

Saanich and Victoria explore amalgamation

Saanich councillors have unanimously agreed to meet with their Victoria counterparts to discuss what, if any, question on amalgamation should be put on this fall's municipal election ballots.

The decision comes after Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps and Saanich Mayor Richard Atwell met with B.C. Ministry of Municipal Affairs officials to discuss what steps would be needed to set the stage for amalgamation discussions.

article continues below

“It was very key from the ministry's point of view that this be a very much locally driven process,” Atwell said.

“They were very clear on the fact that a clear mandate from residents was essential to doing anything and that this [input] was not going to just take place once, it was likely to take place several times.”

While several Saanich councillors said they supported the joint meeting, they cautioned that does not presuppose they would support amalgamation, but rather are simply seeking more information.

“I do think this is a process we need to go down and we should not be frightened of information,” said Coun. Fred Haynes, adding that the assumption should not be made that amalgamation is the better option. “The key for me is to satisfy myself and council satisfies itself that we are going to get the correct type of information to give us answers to the correct questions.”

Victoria councillors will decide Thursday on whether they favour holding the joint meeting with Saanich.

In their report, Atwell and Helps say the advice they received from ministry staff is that any process leading to amalgamation:

- Must be thorough and objective from start to finish.
- Public engagement is key.
- It's the role of local government with experienced consultants to design, host and steward the process.
- An independent technical analysis should be done in tandem to analyze costs and benefits.

“The advice we got from the province was deep, robust, clear, transparent public engagement process start with asking a question something like: ‘Do you support analyzing the costs and benefits of the amalgamation of Saanich and Victoria through the citizens’ assembly,’ ” Helps said.

“That will give us the mandate to spend public resources, according to the provincial staff.”

If a fall referendum is favourable in both municipalities a joint steering committee of elected officials and senior staff could be established to develop a citizen-led process and budget to study costs and benefits of amalgamation.

Eight of 13 local municipalities posed a variety of amalgamation-related questions on ballots for the 2014 municipal election.

Only in Oak Bay, where residents were asked if they favoured being amalgamated into a larger regional municipality, were voters against the idea (62 per cent said no).

Helps said she can understand why some people might be frustrated that some four years later the recommendation is for yet another question. But

the advice from the province is that this is the best process to move forward, she said.

“Yes, it’s frustrating that we’re asking another question but the provincial staff said unless we ask a clear question, we don’t necessarily have a clear mandate to spend public resources and I agree with them,” Helps said.

“The last question asked in Saanich was different than Victoria and both questions were very general,” Helps said.

In the Cowichan Valley, a 36-member citizens’ assembly was formed after residents voted to explore the costs and benefits of amalgamating North Cowichan with Duncan.

The assembly, made up of volunteers chosen by lottery, ultimately recommended merging the two municipalities. Residents are to vote in a binding referendum on the issue in June.

Meanwhile, the advocacy group Amalgamation Yes is sponsoring a town hall meeting at 6 p.m. today at Victoria High School to discuss the citizens’ assembly process. The session will feature Peter MacLeod, moderator of the Duncan-North Cowichan citizens’ assembly, and Abbotsford Coun. Patricia Ross.

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