

Lines in the Sand

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Municipalities across the country are looking for solutions to ensure their long-term viability as they struggle with growing debt or crumbling infrastructure, or in some cases both. Sometimes amalgamation is presented as a solution to the challenges municipalities face. Amalgamation shouldn't be seen as a solution in itself, but it is not a bad thing either. It should be regarded as a tool that allows you to pursue long-term solutions for your communities, together.

In some places across the country, amalgamation has been forced upon municipalities by provincial governments. In most cases of forced amalgamation there is often little immediate success, primarily because there is resentment and hostility among people who are forced into a relationship. It is simply not a relationship when people are forced into it by a higher order of government. That resentment often lasts a generation and accomplishes very little. However, doing nothing and simply leaving municipalities to be divided by artificial lines drawn up 100 – 250 years ago means those municipalities are subject to continued decline caused by uncoordinated and unfocused effort.

It is very sad to watch some regions of the nation argue about lines in the sand. In many cases those regions could come together and pool resources to build the infrastructure necessary to attract businesses and families. Coming together to cooperate can often give municipalities and communities the economies of scale to do proper land management, promote the region, and find avenues to generate economic prosperity.

Some people are determined to hold onto those lines in the sand, however. I once read a note written by a woman at a meeting to discuss an amalgamation. I am not sure if she was being honest or sarcastic, but I did see her holding up a sign that read, "Vote NO to Amalgamation," so it seems she meant these words literally (note reproduced here verbatim):

"I don't know about you but I am getting tired of all of this pressure to vote 'yes' [to amalgamation]. Young people, business leaders, elected officials and outsiders looking at the facts think they know best, and think we should vote YES. They say things like, 'we should come together as a family, as friends, and as neighbours'. They say things like, 'we need to build a future that is prosperous'. Well, I for one say bullocks to that.

"Amalgamation is a scary thing and takes away our democracy and our autonomy. What we have has worked for us for over 200 years. Sure, the jobs are leaving, and our kids are leaving, businesses keep closing around town and our infrastructure is crumbling, but that's the way it has always been, and we have survived this long. Why should we change now? I say it's best if we keep doing what we've always done. We don't need better land use planning, new infrastructure, or new businesses, because all of that will just lead to higher taxes.

“We are kidding ourselves if we think anything will help us grow or be prosperous. There are just no opportunities to be had here, and working together won’t change that. My kids will have to go to find a job somewhere else, anyway, and we will just have to learn to accept that. We won’t grow our economy, and we will just have to accept that. Our region has been in decline for generations and there is nothing we can do about that, together or alone.

“If we eliminate our boundaries what would keep us apart? I know we all shop in the same town and use the same recreation, and our kids go to the same school, but there is really nothing besides that, which the rural and urban, or even the different urbans, have in common. We are just too different. The lines were drawn to segregate us all those year ago for a good reason, and we should keep them.

“The ‘YES’ folks keep trying to say that amalgamation will help everyone work together on building a future. I say it will simply change everything we have been doing for generations, with no guarantee things will be better. It’s a pipe dream. I, for one, won’t be caving into all the emotional talk about building a future. What we have is good enough. Vote ‘NO’ and lets go back to what we know is the safe bet.”

The entire note either borders on a beautiful piece of sarcasm or it borders on virtual insanity. Strangely, I have heard many make these very arguments as though they make sense.

Lines in the sand drawn up by someone 100 – 250 years ago, when the world was a very different place because we walked or rode horses everywhere, do not make sense in a world with fast traffic and high speed internet. That doesn’t mean that amalgamation is the solution to our challenges, but it is a tool that can allow us to think bigger, and plan for a future where we compete with the world, not with each other.

The alternative—doing nothing—will ensure we get nothing, because when nothing changes, nothing can change for the better.

This syndicated content is provided by Doug Griffiths, best-selling author and chief community builder at 13 Ways, a company with a mission to push communities to face their challenges to find their unique path to success. For more information visit www.13ways.ca, or we can start the conversation at info@13ways.ca.