

Editorial: Creating citizens' assembly

It's a common human trait to believe that, in any disagreement: "If you just had more information, you would agree with me."

One can't help wondering if that is behind the push by two Victoria mayors to educate their citizens about amalgamation. Saanich Mayor Richard Atwell and Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps had a meeting with Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing representatives because they want to create a citizens' assembly on amalgamation.

article continues below

With some guidance from the ministry, they are off to their councils to talk about next steps.

This is not a new topic, but the mayors are right that the decades of debate have lacked solid understanding and hard facts. Many people feel passionately about the issue, but it comes more from the gut than from any evidence.

This time, the mayors are proposing to focus on amalgamation between their two municipalities, leaving aside the other possible permutations of local governance.

The idea of getting ordinary folks involved was tried in the Cowichan Valley, where 36 volunteers were chosen by lottery to make up a citizens' assembly to discuss amalgamating North Cowichan and Duncan. The assembly recommended amalgamation, and residents will vote in June.

Opponents of amalgamation will worry that just creating an assembly builds momentum in favour of one outcome. Nevertheless, if the members can assemble facts and figures and apply them to the local case, they will give both sides information they can use to argue rationally.

Maybe then we can arrive at a decision that everyone recognizes as legitimate.

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