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District of North Vancouver pitches amalgamation

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The two North Vancouvers' mayors Darrell Mussatto (city) and Richard Walton (district) at the North Vancouver Chamber of Commerce Mayor's lunch. The the district is mounting a push to see the two governments amalgamated after 107 years apart. Photograph by: Mike Wakefield, North Shore News

The two North Vancouvers' mayors Darrell Mussatto (city) and Richard Walton (district) at the North Vancouver Chamber of Commerce Mayor's lunch. The the district is mounting a push to see the two governments amalgamated after 107 years apart. Photograph by: Mike Wakefield, North Shore News

The District of North Vancouver may try to join together what was torn asunder a century ago.

On Monday night council voted in favour of establishing an apolitical committee to investigate amalgamating the City and District of North Vancouver, as well as West Vancouver.

The move comes as Coun. Guy Heywood prepares to introduce a similar motion to City of North Vancouver council.

"We, of the North Shore communities, have to get away from this vulcanized system of government," said district Coun. Doug MacKay-Dunn, who brought the motion

forward.

Amalgamation could help to allay unsustainable increases faced by taxpayers as well as integrating planning departments across the North Shore, according to MacKay-Dunn.

MacKay-Dunn said he crafted the motion more than two years ago but hesitated to introduce it.

"At that time we were doing what we could to improve our shared services agreement with the city. We have not made as much progress as I would've hoped, and that's why I'm bringing this forward now."

If the motion is successful, an independent committee will examine the ramifications of consolidation, bringing their results to council in September. The question of amalgamation could become a referendum incorporated into the municipal elections scheduled for November, although several councillors said that was overly optimistic.

The debate could dissolve into an "election frenzy" of amalgamation campaigning, according to Coun. Robin Hicks.

Joining two or three communities presents numerous logistical complications, according to Hicks, who mentioned the amalgamation of Brunswick Beach and Lions Bay.

"Brunswick Beach became very unhappy because Lions Bay had some very large contingent utility works to do," he said.

However, while council was split on the best method to bring about amalgamation, they were united in the overarching concept.

"I do believe that amalgamation is an eventuality for our municipalities, we just share too much in common and there's too much at stake from a joint planning perspective," Coun. Mike Little said.

One of the reasons the city has resisted amalgamation may be based on false assumptions, according to Little.

"That's a common misconception out there — that the City of North Vancouver benefits from its density and the result is that they have lower taxes. They actually don't," he said, pointing out the district's current lower residential mill rate.

Coun. Roger Bassam agreed. "That should be the concern for the citizens of the city, is if they look at the financial information and their expenses are growing rather rapidly," he said. "It might be the reason why we don't want to get in bed with the city."

Putting amalgamation to the public through a referendum may take four years, Little said. That four-year plan could become tenuous without Coun. Heywood's support in the city. Heywood has said he will not run for re-election.

"My concern is that we are putting it back to a ball carrier that is not planning to be around for three of those four years," Little said.

Geography is forcing the district and city together, according to Bassam.

"If you live in the city and you want to get over a bridge, you've got to go through the district," he said. "If you want to go to the economic heart of the North Shore, it's in the city."

Living expenses are exacerbated by redundant municipal services, according to Coun. Lisa Muri.

"I think it's evident in neighbourhoods where young families aren't as prevalent as they were," she said. "We're probably a little rich on the politician side."

Muri said she frequently talks with local residents who are unsure if they live in the city or the district.

The two North Vancouvers have collaborated on the North Van Recreation Commission and the North Shore Emergency Management Office. However, the North Shore still has 28 councillors and five mayors serving a population of fewer than 200,000 living in Lions Bay, Bowen Island, and North and West Vancouver.

Muri compared that with Surrey, which has one mayor and eight councillors to oversee nearly double the population.

Several councillors suggested West Vancouver would not be interested in amalgamating, likening the combination of North and West Vancouver to oil and water.

The District of North Vancouver spends approximately \$960 in services per citizen, according to Little. West Vancouver spends more than \$1,400.

Mayor Richard Walton said he never met a district councillor or former mayor for the District of North Vancouver who didn't favour amalgamation.

"Up to this point the city hasn't expressed an interest to do so," he said.

Amalgamation would change North Vancouver's political culture, according to Walton. "Let's be real, in the event that there was an amalgamation, I think we'd find that the North Van city hall would be at 13th and Lonsdale, not up here at Queens," he said.

Former district mayor and current city Coun. Don Bell attended the meeting.

There have been 13 previous studies on amalgamating the two North Vancouvers over the last century, according to Little.

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