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AMALGAMATION BENEFITS APPARENT IN MANY AREAS

Canada has a long history of successful municipal mergers, writes John Vickers.

I the would authors be happy to Canadian to introduce amalgamated communities that are fiscally better off now. JOHN VICKERS, vice-chair, Amalgamation Yes

Sitting here in Victoria, land of 91 mayors and councillors with a population less than Surrey, I find it atrocious to see a broad statement such as “the research is clear — municipal amalgamations are not a reliable way to achieve more efficient government.” This statement, by academic Wendell Cox in the July 2 edition of The Vancouver Sun, flies in the face of successfully amalgamated communities across this province, this country and the Commonwealth.

While municipal mergers can be protracted affairs, B.C. has a long history of successful amalgamations. There have been 20 amalgamations in the province since 1927, when South Vancouver and Point Grey joined. The last major amalgamation in 1995 between Abbotsford and Matsqui proved reliable beyond measure, as politicians and locals will attest.

Cox claims Robert Bish is “North America’s leading expert of municipal government organization,” but fails to mention Bish has for years been a personal advocate against amalgamation. Many academics disagree with Bish’s views, including his successor at the University of Victoria. Bish favours an approach to municipal governance akin to U.S. communities, rather than the traditional Commonwealth community building approach.

The difference is like having a restricted focus on what is just beyond your front door rather than on the wider community, the latter maintaining a greater balance of social equity.

Focusing on social equity and fiscal responsibility through efficiencies gained by merging municipalities is prevalent across the Commonwealth. This year, one Australian state government moved to amalgamate over 30 municipalities. It makes one shed a tear for the doom that awaits them all if one were to believe the conclusions of some academics. The Toronto amalgamation ultimately proved successful, according to a Toronto Star editorial (Dec. 23, 2014) that stated York, the poorest of the city’s former municipalities, had more parks, playgrounds and other community benefits thanks to the benefits of amalgamation.

For further positive evidence, call the provincial federation of municipalities on Prince Edward Island, which produces an “Amalgamation Tool Kit” to assist communities looking at amalgamation based on previous successful mergers in that province.

Seventy-five per cent of voters in Greater Victoria said yes to some form of amalgamation review in the 2011 election.

The provincial government promised to deliver an amalgamation study, which has yet to materialize, and the province appears to be dismissing amalgamation.

A \$140,000 study on amalgamation of the municipalities of Duncan and North Cowichan is presently underway. Ten or more amalgamations are anticipated over the next few years in Nova Scotia alone.

Which brings us back to Victoria.

Why is the B.C. government not acceding to the democratic wishes of the residents of Greater Victoria to conduct an amalgamation study? Our group, Amalgamation Yes, takes no position on the level of Capital Region amalgamation, but does support an in-depth regional study, the results of which would be brought back to the electorate.

Lastly, I wish to address the fallacy perpetuated by certain academics that amalgamations don't result in more efficiently run communities. The article claims that academics have been waiting for evidence that amalgamations save money since 1955. I would be happy to introduce the authors to Canadian amalgamated communities that are fiscally better off now than they were before amalgamation. The most positive cash flow community in the country is amalgamated Mississauga. For those who feel bigger municipal government is essentially bad and that fragmented governance is necessarily better, consider the following:

Halifax and Victoria are two provincial capitals on the water, home to Canada's east and west coast Pacific fleets respectively. They are fairly similar in size, with Halifax at 390,000 residents and Victoria region's with about 350,000.

The Halifax Regional Municipality has one amalgamated, directly elected regional council. The Victoria region has 13 elected councils, plus the CRD board. Let me ask you: Which capital has its act together?

My hope is that Premier Christy Clark will finally come around and let Capital Region residents have their amalgamation study as promised to voters after the last election.