

Tsawwassen land should remain agricultural

Even in the guise of 'new urbanism,' development is not the best use for this fertile patch

BY WENDY HOLM, SPECIAL TO THE SUN OCTOBER 23, 2009

Long after George sold it, the 536.7 acre Spetifore farm fronting Tsawwassen's Boundary Bay (now known as "The Southlands") is still one of the largest parcels of prime agricultural land in the Lower Mainland. And it's still making headlines.

If developer Century Holdings has its way, one-third will become housing, one-third will be allocated to "amenities" and one third offered up for "agricultural purposes."

Community concern over the fate of the farmland has been simmering for close to 30 years. The pot will likely boil over this Saturday as the Tsawwassen area planning committee meets with residents to discuss the future of the Southlands at the South Delta Recreation Centre, 1720 - 56th Street, Tsawwassen from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

When the gentle residents of Tsawwassen first came together in the late 1980s to review a development on this land, they nixed it loud and clear. Today's Century proposal is of equal scale (1,900 homes) but, thanks to a Miami-based design team, has been dressed in the savvy clothes of "new urbanism" replete with leafy green walkways, farmers' markets, community gardens, sports fields and an education centre.

It looks like a pretty wonderful community to live in. Problem is, it's just not good public policy. This 537.5-acre block of farmland has productive soils, an extremely favourable climate and sits on the doorstep of a huge (and hugely interested) urban market.

Cultivated for farming by Samuel Spetifore in the Dirty '30s, the first crop was potatoes. They began milking cows a few years later and it continued as a dairy farm until 1965, when they switched to cash crops. When a potato processing plant seemed like a good way to add value for Delta farmers, George built one. But when he later went to Victoria for support to help the plant compete with deep-pocketed rivals to the east, the Social Credit government said: "You have assets -- go sell some farmland." An exclusion application, supported by Delta council, followed. The Land Commission turned it down flat, but within 10 months, cabinet had reversed it.

Although no longer in the ALR, the property remains in Metro Vancouver's Green Zone and is designated agricultural in Delta's Official Community Plan.

In an attempt to persuade local government to remove these designations, developers have attacked the quality of the farmland, alleging that poor soils, salinity and drainage problems make it uneconomic to farm.

As every soils agrologist who has looked at this land has attested, 99 per cent of the soils have unimproved ratings of Class 1-5. Under normal farm management practices (drainage, irrigation and liming), the Class 4 and 5 soils improve to Class 3. This is good farmland.

This week, thought leaders from around the world gathered in Vancouver to discuss Resilient Cities and the quest for more livable, sustainable communities. The goal is not to build communities that give a livable experience to a handful of people able to afford homes in a tony, upscale, "neighbourhood-by-the-sea."

Nor to pay out the expectations of developers, who, after all, purchased it with farm zoning in place and should not feel aggrieved if their attempts to remove it from our farmland inventory fails.

The goal for policymakers is to find the right fit that puts this good farmland to high public-benefit use.

Farmers are getting older. Young people have a hard time entering farming. Consumers want safe, nutritious, sustainably produced local food and are eager to support local farmers who can provide that. UBC, Kwantlen, Simon Fraser, University of the Fraser Valley and others offering programs in sustainable food production have lots of interested students with very little or no farm experience. And little opportunity to get that experience.

Here's a thought: Why not encourage B.C.'s universities and colleges to come together -- with support from local, provincial and federal government -- to acquire and run the Southlands as an "apprenticeship cooperative:" a space where people who want to farm are given a plot of land, assigned a farm "mentor" (someone they could call for advice in the farm community of Delta), have access to support from institutional partners, and spend two to three years running their own show -- working in cooperation with peers to gain experience in cropping, livestock, farm machinery operation and repair, fencing, minor electrical, plumbing and carpentry skills, budgeting and bookkeeping, and the rest of the skill set needed to farm.

An organic-only mandate would assure area residents of a continuous supply of fresh, nutritious food produced in a way that respects the soils, the farmers, the community and the environment.

Century Holdings has put a pretty picture on the table. Problem is, it pales in comparison to what the picture could look like if institutions, governments and residents pulled together.

The Southlands decision --whatever it is -- will set a precedent for Green Zone agricultural properties throughout the Lower Mainland.

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