

## A tale of 14 cities

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"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness," Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities.

When most people think of Victoria they think of a quaint little city bustling with tourists during the summer and bureaucrats during the winter. But the Greater Victoria area, with roughly the same population as Burnaby, is broken up into 14 contiguous municipal governments.

Most of these municipal governments have, for the most part, been a dismal failure. The municipality of Victoria itself, which predominantly represents just the downtown core of the city, still does its best to promote urban sprawl by restricting new condominium construction to no more than 12 storeys.

Another dozen or so municipalities are for the most part populated with mayors and councils made up either of NIMBYs (Not in My Backyard) or the ever more prevalent Banana bunch (Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone).

Worse still has been the ever-burgeoning bureaucracy of the Capital Regional District. Increasingly it is the CRD rather the local municipality that is running the show with little if any public input. A recent example is an attempt by CRD staff that put forward a bylaw change that would have banned people from smoking on outside patios and decks without any public consultation.

Municipalities such as Sooke and Colwood have even taken to letting officials at the CRD shortlist their candidates for chief administrative officer, ensuring that the bureaucrats running the local municipal halls have the same sort of tax, spend and regulate mindset as the CRD.

Fortunately there has been one notable exception to all this -- the city of Langford. When I first moved to this area 20 years ago Langford was known as "Dogpatch." It was the place where 4x4s could be found parked on people's front lawns and a lumberman's jacket was referred to as "a Langford tuxedo."

All that started to change when Langford incorporated and then elected an innovative entrepreneur, Stew Young, as mayor. A Langford guy with a flair for acquiring struggling businesses and making them successful and profitable, Young took the same approach to fixing Dogpatch.

The first thing he did was take advantage of the fact that all the other municipalities were saying no to big box retailers. As mayor he got Langford to say yes, and in so doing he was able to attract a massive new commercial tax base, as well as get these big box retailers to pay for tens of millions of dollars in infrastructure upgrades.

Now rather than looking like Dogpatch, Langford is becoming the envy of Greater Victoria area with not just new curbs, sidewalks and streetlights but also tree-lined streets, parks and trails. Langford has a new City Hall and true to Young's vision, the ground floor is rented out for commercial businesses while offices and council chambers are located upstairs.

Goldstream Avenue has been transformed from a grungy little street to one where there is an increasing array of small stores, restaurants and condominiums that serves as the heart of this revitalized community. Again Young has shown that if done right, big-box retailers can attract rather than drive away small-business owners by bringing in thousands of shoppers to a given area.

Young has even ensured that new residential developments also add to the supply of affordable housing by requiring developers to build 900-square-foot homes that are sold for \$150,000. This makes it possible for families earning \$50,000 a year or less to become homeowners. This is increasingly important in our region where the cost of an average home is six times higher than the average family income.

So for Langford it is the best of times, while for most other Victoria area municipalities it has been the age of foolishness. Case in point: The still-unfinished Save-On-Foods Memorial Centre.

Sure, as citizens we could try to find and elect 13 more mayors like Stew Young. Better yet would be a provincial government that had the moxie to nix the CRD and start merging these 14 municipal governments into just three: Victoria, Saanich Peninsula and Westshore.

It's this sort of tri-city model that Young sees as the only real long-term solution to the bureaucratic mess our region is currently mired in. Given his track record of success let's hope someone at the legislature is listening.

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Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

The fresh face of Langford: The view north on Goldstream Avenue toward the town's new City Hall shows lush landscaping, pedestrian-friendly boulevards and period street lamps. It's just part of the transformation of "Dogpatch."