

26 May 2016 The Vancouver Sun Zachary Spicer is an assistant professor in the political science department at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont. He is writing a report on the merits of inter-municipal co-operation for the C.D. Howe Institute.

## **Co-operation, not amalgamation, is the answer**

### **Municipalities such as White Rock can solve their problems by working with their neighbours, writes Zachary Spicer**

What is happening on Premier Christy Clark's watch is shameful. Why allow land and homes to become commodities for speculation and private gain to the detriment of families and communities? Nick Loenen, letter writer

A massive fire in White Rock recently left more than 100 people homeless. The shortage of water during the fire has led some to propose the city amalgamate with neighbouring Surrey as a solution to the city's water-capacity woes.



*SHANE MACKICHAN* Crews battle a recent fire near Johnston Road and Buena Vista Avenue in the Five Corners area of White Rock. The firefighters faced a water shortage, prompting some calls to amalgamate with neighbouring Surrey.

The debate is timely, given the province committed to having a plan by late June on amalgamation and service integration across B.C.

Amalgamation is not the right answer. Instead, White Rock and other B.C. cities should look to inter-municipal co-operative arrangements and service sharing.

The debate over the future of White Rock is a classic example of an amalgamation tussle. At the time of the 2011 census, Surrey had a population of 468,000 and was growing by about 800 residents a month. White Rock was home to less than 20,000 residents.

Amalgamation proponents point to Surrey's size as a benefit. White Rock, they argue, is simply too small. The small size ultimately diminishes the quality of services available to residents.

In fact, Surrey's size is a problem.

First, any discussion of an "amalgamation" is a misnomer. This would be an annexation — less of a merger and more of a takeover. There will not be a "two cities become one" mentality. White Rock will become just a neighbourhood of Surrey and any notion that White Rock residents could enter Surrey on their own terms should be abandoned.

Second, there is no guarantee any service would be delivered more efficiently or of higher quality within a larger government. Nor is there evidence taxes would decrease. If size mattered, large cities would have the best services at the lowest cost, while small rural municipalities would be mired in inefficiency and drowning in taxes. That's not the case.

Finally, if White Rock residents had concerns about the quality of their services or the rates of their taxes within Surrey, they would have limited influence to do anything about it. Those in White Rock would be the vast minority within Surrey and would effectively lose the ability to directly control their own community.

The problems that White Rock would face would be true of many amalgamations. That is why the provincial government should be cautious about promoting amalgamation provincewide.

In fact, we often find that smaller units of government are best placed to deliver local services efficiently. Research has shown taxes often increase after consolidation. Simply put, expect the worstcase scenario. Study after study has shown amalgamation and annexation do not result in lower taxes or servicing costs. Instead, service and staffing costs increase as new, larger governments take on more complex functions.

Rather than sacrificing its autonomy, small cities like White Rock should consider an arrangement that would give them greater access to services that are best provided region-wide.

For example, it has come to light White Rock officials have known for years the local water system had a limited capacity. Joining Metro Vancouver's water system could reverse this situation. Even with the cost associated with joining Metro's system and the funds already spent expanding the current reservoirs, it would ensure capacity well into the future and allow the city to expand.

Water is just one example. Services such as transportation, policing and planning are often best delivered on a regional basis. Municipalities do not need to amalgamate or be annexed to enjoy the benefits of scale. Inter-municipal contracts can ensure service continuity throughout a region. The first step merely involves discussing the various options with neighbouring communities. The recent fire in White Rock was a tragedy. What it is not, however, is a reason to amalgamate.

There are easier solutions. Simply put, address the problem at hand, as opposed to introducing new problems through amalgamation. Greater inter-municipal cooperation and contracting are ways small cities like White Rock can address policy challenges without sacrificing the community's autonomy.