

# Saanich looking to scrap study on amalgamation



A motion prepared for a special council meeting on Monday, signed by Mayor Fred Haynes, said the costs, strains and uncertainties caused by the COVID-19 pandemic mean amalgamating with Victoria can no longer responsibly be considered.

Photograph By ADRIAN LAM, Times Colonist

Saanich council appears to be getting ready to scrap its commitment to study municipal amalgamation.

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The motion recommends Saanich council write to the City of Victoria and the provincial government to say it will stop examining amalgamation until further notice. It's unclear when or if the work will start again.

Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps said she was "shocked" by the move, which she learned about from the news media Thursday.

"I actually feel like the rug has been pulled out from under me just a little bit," she said.

Helps said she understands that a citizens' assembly can't be convened to study amalgamation in the middle of a pandemic, but she believes there's plenty of time before the next election for the work to get done.

"I am prepared, and I know that council is prepared, to honour the wishes of our voters that we heard loud and clear in the 2018 municipal election," she said. "And if Saanich is not prepared to do that, then I guess we'll leave that to them."

Jim Anderson, chair of the Amalgamation Yes group that campaigned for municipalities to examine the issue, said councillors should agree to call the latest move a "deferment."

"The motion should be amended to include a commitment that the [amalgamation discussion] should go forward as quickly as possible in the foreseeable future," said Anderson, who is sympathetic to the strains the pandemic is putting on governments. He said it's understandable that Saanich wants to call a time out.

Amalgamation of the 13 municipalities and one electoral district on Southern Vancouver Island has been a controversial topic.

Those in favour cite efficiencies to be found with fewer administrative bodies. Those opposed complain amalgamation would diminish local control.

In the 2018 municipal elections, Victoria and Saanich residents voted in favour of spending up to \$250,000 each to establish a citizens' assembly to examine costs, benefits and disadvantages of amalgamation.

In a non-binding referendum, 67 per cent of Victoria residents and 57 per cent of Saanich residents agreed.

In January, the two councils agreed on terms of reference and how the issues would be studied.

In the end, the councils decided to hire consultants and convene a citizens' assembly of 75 people selected in a random lottery drawn from the 2016 census.

Efforts would be made to ensure an equal number of men and women, and proportionate representation from renters, homeowners, urban dwellers, rural residents and First Nations.

Any recommendations they put forward would be non-binding on either council.

The new motion says public-health recommendations against gathering in large groups make it impossible to convene an assembly of 75 people. The motion also suggests the \$250,000 set aside for the citizens' assembly be spent on other priorities.

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— With a file from Lindsay Kines

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