

A-word conversation begins

DERRY McDONELL

Academics weigh in on the amalgamation question.

In November, voters throughout Greater Victoria said “yes” to studying some form of amalgamation in the Capital Regional District. Even in municipalities where the ballot question was either obtuse (Saanich) or clearly biased (Oak Bay), the overall result endorsed considering, at the very least, how greater service integration and cooperation among the 13 municipalities could benefit the region as a whole. North and Central Saanich, Sidney and Victoria went even further, endorsing a cost/benefit study of amalgamation itself.

Since then, the Province has promised support for any local initiative to research, gather and prepare public recommendations to the Province on the issue. The Minister for Community, Sport and Cultural Development, Coralee Oakes, told a March 10 breakfast meeting of local politicians and Amalgamation Yes organizers she is preparing a public announcement in April that will invite every municipality in the region to meet with her to discuss what steps they wish to take on the issue. She emphasized, however, that the Province itself would not—and under current legislation legally could not—draft nor implement any “top down” plan for amalgamation.

“I haven’t got the green light from cabinet to make any changes to the *Local Government Act*,” said Oakes. “We can do supportive work to assist local governments looking into it [and] we could possibly do a pilot project as well but we don’t [even] want to dictate what the study should look like. You should tell us, at the grassroots level, what you want to do.”

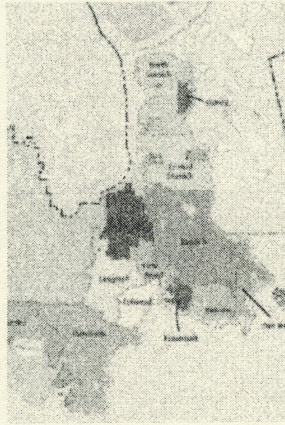
So exactly what have the local governments in the CRD done to respond to the November referenda and the Province’s response? Virtually nothing. In fact, Victoria City Council is the only municipality that has taken any public action so far, having drafted the letter to Minister Oakes that resulted in the March 10 breakfast meeting. Elsewhere, however, the silence has been deafening.

The only other public voice on amalgamation is coming from the volunteer-led Amalgamation Yes group, the same folks whose highly-organized work over the past two years led to the referenda in the first place—a fact that led to criticism from View Royal Mayor David Screech and others skeptical of amalgamation, saying any further study into it should not be led by a group with a clear bias on the issue.

For its part, Amalgamation Yes—since renamed Greater Victoria Conversation—says it’s concerned that far too much responsibility for developing and presenting local opinion in the region is being pushed down to volunteer groups like itself.

“Local governments in the CRD have made it clear they are not going to fund the study at the grassroots level,” organizer Shellie Gudgeon told Oakes. “That puts the onus on volunteers like ourselves and, frankly, we’re going to get burned out if that continues.”

Gudgeon would like to see the Province and municipalities encourage neighbourhood associations to get involved and take ownership of the grassroots level of the study—an idea Oakes said she’d have her staff consider as part of its consultation process.



CRD administrative boundaries

In the meantime, public debate on the pros and cons of amalgamation is already underway, at least in some quarters. On March 24, the Victoria Salon, a newly formed public interest group, launched itself into the amalgamation issue with a public debate at Camosun College that featured four speakers on the subject—two pro, two opposed—who managed to present a wide range of fact and opinion and left an interested audience with much to think about and further research to pursue.

For example, when UVic School of Public Administration Professor Jim McDavid cautioned against adopting amalgamation without a thorough “evidence-based” approach, taking into account local situations in the CRD, his UVic colleague, Professor Emmanuel Brunet-Jailly countered by noting that the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development) recently released a world-wide study of civic governments that provides vast amounts of data and analysis of how effectively, or ineffectively, regional governments in urban areas have performed, and why. “It’s available online now,” he added.

The point was augmented during the post-debate question period, when Amalgamation Yes volunteer John Vickers told the panel more than 300 amalgamations have taken place in Western Canada alone, including 25 in British Columbia, and more are planned. “And we haven’t heard of major complaints with any of them,” he said, adding, “There are clearly a lot of examples and models for us to examine if we want to look at them.”

The debate for and against focused on two central themes: representative regional government versus regional cooperation/service integration, and top-down implementation versus grassroots-led implementation. Speaking for the nay side, Oak Bay Councillor Tara Ney (who also is an associate professor at UVic’s School of Public Administration), along with Professor McDavid, argued that ongoing service integration, especially among police and fire services, was already providing a key regional benefit demanded by amalgamation proponents, and that while the CRD board of directors admittedly has had difficulty delivering major projects like regional sewage and waste management, many other worthwhile regional services and improvements have resulted from specific CRD commissions and committees. They contended that if the Province would simply give regional districts like the CRD more jurisdiction—specifically over regional development and transportation—municipal amalgamation wouldn’t be necessary.

The yea side, presented by Professor Brunet-Jailly and Amalgamation Yes spokesperson Lesley Ewing, noted that the absence of an effective regional governance structure is costing the region numerous opportunities for economic and social development and hindering the development of necessary infrastructure as well. “Greater Victoria’s population [350,000] is larger than that of at least seven of the official largest cities in Canada,” Ewing pointed out, “yet it has no representation on the national body that speaks for that large-city group. This is costing us the opportunity to share in federal cost-sharing programs.”

Focus presents: Triangle Healing

A Sports Hoop adds fun to your workout

ONE POINT on which both sides agreed was that the current procedure of having municipal councils in the region appoint directors to the CRD Board of Directors is a major flaw in its governance structure.

Professor Brunet-Jailly went further. "The OECD study looked at 263 municipalities in the world and concluded that 'forced' amalgamations work better than those created by 'bottom-up' consensus," he said. This is based on demonstrated outcomes, "such as reduced urban sprawl, reduced income/social inequity, better transportation planning, and economic growth."

The key to seeing the gap between the two approaches, he explained, is to evaluate governance models on performance effectiveness (results-based outcomes of services provided), rather than simply on efficiencies (i.e. cost containment). The latter is more commonly applied in North American municipalities than elsewhere, he said, and that, along with concurrent requirements for local-level sign-on to fiscal initiatives, has led to severe distortions. The most recent example is Ferguson, Missouri, where local courts and police were found to be focused solely on revenue-generation in order to make up for revenue shortfalls from other sources in the city, especially taxes.

Professor McDavid observed that, in fact, with its insistence on local approvals for regional initiatives (e.g., the current transit referendum taking place in Vancouver), BC's regional government structure is more similar to the US model than that of any other province in Canada. Councillor Ney also cited this requirement as the key reason the Scaterra project was stalled.

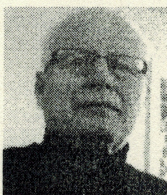
One point on which both sides agreed was that the current procedure of having municipal councils in the region appoint directors to the CRD board of directors is a major flaw in its governance structure. "There's a widespread public view that CRD directors are solely there to represent the interests of their own municipality, not those of the region," noted Lesley Ewing, adding, "This is more evident when large projects and/or major dollars are involved."

Professor Brunet-Jailly said "the CRD's poor reputation on major projects like sewage treatment is primarily due to a lack of public visibility," he said. "Unlike municipal councillors, these people are not seen to be accountable to the public. As a result, 'face-to-face' democracy at the CRD level doesn't exist."

Both sides agreed a switch to having CRD directors elected directly by their constituents would go a long way to rectify the current situation. Still to be worked out, however, would be the electoral and geographical boundary represented by each CRD director.

Another public debate is set to take place on April 21, when former BC Premier Mike Harcourt is slated to be the keynote speaker. It starts at 5 pm at the Victoria Conference Centre and reservations are required. You can register here: www.greatervictoriaconversation.ca

In the meantime, Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps says she is trying to arrange for another meeting with Minister Oakes to clarify the next steps in the consultation process. Stay tuned.



Derry McDonnell has been writing and editing since his UVic days in the 1970s. His career includes stints as Editor of *Monday Magazine*, publisher/editor of *BC Digest* and the first publisher of *Canadian HR Reporter*.

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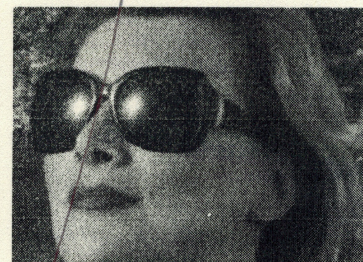
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Top: Eagle Eyes Sunglasses
Bottom: Sports Hoop