

Land ruling could be a tipping point

The decision on Richmond's Garden City Lands will have far-reaching implications for agricultural lands

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Several weeks ago, the process for public comment on the Agricultural Land Reserve exclusion application for Richmond's Garden City Lands drew to a close.

This Monday, almost two years to the day after rejecting it for the first time, an Agricultural Land Commission panel convened to re-evaluate whether this 55-hectare parcel of land in the heart of Richmond should be removed from the ALR and slated for development.



CREDIT: Ian Lindsay, Vancouver Sun

Haven't heard about it? Doesn't affect you? Think again.

The Garden City Lands in Richmond have been public property for over a century.

Whether you live in Richmond, Burnaby, the North Shore or Chilliwack, the decision on the fate of the Garden City Lands will be a tipping point for urban agriculture and community engagement. What happens next is going to impact communities across the Lower Mainland for a very long time.

The decision by the ALC's South Coastal Panel is final; it cannot be appealed. It is for this reason that commissioners should know that their decision is being watched by the public.

The events that brought us to this point read like a Hollywood script.

The Garden City Lands have been Crown land for over a century. During the Second World War, the Department of National Defense placed anti-aircraft guns on the property. Some years later, communication towers were erected. Since the towers were removed, its only use has been as habitat.

Enter Canada Lands Corporation. Created as Public Works Land Company Limited in 1956, this largely dormant crown corporation was renamed and rejuvenated in 1995 with a mandate to ensure the commercially-oriented orderly disposal of surplus real properties. It accomplishes this by acquiring surplus properties from federal departments at fair market value, then improving, managing or selling them to produce "the optimal benefit for the company's shareholder, the Government of Canada, and local communities."

When the CLC cast its eye on the Garden City Lands, the community rallied. As everyone who lives there knows, Richmond already suffers a green space deficit that can only grow as the city expands. Public hearings brought forth a well-developed community plan for the property that included urban agriculture, allotment gardens, greenhouses, a farmers market, a community kitchen, composting areas, a heritage orchard with berries and fruit trees, an apiary, a small reservoir for water storage and habitat, walking trails, a tai chi area and sports fields.

Kwantlen College -- fast becoming Canada's top authority on integrated pest management and agro-ecological practices -- offered to partner with the City of Richmond to construct an urban agriculture research and education centre, ideally located on-site.

A perfect fit, no? CLC's vision statement promises that it will "... enhance the quality of life in communities where the company conducts business."

Think again. As ALR land, the property is assessed at just over \$100,000 an acre. Removed from the ALR, value jumps to an estimated \$4 million to \$5 million an acre.

In an astounding, behind-closed-boardroom-doors manoeuvre that completely bypassed the established treaty negotiations process, CLC granted the Musqueam First Nation a one-half interest in the property in return for a joint venture development partnership.

CLC then approached the City of Richmond with an offer they couldn't refuse: Support an ALR exclusion to allow residential and commercial development (including a token park for the community) or face land claims litigation ad nauseum.

The agrologist's report that formed part of the developer's exclusion application was titled Agricultural Assessment of the CLC Lands, yet no agricultural capability assessment was ever conducted. In the same report, agricultural suitability was limited to commercial cranberry, blueberry and potato crops, which were deemed not economically viable (in fact, not a justification for exclusion under the ALC Act). The use of the land for urban agriculture was dismissed out of hand ("not commercial agriculture").

What nonsense. Enlightened communities around the world are racing to develop strong urban agriculture within their cities. Terms that five years ago were unheard of are today in common use: Food security, food democracy, food sovereignty, food miles, slow food. The community interest is clear. Equally clear is the astounding manner in which this interest is being dismissed by the federal government's Crown corporation. Garden City Lands is a tipping point because what is happening in Richmond is part of much larger malaise affecting farmland and community interests in this province.

Since the 2002 restructuring of the ALC (from one provincial body into six regional panels), 580 hectares of farmland have been removed from the ALR in the South Coast region (GVRD, Fraser Valley, Powell River, Squamish-Lillooet and the Sunshine Coast) and 11.7 hectares included, for a net loss of 568.3 hectares. Seventy per cent of farmland lost (397 hectares) was in the Fraser Valley and 25 per cent (140 hectares) was in the GVRD. In 2007, 59 per cent of ALR applications to the South Coast panel were approved (73 of

124); not all were exclusions.

Last year, when a senior and respected soils agrologist wrote to Delta Council expressing professional concern over an ALR exclusion application by developer Peter Toigo, she was -- incredibly -- charged with breach of the institute's Code of Ethics by the agrologist working for the developer. Equally incredibly, this charge stuck and she was ordered to withdraw her letter. A group of nine senior agrologists -- myself included -- are demanding a full investigation, exoneration and public apology.

Urban agriculture is the new darling of cities around the globe for good reason. Vancouver, blessed with good climate and good planning, has the land base, human capital and infrastructure capacity to quickly catch up -- offering new models for Lower Mainland communities, the rest of Canada and the world.

There could be no better place to start than by implementing the community's vision for the Garden City Lands. Call the BC Agricultural Land Commission. Tell them to reject the exclusion application and keep these lands within the ALR. It is time for the community to engage.

Wendy Holm is an agrologist, economist and farm columnist.

ONLINE: Go to vancouver.sun.com/editorial to answer Yes or No to our poll: Do you think the Garden City Lands in Richmond should remain in the Agricultural Land Reserve?

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