



HEADED FOR SPLITSVILLE?

The de-amalgamation of Halifax Regional Municipality has been a recurring theme since the day of its reluctant formation in 1996. If certain prominent residents have their way, it's going to be one of the central issues in next year's municipal election.

Logistically speaking, it's hard to comprehend why the provincial government of the day forced HRM's 5,850 square km. of scattered settlements and cosmopolitan cores to the altar in the first place. Bigger than the entire province of P.E.I. and spanning 165 km from wingtip to wingtip, it must be one of the most unwieldy municipalities in the country.

A majority of residents agree. At least, that's what five years of polling results from Corporate Research Associates seem to say. Specifically, the polls show that from January 2005 to September 2011, 48 to 61 per cent of residents 18 years of age and older support the idea of splitting HRM into two municipal units: one for rural residents called the County of Halifax and one for urban residents called the City of Halifax.

If CRA is accurate — and they claim they are, to within plus or minus 4.9 percentage points, 95 times out of a 100 — Coun. Steve Streach is in the minority.

Not that he cares. The representative for Musquodoboit Valley - Eastern Shore doesn't give a lot of credence to CRA's polling results, in this instance at least. "Don Mills (CRA's president and CEO) is seeding public opinion, not searching for it," asserts Streach, referencing the fact that the pollster has asked the same question 18 times in five and a half years.

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Mills, for his part, doesn't deny that he believes dividing the municipality into two distinct municipal units would be in the best interests of all citizens.

But he does take issue with the criticism that he doesn't respect his country cousins. "Completely contrary. I believe that rural citizens are not as well served by the current municipal structure as they were previously under the old county of Halifax model. I do have complete disdain for parochial politicians, however, who are unable to see the better picture.

"The current governance model ... has proven to be essentially ungovernable given the distinct differences in the needs of those living in the more than 130 communities that compose HRM."

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Malcolm Fraser doesn't like the "d" word (as in de-amalgamation), but he agrees with Mills that the existing governance structure isn't working. Fraser is president of ISL web marketing and development and chair of Citizens for Halifax, though he says he wasn't speaking in either capacity for this interview. And it is his personal opinion that there needs to be more local management. "There are all sorts of neighbourhoods in any city. Those neighbourhoods should have a say in how money gets spent."

An adjacent issue to governance reform, according to Fraser, is tax reform. "The taxes that a business pays in Bayer's Lake versus Quinpool Road are substantially different. We have a sprawling city. Infrastructure is expensive to put in place (in rural areas), and it's subsidized by downtown taxpayers.

"Is it fair that only one or two per cent of all tax dollars raised in the downtown is spent in the downtown? The imbalance is causing the core to crumble."

Streach describes such comments as "insulting" and "narrow-minded."

"What would they do if we cut them off from the water supply? What if we installed a toll at the landfill?"

"There are benefits to being such a large and diverse community. And we (HRM council) are doing the best we can to support both the rural and urban parts of our municipality."

Among those efforts are pockets of funding for rural needs as well as some newly-approved projects in the downtown core (see story page 20).

As for governance reform, Streach and other councillors such as Barry Dalrymple and Peter Lund assert it's already underway thanks to the recent redrawing of electoral districts.

Whether or not those moves go far enough will be up to voters to decide. With roughly 12 months to go before the next election, campaigning is clearly already well underway. | **ABM**

Web extras: for more detail on the above points of view, see Salvo online at atlanticbusinessmagazine.com

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