

Book Review: *Governing Greater Victoria*

Robert L. Bish and Josef Filipowicz (2016). *Governing Greater Victoria: The Role of Elected Officials and Shared Services*. Fraser Institute (fraserinstitute.org)

by Ken Cameron, FCIP, RPP

Consolidation of local governments without coercion by a provincial government is relatively rare in Canada. In fact, the most prominent examples are from here in British Columbia, notably the amalgamation of the City of Chilliwack with the Township of Chilliwack (sic) in 1980, the creation of the larger City of Abbotsford through its absorption of Matsqui in 1995, and the merger that same year of the then-three regional districts outside of the Greater Vancouver Regional District (now Metro Vancouver) into one, the Fraser Valley Regional District, following the decisions of Langley City and Township, Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge to join the GVRD.

Even rarer is the emergence of “spontaneous” popular support for consolidation, particularly at the regional scale. Yet this is exactly what happened in 2014, when the 13 municipalities in the Capital Regional District responded to public pressure by including questions about consolidation on the municipal ballots in November of that year. In all but one of the municipalities (Oak Bay), there was relatively strong support for partial or complete consolidation of municipalities (the questions differed somewhat from municipality to municipality).

These results must have had all the appeal of a dead fish to the provincial government, which has traditionally been extremely reluctant to become engaged in situations where a broad consensus for change - at the political more than the public level - is

not evident. Not much has happened since the 2014 votes, and with the next provincial election less than a year away, the possibility of the province taking definitive action on the ballot results seems ever more remote.


Intellectual fodder to feed the debate has now come from an unlikely source - the Fraser Institute. The study conducted by Bish and Philipowicz provides a wealth of information on how the municipalities in the capital region have collaborated to provide necessary services through the Capital Regional District. Useful comparative information on per capita expenditures is included in the study, along with an analysis (predictable, considering the source) of the per capita cost of elected representatives in each municipality. Anyone seeking basic information on the issues that might or might not be addressed by municipal consolidation in the capital region or elsewhere will find a great many insights in this work, including a thoughtful analysis by Gerry Berry on whether the expansion of the City of Nanaimo in the mid-1970s brought equalization of public services there (it didn't).

The most disappointing but not surprising shortfall of the study is the short shrift it gives to the idea that local government is more than the “production” of public services at the lowest possible cost. While economical service provision is undoubtedly important, it can be argued that the purpose of local government is broader, involving the democratic process of

identifying choices and selecting courses of action for the pursuit of local objectives and aspirations for community betterment. It is not surprising, then, that the study seems to see planning as a process of arbitrating public and private interests and is somewhat peripheral to the real work of “production” of services.

The authors are particularly skeptical of the value of regional planning because they cannot find that such planning enhances economic development or leads to significant savings in the basic “production” functions. The study states that “The question as to whether a regional government is able to undertake strong planning and over-ride municipal preferences actually does reduce local service costs and contribute to economic growth is still unresolved.” For many of us who have worked for more than 20 years with the growth strategies legislation enacted in 1995, the concepts that regional planning must involve over-riding municipal preferences and that its purpose is to reduce service costs seem strangely limiting.

As planners, I suspect that most of us would see this proposition differently, believing that the function of local government is to meet the aspirations of communities through the orderly management of growth and the planned provision of a wide range of public services that are inextricably intertwined with each other. It seems only logical that advanced planning can improve the delivery and minimize the cost of a whole panoply of public and private services a growing community needs, but these benefits are almost incidental to the more important outcomes such as more livable communities. We as professionals should do more to ensure a broader understanding of this true nature of planning and the public benefits it can provide.

All that said, the Fraser Institute has done a major service to the consideration of local government structural choices, not only in the capital region but in the province generally. The emergence of the Fraser Institute as a credible and thoughtful research organization able to contribute to timely dialogue and analysis of public policy issues can only be seen as a positive and constructive development. 

PIBC 2016 UBC SCARP Student Scholarship Winner

By Cindy Cheung, PIBC Communications and Marketing Specialist

The Planning Institute of British Columbia (PIBC) is proud to support the future of the planning profession by supporting student members with various funding and award opportunities throughout the year, including the annual PIBC Student Scholarship. This is given out to a planning student at each of the accredited university planning programs in BC and the Yukon, including the University of British Columbia’s School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP). We caught up with the 2016 UBC SCARP scholarship winner to talk about why planning matters to her and the impact of the scholarship on her current and future goals.

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Born and raised in Toronto, Jen travelled across the country to obtain her Master’s degree from UBC SCARP. While studying at the University of Toronto for her Bachelor’s Degree in Sexual Diversity Studies and Comparative Literature, she was involved with non-profit initiatives focused on sustainable transportation and LGBTQ homelessness.

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