

BEYOND THE HEADLINES: Don't expect panacea

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There's been a lot of talk about amalgamation since a consultant suggested that route would create efficiencies for Vernon. It's generated letters to the editor and some scuttle when politicians gather.

However, while merging Vernon, Coldstream and the two electoral areas appears simple on the surface, there are some key factors to consider.

Specifically, while many believe there would only be one level of governance instead of three, the reality is there would be two.

Regional districts are mandated under provincial legislation and all municipalities must belong to one (even in the case of larger communities like Vancouver, Victoria and Kelowna).

If Greater Vernon were to join together as a single entity, it would obviously take some current duties away from the Regional District of North Okanagan, such as water and parks and recreation.

However, even under a diminished form, RDNO would remain as its purpose does not hinge on Greater Vernon alone. It is a collective of six municipalities in the North Okanagan and provides governance for the five electoral areas, which include rural Enderby, rural Lumby and Cherryville besides the two adjacent to Vernon.

Through that collective, a number of functions are provided. Among them is representation at Okanagan Basin Water Board, which focuses on water quality and quantity and attempts to control milfoil in our lakes.

The region, as a whole, is also looking at growth and how development occurs in the years to come. Housing, employment, transportation and the environment know no boundaries.

Perhaps the most important function, though, is solid waste. Under provincial legislation, it is regional districts, not municipalities, that are responsible for managing garbage and recycling. That scenario wouldn't change if Greater Vernon merges.

It's also interesting that talk of amalgamation comes while the City of Vernon has been warned about its infrastructure deficit — a whopping \$78 million.

Amalgamation would expand Vernon's tax base, but expenses and liabilities would also climb. All of a sudden, existing city residents would be on the hook for maintenance of sprawling roads throughout the BX and the Commonage. Because electoral roads fall under the jurisdiction of the provincial government, many have been neglected for years. As an example of the potential burden, Vernon has experienced a significant cost for roads — and meeting demands for urban standards — since Okanagan Landing was absorbed 20 years ago.

If there is one positive from amalgamation, it could be the end of the fighting that flares up every few years within Greater Vernon. Obviously there would also be fewer bureaucratic hoops to jump through if development policies were handled by the same entity dealing with water and parks.

But, it should be pointed out, that presently, all three jurisdictions are working together and resolving outstanding concerns.

And in terms of cost savings, all that would likely be trimmed are a few politicians and senior administrators. There would still be a need for the rank-and-file workers to meet public demands, which won't shrink just because there's fewer jurisdictions.

Ultimately, amalgamation of part or all of Greater Vernon may occur, but for anyone who believes this is the gateway to panacea, they may be disappointed.

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