



Duncan-North Cowichan Citizens' Assembly on Municipal Amalgamation
Public Roundtable Meeting summary
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On the evening of Thursday, February 2, 2017 the Duncan-North Cowichan Citizens' Assembly on Municipal Amalgamation hosted its first of two public roundtable meetings at the Island Savings Centre. More than seventy residents attended as did two dozen Assembly members and several local councillors. Peter MacLeod, the Assembly's Chair, led the meeting and explained the Assembly's mandate.

Following his presentation, he invited residents to discuss four questions in small groups. Assembly members sat at each table and helped to facilitate the discussion and take notes.

Discussion questions

- 1) How have you seen the Cowichan Valley change?
- 2) What values do you want local government to exemplify?
- 3) What issues or concerns do you think matter most when considering whether Duncan and North Cowichan should be amalgamated?
- 4) What advice would you like to give the members of the Citizens' Assembly?

Below are short summaries of each discussion and examples of the comments that we heard.

Question 1: How have you seen the Cowichan Valley change?

Growth

Participants observed how the Cowichan Valley has grown. There are many more people, more housing developments, and, frequently, more traffic. They also discussed how the economic base had shifted from resource extraction to services and how more people were also choosing to commute to Victoria. They also cited demographic changes – each year it seems like there are fewer young people and families, and more retirees. They also discussed the need for a more “coordinated plan” between the two municipalities to better manage growth, and resolve outstanding tensions between urban and rural areas.

Sample comments:

- A lot of new people, we used to know everybody



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- Increase in split between rural and urban
- Resource-based to service-based community
- Agricultural shift to wineries etc. has increased tourism
- Chemainus: transformation from mill town to tourist destination
- Ageing populations in both municipalities
- Increase of "out of town" demographic
- Number of youth/students has decreased
- Increase in traffic; buses are new and improved
- Commuter society, a bedroom community
- Infrastructure changes and fewer services – e.g. no police in Chemainus.
- Even in services are centralised, many people don't benefit. Services are loaded at the south end of the valley
- Dramatic traffic increase – e.g. crawl through the lights in Duncan. The roads haven't kept up with the traffic infrastructure. More commuting

Character

Participants clearly take pride in the distinct character of the Cowichan Valley, and its many unique communities. They described the importance of being a 'green' community, maintain local agriculture, small-scale retail, new wineries, the appreciation and good environmental stewardship. Others mentioned how these features were being diluted by big box stores or threatened by increased crime and periodic water shortages and management issues.

Sample comments:

- Unique – valley very agricultural
- Community has embraced the farmers market, vineyards, slow food
- Active arts and family events
- Welcoming big box stores – unfortunately
- Commercial shift from small businesses to bigger chains etc. (better shopping)
- Lots of empty storefronts, though now filling up in core of Duncan
- New emphasis on the environment and recreation; many new recreational venues – pool, track, ball fields, parks
- There has been a rise in pan-handlers, homeless, graffiti and drugs
- A substantial increase in population, but needs a coordinated plan
- Loss of green space, agricultural land.
- Water shortages – same water source
- Collective attitude
- Lack of opportunity for young people
- "Roots" feeling is coming back
- Duncan has a more "green" mind-set
- Rural atmosphere formed my outlooks/who I am



Relationship to local government

Many participants felt their relationship with local government had changed and that both municipalities could be more responsive to the concerns of residents. Several participants admitted that they were unsure of the differences between the two municipalities or their boundaries.

Sample comments:

- CVRD – 25 employees in the early 1970s
- Property taxes gone up
- More politicians? One Cowichan Valley
- Lot more governance; lot more bureaucracy – and more power
- Slow process for builders
- Local government more involved in management of resources, and less efficient – but taxes more
- Multi-level governments/no coordination of services – more separation of community
- Stronger feeling of support
- Lack of leadership or vision
- Lack of motivation on the part of citizens
- Need to force politicians to get involved

Question 2: What values do you want local government to exemplify?

Fiscal Responsibility

Many participants discussed the need for frugality and respect for taxpayer money, but also the need to balance prudent fiscal management with important social investments like affordable housing or environmental initiatives that protect and preserve the natural habitat.

Sample comments:

- Be frugal
- Less bureaucracy
- Taxes should be used responsibly
- Forward-thinking and willing to encourage and attract new business
- Integrity, accountability, fiscal conservatism, streamlined regulatory processes, protection for small businesses, preserving the environment
- Respect taxpayers
- Don't over-regulate
- Make decisions based on community values
- Fiscal responsibility vs. progress.
 - Not neglecting culture
 - Remember those who came before



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- Balance - environment, economy, social aspect (triple bottom line)
- Good fiscal management
- Social value – social issues need to address. E.g. social housing, affordable housing.
- Value for our dollars

Community-building

Participants look to local government to reflect local voices and perspectives and to represent the different needs and interests of community members. Many would like to see local government make a stronger effort to listen and respond to community concerns and to take greater care to ensure that the special qualities of the area's many communities are preserved.

Sample comments:

- Listen to the people
- Respect for First Nations
- Representatives that live in the community
- An active listening Council – when public has concerns, they listen.
- Accessible hours for public participation
- A council keen on attaining to issues for all ages: children, working parents, retirees
- More responsibility to citizens' points of view
- Values of old – big picture, long-term
- Government needs to provide tools and not rely on technology to encourage people to become more informed citizens
- Show respect and love for community vision with every decision
- Strength is in diversity
- Engagement of youth, First Nations
- Find what make us, us
- Proactive and exploratory – be open to financing citizen groups, bringing in new info by outside experts and ideas from other groups of citizens. Need to be current
- Local government should value and promote citizen participation, beyond voting in Municipal Elections

Transparency

Participants also felt that there should be more openness and accountability on the part of local government.

Sample comments:

- Transparency – doing what they say they will
- Accountability
- Accessibility (know our government members)



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- Councillors that listen to the public and act. Be accountable.
- They are part-times who just fill a seat and don't do a good job. We should pay more to get better people. We should have well experienced, educated, and experienced full-time councillors.
- Local government open for business
- Government that listens.
- Consistency of government rules.
- Be more transparent when wanting to put in another service/facility

Collaboration

Many participants noted the lack of communication and collaboration between the two municipalities, believing they should do more to align and coordinate their activities.

Sample comments:

- Unity, cohesiveness and working together
- Collaboration
- Working together – now council does not do this. Not cohesive.
- Working with CVRD to create a shared environment with shared trails
- Willingness to share resources – i.e. snow removal, street cleaning etc.
- No sense of unity, people are divided
- Focus on regional goals
 - Tourism vs pastoral
 - Industry community
 - A community theme for region
 - A shared vision

Question 3: What issues or concerns do you think matter most when considering whether Duncan and North Cowichan should be amalgamated?

Most participants focused on the financial challenges faced by both municipalities as well as by residents. Participants expressed concern about the potential cost of amalgamation process – severance pay, for example – as well as the cost of sharing services. Broadly, participants were keen to better understand the fiscal implications of amalgamation and take a long view towards any costs or savings.

Participants were also keen to discuss what it might look like to take a 'whole-of-valley' view of land management and zoning. Many believe it would be advantageous to streamline existing development guidelines, creating a more consistent and balance plan for growth. They also cited the benefit of harmonizing bylaws, transportation planning, and emergency services.



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Participants noted several concerns regarding elected representation and the importance of ensuring that future investments in Duncan wouldn't disadvantage other communities in the Valley. To this end, participants repeatedly flagged the importance of preserving and investing in the distinct identity of the many communities in the Cowichan Valley and the importance of maintaining a 'small town feeling.'

Sample comments:

- A community of communities: Respect and celebrate identity, value, vision of each/all: Chemainus; Crofton; Maple Bay; Sahtlam; Quamichan Lake; Duncan; and Genoa Bay.
- Role of citizens: citizen participation - harder for larger number of citizens to have access and their voices heard; lose access and government representation.
- Efficiencies of services and resources. Proximity, accessibility and share of services/resources for outer communities
- How do you rationalize a resource management between the different communities and avoid disparities in services – e.g. Duncan police response time is faster at the moment
- Don't want amalgamation to make my taxes go up
- Want to make sure things aren't central in Duncan, and every community is fairly represented and not neglected
- Cost to amalgamate? Jobs lost/created – what's the debt burden comparison between Duncan and North Cowichan?
- Will amalgamation bring young people? Will it create jobs? How will future industry/jobs be affected?
- Improve efficiencies; simplify organization; efficiency of resources; relocation of offices; Automation/technology
- Look at European examples of separation town from country
- How to blend community plans?
- Assets: what does each party bring to the table?
- Staffing: severance costs?
- Land management and zoning and sustainability of the whole valley – watershed/forest/protected land
- What is the timeline?

Question 4: What advice would you like to give the members of the Citizens' Assembly?

Participants urged the members of the Assembly to keep an open mind, think long term and make a rational argument for either option based on detailed analysis.

Sample comments:

- Keep an open mind and listen well.



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- Review previous amalgamation concerns, and other municipalities' experiences and case studies, including cost comparisons with other similarly-sized amalgamation communities
- Expect mistakes and make the best of them
- Push for quantitative data, and explore the pros and cons
- Develop real criteria to make it worthwhile
- Focus on the facts and analyse the source
- Insist on a clear direction and full documentation with citizen access to the data
- Listen to what citizens and the public have said
- Become an informer to the community at large
- "We, not I"
- Don't allow one community to overcome the other – either the different identities of Duncan and North Cowichan, or in urban/rural identities. Listen to the small communities.
- Be strong advocates of your neighbourhood
- Don't be influenced by perceived limitations or by "expert" opinion. Be brave and innovative – be the champion for community
- Ensure land-use planning is considered
- There should be citizens' input post-report
- Go out to the individual communities and hold meetings in each community – not just Duncan Central. Get the whole community involved (i.e. Crofton, Maple Bay, Chemainus)
- Properly advertise – one-month notice and reminders up to the meeting
- These four questions on the website for public feedback?
- Publish your report in a newspaper and hold a series of meetings once your report is done to inform the public
- What should the percentage of vote yes or no be to trigger amalgamation (is 51% enough?)
- Show early, stay late; be curious and realistic
- Think about the big picture – don't sweat the small stuff, and consider the benefits 20 years down the road
- Don't just focus on economics; consider vision and values equally
- Take your time – as much as is needed
- Don't be stressed by the magnitude of the task
- Keep a sense of humour and keep up the good work