this work plan to either Council nor to the Province!

It is true that COVID has limited opportunities for the Citizens’ Assembly to actually begin public deliberations, however this is not sufficient reason to delay OR worse to propose diversion of funding. In this “virtual” era many council proceedings have continued, yet they continue to ignore what the public voted on. Councilors must recognize their duty to act on behalf of the electorate and allow the Citizen’ Assembly process to take its course.

We remind everyone that several preparatory steps are necessary prior to implementation of this independent assessment of the prospects and consequence of possible amalgamation that can be started now! These include:

- Preparation of submission and formal application to Province to confirm funding and work plan for implementation of the Citizen' Assembly process.
- Prepare Request for Proposal (RFP) to contract with a "Consultant" to independently compile and assess a detailed overview of "*costs, benefits and disadvantages*" and likely impact of a merger possible.
- The corollary of this would be to give notice to municipal staff to compile and provide the necessary data set i.e. taxation, revenue, budgets, debt and staffing for a technical assessment.
- To issue second RFP to select an independent "Facilitator" responsible to advertise and recruit a pool of 75 residents to serve as members of the Citizens' Assembly and to facilitate and Chair their public proceedings and prepare final report, once it is deemed safe to do so.

Completion of these preparatory steps would likely match timing later this year, when Dr Henry may modify restrictions on public gatherings so that the Citizens' Assembly could readily begin public hearings.

We request that the new Minister of Municipal Affairs take administrative steps to remind local Councils of the requirement for a formal application as necessary to implement the Citizens' Assembly process as approved by their residents.

We despair that elected officials are able to simply ignore the will of their voters and again we ask residents to make their expectations known. It is time for your voices to be heard. A Citizens Assembly process is the most democratic means of objectively examining the case for or against merging Saanich and Victoria.

Do some Council members fear the outcome because a Citizens Assembly would be beyond their reach?

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Further we would reflect that recent events and dynamics of local politics should remind elected Councilors that change is the air and municipal elections are only 18 months away.

Signed by:

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(Reference and source documents can be located on our web site www.amalgamationyes.ca)

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