

A note on the Deep Un-Sustainability of the role of CAO

Anna Keenan, CAO of the Rural Municipality of Victoria, August 19, 2023

After significant reflection, and having now spent 6 months in the role of CAO, I recognize that the role of CAO for this municipality is deeply unsustainable, and want to officially raise the warning flag to Council: there is too much work, and too few hours (caused by too small a budget), to deliver the complexity of services that Victoria requires, with the level of care, preparation and consistency that should be reasonably expected in any municipal government.

Victoria is a wonderful town, however the pressures are significant, given that Victoria has:

- Significant public facilities (as a coastal tourism destination with many parks)
- It's own Official Plan & Development authority
- Water & Sewer services,
- The same core obligations to manage as all municipalities: Fire and Emergency services, financial reporting and audits, and a Council for decision-making; and,
- A very small population and therefore a small tax base.

Personally, I don't believe the challenges of sustainability are something that can be solved by better time-management or other productivity hacks on my part. I feel that I am operating close to my maximum personal productivity and on-the-job learning: a larger level of impact, and faster results, would require a larger and/or more professionally-experienced staff team, which is not possible within Victoria's current budget.

Additionally, while I have committed to staying in this role until at least the 2024-25 budget is passed next year, I will be frank that I am seeing other employment opportunities pass by that are better remunerated (which I do have to consider, as a provider for my family), and are lower-stress or higher-impact. I am quite confident that the mis-match between low remuneration and high stress in this role is one of the reasons there have been 10 changes of CAO in the last 4 years. I know that other small rural municipalities are having similar experiences with high turnover of CAOs, but in Victoria, the challenge is particularly acute.

While I have worked in the non-profit sector for 15+ years, and so I am used to working in resource-constrained spaces, it doesn't please me to know that I am delivering work below the standard that I would expect of my own municipal government, because of the many competing priorities that are being juggled here. I feel that I am constantly settling for doing a 'good enough' job on each file, while knowingly neglecting other very important priorities, because of the need to work on the most urgent projects. Municipal staff would prefer to have the hours and resources required to do a genuinely 'complete' and 'thorough' job, in their areas of responsibility.

I had been reflecting on the thoughts I would put into writing in this report for a number of weeks already, however the particular recommendation I am to make was sharpened this past Monday, when I heard that **the CAO of our neighbouring municipality, Crapaud, has just resigned.** I believe that Jamie and I started within 3 weeks of each other, in February this past year, and from all accounts I have heard, he did an excellent job during his tenure.

In discussing his resignation, we agreed that the challenges that he faced, and which I face, in our roles as CAOs of small rural municipalities, are structural rather than personal.

With all of the above as background, I will cut to the chase: **I am recommending that Victoria strike a committee to explore the possibility of restructuring the municipality under the MGA, to amalgamate with Crapaud, and potentially also the unincorporated areas covered by the Victoria and Crapaud Fire Districts.**

I don't suggest that Council vote on this path forward at the current meeting, but rather let this recommendation sit for a month, discuss amongst yourselves and in the community, and that we raise and discuss the question at future Council meetings, as a separate and formal agenda item. Such a significant transition would, if Council wishes to pursue it, of course, take time.

It is with some trepidation that I've put this recommendation into writing before a public meeting; I know that municipal amalgamation is a tremendously sensitive issue for many Islanders. And, after speaking with people at West River and Three Rivers municipality, I've seen that, post-amalgamation, there is a recognition that ***a sense of community is not defined by the boundaries of a municipal government.***

Although a committee would need to investigate and quantify the likely impacts, I am already confident that the operational financial impacts alone would be very positive. Consider the savings, for both communities, of both funds and staff time, that would result from having:

- 1 Council meeting to prepare every month, instead of 2
- 1 Audit instead of 2
- 1 Municipal office instead of 2
- 1 united Fire Department, with either 2 stations or just 1, but properly funded and with a larger team, paid decent honorariums, instead of 2 departments that are both short on resources.
- 1 united Emergency Management Plan
- 1 united Official Land-use and Development Plan, that still maintains unique zones for Victoria's unique Central Core.
- A larger tax base.

Aside from the financial benefits, the de-duplication of staff time could mean greater specialisation, so that one staff member could focus more exclusively, for example, on files like Planning & Development and Emergency Management, while another staff member focuses on Asset Management/Maintenance, Parks & Rec, and Water & Sewer.

I feel that greater specialisation would lower stress significantly for municipal staff teams, and increase retention. Currently, with just one CAO (in both communities) handling all of these files, it is hard to simply 'hold on', let alone having the ability and space required to think strategically and advance new and creative initiatives.

I have more thoughts to offer in this direction, but will stop here, as this is only a start to the conversation. I feel that it is a good moment in the 4-year municipal cycle to initiate such a weighty conversation, given that all Councillors are now sufficiently onboarded to their role, and yet there remain 3.5 years in your term, during which significant changes and processes can be followed through.