

Province moves on from amalgamation after service-sharing study

The province doesn't plan to study amalgamation in the capital region, saying it's satisfied with a report released Wednesday that reviews integrated services but requires no action.

In a letter sent to advocacy group Amalgamation Yes in advance of the election, the B.C. NDP criticized the B.C. Liberal Party for delaying the release of the integrated services report and committed to commissioning its own review of amalgamation.

Education Minister Rob Fleming, who represents Victoria-Swan Lake, said the government is focused on other priorities, including affordable housing, expanding transit and building infrastructure — not perfecting governance in the region.

“But we're certainly open to a discussion with local government leaders and citizens, once they've had a chance to digest the report, on any ideas that may be coming forward, whether it's improving the integration of policing or other ideas around, for example, transportation and how we can align decision-making,” Fleming said.

Fleming was speaking in place of Municipal Affairs Minister Selina Robinson, who was not available for an interview.

The \$95,000 review of integrated services was commissioned by the former Liberal government.

It followed the 2014 municipal election, in which 75 per cent of voters in eight of the 13 municipalities in the capital region said they supported the

study of some form of amalgamation.

The report, released Wednesday, describes how the 13 municipalities are already working together — as well as ways that they aren't.

It does not review amalgamation as an option.

“This is not a study of municipal amalgamation, although it is designed to provide information that could inform subsequent interest of some municipalities in discussions on amalgamation,” the report says.

Its recommendations include creating a “leaders forum” to discuss integration, using a standardized workbook to review potential service sharing and continuing initiatives that have been started, such as a shared 911 dispatch centre and South Island Prosperity Project.

Amalgamation Yes spokeswoman Shellie Gudgeon said she was happy to see existing problems affirmed in the report.

“It clearly, clearly confirms what the public has noted, which is that we are Dysfunction-by-the-Sea. There's no doubt — it spells out repeatedly throughout the report that we must do better,” she said.

But, she said, without requiring action, the report has no teeth.

“There's lots of suggestions, but other than growing government more, there's not much else. ... It is, relatively, a piece of fluff.”

The report highlights a number of areas where the region is not working together and where costs vary widely.

Transportation needs higher-level co-operation, it says. Currently, local governments, the Capital Regional District and the province work together on an ad hoc basis.

Another example is policing: The per capita cost is highest in Victoria at

\$574, in part because it carries the burden of the downtown core, it says. View Royal residents pay \$115.

Gudgeon said she wants to see incentives from the province to merge municipal services, as well as a comprehensive governance review.

“What the report is incredibly short on — which is very disappointing — is the fact that the current minister whose government promised us a comprehensive review, seems satisfied with this report,” Gudgeon said.

Langford Mayor Stew Young said he was happy the report didn’t require any action. The ad hoc method of working with neighbouring municipalities works, he said, since each municipality has different needs.

It’s unfair to make his neighbours in Metchosin and Highlands pay into sewer and water services that they don’t want, he said. And many services, such as policing, are already shared among West Shore communities. Plus, the idea of forming a leaders forum or designing a workbook is unnecessary bureaucracy, he said.

“My general take on this thing is that we’ve actually done a good job of integrating on the West Shore already. If there are ways and opportunities to do it, we don’t need a bunch of bureaucracy to tell us how to do it,” he said.

“I believe the best thing to do is have a good relationship with your neighbours and respect them.”

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