The Corporation of the District of Saanich

Report

To: Mayor and Council

From: Angila Bains, Director of Legislative and Protective Services

Date: September 8, 2025

Subject: Citizens' Assembly on Amalgamation – Final Report

File Code: 1420-30

RECOMMENDATION(s)

1) That Council direct staff to work with the City of Victoria on the ballot question to be approved by both Councils.

2) Subject to Council approval of the ballot question, that Council direct staff to list the question regarding amalgamation between Saanich and Victoria on the ballot for the 2026 General Local Election.

3) That Council direct staff to work with the City of Victoria and report back to Council, if necessary, on whether there is any additional information needed to support the ballot question.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with further information on the Final Report of the Victoria Saanich Citizens' Assembly on Amalgamation and to seek direction on the next steps for consideration.

BACKGROUND

At the 2018 General Local Election, the District of Saanich and the City of Victoria each included the following public opinion question on their ballots: *"Are you in favour of spending up to $250,000 for establishing a Citizens' Assembly to explore the costs, benefits and disadvantages of the amalgamation between the District of Saanich and the City of Victoria".* That question received approval in each municipality of a majority of those who voted. The total budget for the exercise was established at $750,000, apportioned equally between the municipalities and the Province of British Columbia who confirmed their funding contribution before the project started.

A Citizens' Assembly is a group of residents, and in this case that group was demographically representative of both communities, both in terms of the number of participants (Saanich 27 members – Victoria 21 members) consistent with the population totals for each community but also with numerous other demographic elements.

Working collaboratively, staff from Saanich and Victoria created draft Terms of Reference for consideration. That process involved the establishment of Council Committees in both municipalities who met and reviewed the draft Terms of Reference as well as a joint meeting of the two Council Committees which was held in the CRD Boardroom. The Terms of Reference were approved by each Council in late 2019, a copy is attached as Attachment "A". However, before the process could begin, the COVID 19 Pandemic occurred causing a delay in the process. Each Council decided at the time, based on advice from experts in that field, that any Citizens' Assembly would be best suited to be conducted in-person and that it was prudent to wait until social distancing mandates were over.

In early 2024, the process re-commenced, and the procurement of the Lead Consultant was completed. MASS LBP was engaged by Saanich and Victoria for that role which included acting as the Facilitator/Chair for the Citizens' Assembly. MASS LBP led the Assembly process at arm's length from the District and City.

MASS LBP undertook a civic lottery process to seek out the participants in the Assembly, as well as recruiting the Consultants to undertake the technical study as was identified in the approved Terms of Reference. Further details around those processes are noted in the Final Report of the Assembly.

By the summer of 2024, the Assembly members were selected along with MNP as the consultants for the Technical Study. Full details of the activities of the Assembly are noted in the Final Report attached as Appendix "B". The Technical Report is attached as Appendix "C". MASS LBP created a website www.victoriasaanich.ca. that remains active at this time which stores all of the information that has been presented during the Assembly process.

In brief, the Assembly had eight full day sessions in which numerous speakers presented information to the 48 members for their consideration. Two on-line and two in-person sessions were held for the public which took place during the work of the Assembly to engage the broader community on the matters being considered. Staff attended all the Assembly sessions and in-person public sessions to witness the discussions that occurred.

Noting that the Assembly commenced in 2024, the original budget for the exercise was established in advance of the 2018 Local Government Election at $750,000. The total costs for the Assembly were $681,719 which is shared equally between Saanich, Victoria and the Provincial Government.

The Final Report was presented to Council by MASS LBP at the July 14, 2025, regular meeting, and is attached as Attachment "B". Council at that time received the report for information noting that staff would report back with additional information for Council's consideration.

The Final Report of the Assembly contains a primary recommendation on Page 43 of the report:

"Having considered the costs, benefits, and disadvantages to the best of our abilities and with the information available to us, we recommend the amalgamation of Victoria and Saanich"

In addition, nine further considerations/recommendations were included for Council's consideration on the following topic areas on pages 46-53 of the report:

- Indigenous Government Relationships
- Climate Change and Environmental Considerations
- Planning
- Service Levels and Delivery
- Police and Fire
- Housing Affordability
- Agricultural and Rural Lands
- Future Governance and Representation
- Conducting the Referendum

Several minority reports were also included in the Final Report as per the approved Terms of Reference which are found on pages 55-59 of the report.

The Final Report was also presented to the City of Victoria Council at their July 17, 2025, meeting. Victoria Council passed the following resolution:

"That Council receive the Victoria-Saanich Citizens' Assembly – Final Report Submission report for information, and direct staff to work with their counterparts in Saanich to craft a short question to be placed on the 2026 local election ballot in both municipalities, and to report back to Council with that question and any other information staff deem relevant, including whether the public needs more information in order to make an informed decision".

Next Steps

The Assembly followed the Terms of Reference throughout the process and while costs were considered in its deliberations, costs associated with an amalgamation exercise to integrate two municipalities, or any financial implications that would be incurred post amalgamation, were not specifically identified in either the Assembly's Report or in the Technical Study. Staff do not have any estimation of the magnitude of costs to integrate the two municipalities should amalgamation take place. In addition, a recommendation around conducting the referendum involves the engagement of a neutral third party to manage civic engagement and public education. This raises the question as to what the information would be for the public education component in light of the earlier comments around the lack of any financial data.

The recommendations of the Assembly include conducting a referendum in conjunction with the 2026 General Local Elections. Time is of the essence should Council wish to move in that direction. Any further information that Council may wish to have would need to be provided in a timely manner and depending on the extent, timelines may be challenging.

Given the timeframe, it would be impractical to develop an implementation plan prior to a 2026 referendum question. Should Council direct the question to be put on the ballot and should the response in both communities be in the positive (yes to amalgamation), detailed issues related to implementation (including an implementation plan) would need to be worked out in the 2026-2030 Council term. In this scenario, staff anticipate that the work of integration would consume the human resources of both organizations over the subsequent term, building to an integrated

election for 2030. There would undoubtedly be costs associated with plans for implementation, but the costs are currently undefined.

Council may wish to consider the following:

- Whether any additional information is needed to support the ballot question;
- Whether to advance the Assembly's recommendation related to a third-party communications plan (noting that the City of Victoria has not provided direction on this recommendation).

ALTERNATIVES

1. That Council adopt the recommendations as noted in the report.
2. That Council receive this report and take no further action.
3. That Council provide alternate direction to staff.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

If Council gave direction to list the question of amalgamation on the ballot for the 2026 General Local Election, staff confirms there would be no additional costs other than the budgeted amount approved to conduct the election.

If Council or the City of Victoria identify the need for additional information to support the ballot question, additional costs could arise. As noted above, the Assembly report did not contain detailed information on the costs of developing an implementation plan. The implementation plan would incur costs if there were a positive vote on the referendum question in 2026.

CONCLUSION

The District of Saanich wishes to thank the work of the Victoria Saanich Citizens' Assembly and note their significant effort and time commitment as volunteers. There was support amongst the participants on the recommendations as provided in the final report but noting the decision was not unanimous. Staff will take direction from Council on its consideration of the Final Report of the Assembly.

Prepared by	Chris Coates, Strategic Advisor, Citizens' Assembly
Reviewed by	Paul Arslan, Director of Finance
Approved by	Angila Bains, Director of Legislative & Protective Services/Corporate Officer

Attachments:

Attachment A – Citizen's Assembly Terms of Reference
Attachment B – Citizen's Assembly Final Report
Attachment C – MNP Technical Study

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER'S COMMENTS:

I endorse the recommendation from the Director of Legislative & Protective Services.

Brent Reems, Chief Administrative Officer