The Corporation of the District of Saanich

Report

To: Mayor and Council

From: Angila Bains, Director of Legislative and Protective Services/Corporate Officer

Date: June 1, 2026

Subject: Amalgamation Question – 2026 General Local Election

File Code: 1500-20

RECOMMENDATION

That Council authorize staff to place a non-binding public opinion question on the ballot for the 2026 General Local Election as outlined in the memo from Mayor Murdock.

That Council approve the non-binding question cited on the ballot as "Do you support Saanich and Victoria becoming one municipality?"

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is to seek Council direction on progressing to a referendum on the matter of Amalgamation between Saanich and Victoria.

BACKGROUND

At the 2018 General Local Election, the District of Saanich and the City of Victoria each included a public opinion question to determine elector support for spending up to $250,000 to conduct a Citizens' Assembly on the question of the amalgamation of Saanich and 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 BC who confirmed their funding contribution prior to commencement of the citizens' assembly process.

Saanich and Victoria co-created draft terms of reference that were approved by both Councils The process involved the establishment of Council Committees in both municipalities. However, before the process could commence the COVID-19 Pandemic occurred causing a delay in moving forward. Each Council decided at the time that Citizens' Assemblies were best suited for being conducted on an in-person basis and that it was advisable to wait until that could occur.

In early 2024, MASS LBP, consultant, was engaged through a robust procurement process by Victoria and Saanich to lead the Citizens' Assembly process which included acting as the Facilitator/Chair for the Citizens' Assembly. MASS LBP led the Assembly process at arm's length from the City and the District.

The Citizens' Assembly selected by random civic lottery was established. This group of residents was demographically representative of both communities, both in terms of the number of participants (27 Saanich 21 Victoria) consistent with the population totals for each community but also for numerous other demographic elements identified in the approved terms of reference.

In brief, the Assembly had 8 full day sessions in which numerous speakers presented information for the members consideration. Two on-line, and two in person sessions for the general public took place during the work of the Assembly to engage the broader community on the matters being considered.

The Final Report (Attachment C) was presented to Council by MASS LBP and members of the Citizen's Assembly at the July 14, 2025, regular meeting, and Council passed a resolution to receive the report for information and it was noted that staff would be providing a report to Council for consideration.

The Final Report of the Assembly made the following recommendation:

> *"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:

- 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

There were also several minority reports included in the Final Report.

At the September 15, 2025, meeting, Saanich Council passed the following resolution:

"That Council:

- *Direct staff to work with the City of Victoria on the ballot question to be approved by both Councils;*
- *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; and,*
- *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."*

The resolution passed by the City of Victoria in connection with the Final Report on July 31, 2025, was as follows:

> *"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".*

Saanich and Victoria staff engaged staff from the Ministry of Housing and Municipal Affairs to update on the progress of the process and seek a response from the Ministry in terms of whether the Minister would approve a Ministerial Order to permit a binding referendum question on the amalgamation of the two municipalities. In addition to those meetings, the Mayors subsequently met with the Minister seeking approval of a Ministerial Order to place a binding question on the upcoming General Local Election of 2026.

Recently, the attached correspondence (Appendix B) from Minister Boyle was received by both municipalities. The letter (page 2) indicates that the Minister is not prepared to authorize a binding referendum question at this time noting that additional financial and transitional information was not addressed in the Citizens' Assembly process. The Minister believes this information should be provided to the public before the Province could consider authorizing a binding referendum question. It was noted that a non-binding question could be posed to the public in conjunction with the upcoming General Local Elections in October, 2026, should Councils wish to take that more intermediate step. Such a question could be used to gauge public interest in further investigation from a technical perspective, on the details around a possible amalgamation. This analysis would require a scoping exercise to identify the potential costs to undertake that level of service review.

It is also important to note the Minister's comments that the Province would be responsible to undertake consultation on a proposed amalgamation with affected First Nations as part of the process.

With the Minister indicating a binding referendum will not be authorized, Saanich and Victoria Councils may now wish to consider what the appropriate next steps may involve. The next steps may include the following:

- Holding a non-binding referendum in conjunction with the upcoming General Local Election to gauge public opinion on whether to proceed further.
- Pursuing the identification of the financial information, service delivery implications and transitional issues of the two municipalities amalgamating to become one. The analysis would be presented to the electorate for the 2030 General Local Elections.
- Providing direction to permanently cease any further work on the topic of amalgamation between Saanich and Victoria.

Mayor Murdock put forward a memo (Attachment A) proposing a non-binding ballot question regarding amalgamation for Council's consideration.

ALTERNATIVES

1) **That Council authorize staff to place a non-binding public opinion question on the ballot for the 2026 General Local Election as outlined in the memo from Mayor Murdock.**

   That Council approve the non-binding question cited on the ballot as "Do you support Saanich and Victoria becoming one municipality?" (RECOMMENDED)

2) **That Council direct staff to identify financial information, service delivery implications and transitional issues of the two municipalities amalgamating to become one and defer this matter to the next election for 2030.**

3) **That Council receive the report for information and permanently cease any further work on the topic of amalgamation between Saanich and Victoria.**

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

If a non-binding public opinion question was conducted during the 2026 General Local Elections, there would not be additional costs associated/incurred as staff have already budgeted for the cost of conducting the election.

Should Council wish to pursue more information as required by the Minister to seek a Ministerial Order for a binding referendum, the cost for the work would be evaluated and brought back for the future Council's consideration which would also postpone the question to a future election.

CONCLUSION

The Citizens' Assembly addressed the issue of amalgamation on a number of factors and issues that were identified in their Final Report. However, it did not provide any detailed insight into financial implications, service delivery or issues relating to transitioning from two municipalities to becoming one amalgamated municipality. Specialized and detailed analysis on an operating model, financial implications and service levels with an implementation plan would be required for the public to actualize what is required for an amalgamated municipality.

Prepared by: Chris Coates, Strategic Advisor, Citizens' Assembly

Approved by: Angila Bains, Director of Legislative & Protective Services/Corporate Officer

CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER'S COMMENTS:

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

Brent Reems, Chief Administrative Officer

Attachments:
Attachment A – Memo dated June 1, 2026 from Mayor Murdock
Attachment B – Letter dated April 29, 2026 from Minister Christine Boyle, Minister of Housing and Municipal Affairs
Attachment C – September 2025 Staff Report – Citizen's Assembly Final Report