**Incorporation: What do we get, what do we pay and is it worth it?**

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Incorporation of Shawnigan as a municipality will both cost more and bring benefits. For the voting public of our community the fundamental questions are about what the actual benefits will be, what the exact cost will be and if the benefits are worth the increased taxes.

Determining the benefits of incorporation is not simple. Shawnigan’s land use includes industrial operations in mining and forestry that are the jurisdiction of the province. Matters of public health, sewage treatment, fisheries, water quality, lake navigation and public safety, for instance, are regulated by both provincial and federal agencies with statutory authority. A municipality would likely acquire authority to deal with official community plans, lake shore access, growth management, watershed protection, parks and trails and local economic development. How each of these is to be achieved needs to be thoughtfully determined. A locally elected mayor and council can make many decisions that would be more effectively responsive to their community, but nothing can predict future political direction in local elections under small voter participation.

Estimating the tax cost of municipal status includes many factors that require detailed examination. Among them are the municipal boundary, the service delivery model, the governance arrangements, the existing and future commitments as a member of the regional district, the inclusion of the Shawnigan Improvement District and the assumption of responsibilities for roads and policing. Each of these needs to be discussed with the voting public.

The overall process for addressing incorporation issues is a three-stage process governed by the protocols of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs in collaboration with the community, the Area Director and the Regional District Board. Stage one is a broad review of major issues such as the overall area to be incorporated, the proposed municipal boundary and its service cost implications. Stage two gets into the nitty gritty details of tax base, costs and benefits for differing boundary models. Stage three is organizing and conducting a referendum. The first two stages are funded by the provincial government and supported by a consultant chosen from a provincial list by a community committee. The local committee is set up by the Area Director, or Directors if amalgamation of more than one electoral area is being proposed. It is essential that the committee discussions are fully transparent and frequently and thoroughly communicated to the entire community.

A Stage One process was undertaken in 2009 that examined the major questions of boundaries and service implications of Shawnigan, Cobble Hill and Mill Bay alone and in combination. At the time the three Area Directors were promoting a full South Cowichan incorporation and the implications were examined with the advice of the provincial consultant and ministry staff. The province declined to proceed with Stage Two at the time, pleading inability to cover the ongoing cost of the process. The 2009 Stage One documents are available and can help in the re-introduction of an updated one if the community decides to proceed and the province is willing. The Stage Two process is essential to give the community the information necessary to make an informed decision in a referendum.