

To Cooperate, Collaborate, or Amalgamate?

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We've done extensive cross-Canada research on municipal cooperation, regionalization and amalgamation to better understand what works and what does not work. Our research, and that of other accredited individuals and institutions, indicates municipalities that willingly decide to work together are always more successful than those that are forced together. Research also indicates, however, that those forced to work together often find much more success than communities that refuse to work together, or see each other as enemies.

As a result, many provincial governments ask municipalities to work together better. They plead for more partnerships. Sometimes they incentivize cooperation with money meant to address infrastructure deficits. Still, it is a rare case that municipalities willingly find ways to work together. Too many communities hold onto something from the past that causes them to see their neighbours as the competition, or even the enemy. So, some provincial governments decide they need to force cooperation, knowing it is not the best option, but it is better than the continued slow decline of the many communities that see themselves as islands unto themselves. Forced cooperation has many faces—from shared service agreements, to broader regional initiatives, to amalgamation.

Not cooperating just isn't an option anymore if you want your community to survive and grow. Elected officials, their administrations, and the public from neighbouring communities need to learn to let go of the recent and ancient past, learn to trust each other, and work on building a future together, or there will be nothing left of our communities to save. We all want our communities to grow, to attract youth, to attract businesses and to provide great places to live and raise our families. However, if we don't quit warring with our neighbours, and if we don't start to trust each other and work together, we will have no one but ourselves to blame for the death of our communities.

Success requires cooperation. There are many models available that deliver enhanced cooperation and produce success. The greatest success comes to communities that choose their own model of cooperative governance. There seems to be a natural fear of amalgamation as a solution to enhanced cooperation, even though evidence shows how well and how often it works. Perhaps it is because we prefer evolutionary change over revolutionary change, even though the world around is changing at a revolutionary pace. That said, amalgamation is not the only option available, and it is not always the best option for a group of communities. There are pros and cons to each of the many options. You must find the best fit for you.

What is universal, however, is that doing nothing and seeing neighbouring communities as the enemy—to be feared and not trusted—is always the worst option. Municipalities that fight and argue and compete against each other are headed to certain failure. We should all wonder why we fight so vigorously with each other over municipal lines that were drawn in the sand by someone 200 years ago, who lived in a far different world than we live in today. We need to stop

making our neighbours into enemies, and work together on addressing our collective challenges and creating new collective opportunities.

For the sake of the future of our communities, and our children and their children, I hope we can stop fighting demons that don't exist. Instead, let's focus on how our communities can grow together to realize their full potential.

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.