

Delta – canary in a coal mine for B.C. agriculture.

September 2000 Column, Country Life in B.C.

Wendy R. Holm, P.Ag.

I sat in the audience on August 14th when Delta Council gave third reading to a by-law that will impose \$23,000 per hectare development cost charges on Delta greenhouse operations. Purportedly to recover costs for road repairs and municipal services. On the unsubstantiated claim — the municipality refuses to provide analysis in support of this and has rejected offers of analysis by industry and the government — that greenhouses are not paying their fair share under the present system.

Bullshit (a term Agrologists are licensed to use).

As a sector, Delta greenhouse growers have contributed close to \$3 million in water, sewer and road improvements and between \$1 and \$1.5 million in habitat protection (set asides, hedgerows and the like). Delta's largest employer, greenhouses account for \$175 million in local investment and create 1,000 local jobs producing beefsteak tomatoes, long English cucumbers, tomatoes-on-the-vine and red and orange peppers for sale to Vancouver, the rest of Canada, the USA, Japan and Hong Kong, a market valued at \$135 million a year. With 100 hectares currently under glass (1% of Delta agricultural land), the industry has plans to double in size over the next decade. Delta greenhouses already pay close to twice the water rates (56 ¢/m^3) of their Surrey counterparts (28 ¢/m^3), despite the fact that the wholesale price of the water to each municipality is the same (17 ¢/m^3).

I sat and listened to Councilors Hawkesworth and Claggett ask the Delta bureaucrat for an economic justification for the \$23,000 per hectare greenhouse levy (there is none). I listened to them demand to know what is meant by "intensive agriculture" (impossibly imprecise; likely inserted to avoid legal challenge were the bylaw aimed solely at greenhouses). And why, if there were such fiscal needs, they did not appear in Delta's recently approved budget and were only now being hastily added as the bylaw to levy greenhouse taxes was given third reading?

Why indeed? Because it has nothing whatsoever to do with development cost charges. And everything to do with the politics of controlling (read halting) greenhouse development in Delta.

For almost a decade, groups such as the Friends of Boundary Bay, Boundary Bay Conservation Committee and Tsawwassen Homeowners Association have been lobbying to stop greenhouse development in Delta. Some see covering open fields with glass as a withdrawal of habitat. Others base their opposition on "aesthetics" (they prefer idyllic farm fields and red tractors to food production under glass). Still others fear "increased truck traffic" on "their" roads in "their" communities.

When these groups made greenhouses a major issue in the last municipal election, the Tri-Delta slate, which included the current mayor and three elected Councilors, campaigned on a promise to control greenhouse development.

The Tri-Delta slate now controls Delta Council.

Immediately following their election, a call was made for a moratorium on all greenhouse development while opponents searched for ways to control development. In December, environmentalists looked at funding a study to determine the cost to return greenhouse sites to open field agriculture. The Tsawwassen Homeowners Association called for "guarantees from the greenhouse operator that the land be returned to a condition where it can be used again for soil based agriculture should greenhouse operations end."

In mid-March, Council voted to delay a development permit for a 13 hectare extension to an existing greenhouse on 80th Street "until an environmental audit is done to determine whether removing

topsoil and replacing it with fill material would render the property useless for future soil-based farming."

In May, citing powers held under the Soil Conservation Act, Delta demanded a \$218,000 - \$17,000 per hectare - soil reclamation bond from the 80th Street greenhouse operator. In response, Agricultural Minister Corky Evans made changes to the Act to exempt greenhouses.

Thwarted but not ready for defeat, Council trumped up today's \$23,000 per hectare development cost charge. To curry political support for the tax, Delta council threatened residents with a tax hike of 1.4% if the bylaw is not approved.

Acting in Bad Faith

Delta Council cannot do by indirect means that which they are not allowed to do by direct means. To do so is to act in bad faith, and for that reason alone the Minister of Municipal Affairs should send Delta Council's by-law back to the drawing Boards. Council wants to control greenhouses on farmland, a power they do not have. They tried and were unsuccessful under the Soil Conservation Act. Apparently, they tried and were unsuccessful through appeals to the Delta Farmland and Wildlife Trust. And so now they are going to levy an unsubstantiated tax (payable regardless of actual costs) to do the dirty work of politics. The partisan equivalent of leaving with the lady what brung ya: Delivering on the promises that got them elected.

BC's Agriculture Minister Corky Evan's job is clear: The Minister of Municipal Affairs must turn back the bylaw and tell Council to play fair. Farmers don't mind paying development charges if they are actually reflective of development costs. Take the B.C. Agricultural Council up on their offer to study development costs for greenhouses in Delta. If the concern is that one operator or the entire sector may go udders up, farmers can easily purchase insurance to cover soil reclamation costs (the rates for which are competitively set and would be quite affordable for a healthy, low risk sector).

The problems facing Delta's farmers today are — in one and the same instant — both potentially fatal and easily solved. All that is missing is political will.

Delta is a frontier. It is the meeting of the mighty Fraser with the sea. The mixing of salt and sweet. Land reclaimed from nature to grow food for the camps that sprang up to serve the unending march of men and mules pushing north in search of gold. Delta carries the soils of the province in its rich silts; a legacy of the Fraser's long relationship with the fissures and clefts of the high country above it.

Pushing up against Vancouver's boundary like one of those green metal strips placed between grass and garden to keep the two apart, Delta is the green edge of the Fraser Valley, a frontier protecting farming from the pressure of urban growth.

Like the canary in the mine, shouts of unfair from Delta's farm community resonate a warning across the rest of the province. Is anyone listening?