

Recommendation revealed

Tsawwassen Area Plan draft will state Southlands should remain as agricultural land

By Sandor Gyarmati, The Delta Optimist July 31, 2010



The recommendation on the Southlands for the new Tsawwassen Area Plan is for no change to the agricultural designation of the land.

Photograph by: file, Delta Optimist

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It was revealed at the area plan committee's meeting Thursday at municipal hall that their draft plan will state the controversial Southlands property should remain as agricultural land.

The recommendation from staff, which will still be discussed by the committee at another meeting in a couple of weeks, comes on the heels of an Ipsos Reid mail-out survey for the municipality. It found a majority of respondents were not in favour of allowing housing on the Southlands in exchange for the remainder of the site being converted to urban agriculture.

"I'd like to work with the owner of the property and see how it can be producing food...I believe the zoning, A1, is where I want it and that is what the community has told us, so I believe this is the right thing," said Coun. Heather King.

Committee member Dorothy MacDonald said the survey made it clear a majority of residents don't want a trade-off.

The Century Group wants to develop the Southlands with 1,900 homes in higher density housing on a third of the site using concepts of new urbanism. Once completed, it would add 4,000 to 5,000 new residents in Tsawwassen.

Several strategies are identified, including designing a housing pattern, which "maximizes the use of the land that contains lower quality soils and less wildlife value."

The proposal also includes 42 per cent (about 200 acres) of the Southlands that has better soil dedicated to agriculture. The agricultural land would be handed over to Delta in a transfer from private to public ownership. The plan also includes a post-secondary institute focused on sustainable agriculture, in partnership Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

Earlier this year, the TAP committee released an "Ideas" document. Although not specifically mentioning the Southlands, the document notes: "innovative policies supportive of urban agricultural activities could be supported."

However, planner Barry Konkin said Thursday that statement is no longer present in the current draft plan, although some of the committee members wondered why they never got to discuss the exclusion or the Southlands issue more fully.

Noting the Southlands requires extensive and costly drainage improvements to make it more farmable, committee member Helen Kettle said she'd like to see a provision in the new area plan that, at least, opens the door for the municipality to negotiate with agricultural property owners on what it would take to better utilize their lands for farming.

Coun. Bruce McDonald, who chairs the committee, said it will ultimately be up to council, following a public hearing process, to make the final decision.

However, the committee if it wishes can try to include a provision that opens the door to discussions with property owners, he said.

Konkin said plans can evolve over time and there's nothing to stop a council or another agency from opening up a conversation with the Southlands owner, as long as the fundamental use of the land remains agriculture.

McDonald agreed, saying, "official community plans do not come down the mountain on stone tablets."

King noted she'd like to see a discussion take place with the owner to see how the property can be farmed and profitable, although it's not for the committee to initiate that conversation.

"The community has told us what they want and what they don't want, and I think they've been very clear," she said.

"If the owner decides to sell it and greenhouses cover it, the community knew that that was a possibility and there's nothing we can do. I'd hate to see that, but the capital investment that the new owner would have to do makes something like that sketchy at best if that would happen."

The committee is to issue a final report to council by Aug. 30. The next meeting is Aug. 17.

Last year, Century Group president Sean Hodgins submitted an application for a community plan amendment for the Southlands, which is zoned agricultural but is no longer part of the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Council a couple of months ago gave the application back, citing the land being in Metro Vancouver's Green zone and that the regional district still hasn't completed a new livable region plan.

Meantime, Delta this week issued a statement to residents that a research group conducting a telephone survey in Tsawwassen on the Southlands has no involvement or association with the municipality.

Hodgins confirmed this week he had a telephone survey conducted.

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Photograph by: file, Delta Optimist

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