

Old debate making news again

Viability of farming the Southlands, which is no longer in ALR but still zoned agricultural, remains a hot topic

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A debate that has been around for many years - the viability of farming the Southlands - is once again making news.

Hundreds of residents attended the Oct. 24 Tsawwassen Area Plan committee forum to hear presentations from several guest speakers about urban agriculture and, in particular, the future of the Southlands.

Wanting to develop one-third of the site with housing, Century Group president Sean Hodgins discussed his vision of incorporating agricultural urbanism into the plan. The Century Group plan would see more than 40 per cent of the 214-hectare (535-acre) property used for small-scale agriculture on land that would be turned over to the municipality.

Agrologist Wendy Holm, however, claimed the entire site has good soil quality and suggested the Southlands can be used as a teaching farm.

It stirred up an all too familiar debate about just how good the land is for soil-based farming.

Formerly called the Spetifore land when farmer George Spetifore owned it, the property was removed, amid much controversy, from the Agricultural Land Reserve in 1981. The request was put forward by Delta council and the Greater Vancouver Regional District.

The Social Credit government issued the cabinet decision overruling the Agricultural Land Commission at the time. Out of more than 8,200 acres of land in B.C. pulled out of the ALR during that period, the commission opposed only Spetifore's parcel, the Optimist reported.

In an interview in 1981, Spetifore cited several reasons for the exclusion, including poor quality soil.

A decade earlier, Quadrant Development Ltd. unveiled plans for a major



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George Spetifore gave a presentation to Delta council in the early '70s claiming poor soil quality made his farm not viable for most types of crops.

development for the site. At that time as well, Spetifore noted that less than one-quarter of the property was still in use as farmland. The Quadrant plan was soundly rejected, as was a highly controversial housing proposal in the late 1980s by Tsawwassen Developments Ltd.

When the land was pulled out of the ALR in '81, Spetifore referred to his property as a "stupid potato plant."

He said it was forced out of business after the federal government provided several million dollars in subsidies to a french fry manufacturer in Manitoba. The french fry manufacturer dropped its prices and Spetifore was unable to compete, he claimed.

Spetifore also said his land was classified by the ALC in the lower soil ratings, and he pointed out the land was in a salt area built up from the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

A report by agrobiologist Norman Putnam, hired by Spetifore, noted, "extensive drainage and irrigation facilities would have to be added" before the land was viable for farming.

Delta Socred MLA Walter Davidson at the time said third and fourth generation farmers in the area were also in agreement that the land was not valuable for agriculture.

"The ALC were fully aware of this coming out (of the ALR) and they knew they had no footing," Davidson said. "Basically, what it boils down to is it should never have been put into the land freeze anyway."

Davidson noted Tsawwassen developer George Hodgins (who would own the land some years later) pointed out the property was used only intermittently to grow hay and potatoes and that it was not successful enough to pay even municipal taxes.

The MLA also predicted that over a 10-year period, close to 2,500 homes could be built on the land along with a commercial core creating "hundreds of jobs."

"I hope to see as time goes by that even the negative people will see the advantages," he said.

Later in 1981 three Delta councillors - Karl Moser, Norm Lortie and newly elected Beth Johnson - wrote a "minority report" to the Greater Vancouver Regional District planning committee recommending the Spetifore property not be developed. The three cited an April 1980 report by the ALC "which suggests the lack of viability in Mr. Spetifore's farm is due more to Mr. Spetifore's farm management than poor land."

Mayor Ernie Burnett, though, told the GVRD there was majority support on Delta council and "minimal opposition from residents."

The year before, in 1980, Burnett had criticized what he said was the open space policy of the GVRD, saying in many instances land that can't be used for farming should be taken out of the ALR.

"If it is in the ALR it is sacred even if it won't grow anything but weeds," he said.

He said ALR land should not be retained as open space "just so passing motorists can enjoy a nice view." The ALC that year had rejected Delta council's request to review the ALR boundaries.

A few years later, in 1989, during the TDL public hearing, then Delta Farmers' Institute president Albert Weaver said the high saline content made the Spetifore land impossible to adequately farm.

It was the same assertion current DFI president John Savage made in an interview with the Delta Optimist a couple of years ago, noting he was given an opportunity to farm the Southlands when the Century Group took ownership, but he also experienced many problems.

However, Holm claims that almost all of the land has the capability of producing agricultural crops. She said a 1981 consultant's report done for the Spetifores notes it's not surprising that less than ideal drainage conditions exist on some of the land because drainage upgrades weren't undertaken.

Such improvements will lead to better soil tilth and reduced salinity problems, she said, adding the report concluded the rationale for allowing the land to be developed for urban uses "must be based on criteria other than soil quality."

A report by Marshall A. Cronkhite in 1989 echoed her claim, noting tests "show a viable economic farm unit could be developed on the property."

In the early '90s, the NDP government declined Delta council's request to put the Southlands back in the ALR. The DFI at the time voiced opposition to council's request, arguing the land wasn't suitable for farming. Although it's no longer in the ALR, the Southlands is still zoned agricultural and is in the regional district's green zone.

The last two meetings in the latest round of public consultation sessions by the TAP committee (March 31 and April 6 at South Delta Secondary) will focus on urban agriculture and the future of the Southlands.

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