

# 'New ruralism' puts homes at farmland's edge

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Proponent advocates principles of smart growth and new urbanism in redevelopment plans where suburbs meet agricultural turf



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SPECIAL TO WESTCOAST HOMES

## REAL ESTATE MATTERS

Your home directly abuts land that is designated for agriculture. Only your backyard and a wooden fence stand between you and the open fields.

Chances are those fields are fallow and probably have been for some time. If, on the other hand, active farming is going on next door, you've probably been a constant thorn in the side for the poor farmer working his land. Poor, by the way, is financially poor.

Many Delta, Richmond, Surrey, Langley, Pitt Meadows and Abbotsford homeowners have enjoyed pastoral views over expanses of unproductive open space for years, often treating the neighbouring farm fields as parkland.

These same homeowners buy Idaho potatoes and California cauliflower at the supermarket without giving a passing thought to the viability of local food production, let alone the impacts of agricultural subsidies in competing global jurisdictions.

Others have struggled to tolerate coexisting with the kind of incompatible farming activity that is modern day large scale agricultural production.

Thirty years ago, an arbitrary line was drawn around urban areas in British Columbia to preserve agricultural land for food production.

In our largest urban centres, the Agricultural Land Reserve boundary has become an effective urban growth boundary.

But that arbitrary line drawn in the soil seems little more than a temporary halting place for suburban sprawl.

A landscape-architecture graduate student at the University of B.C., Edward Porter, argues that there is a better way to protect agricultural land, foster a healthy local food system and design better suburban communities.

He suggests blurring that arbitrary line that segregates land uses and pits farmers against residents and developers against farmland preservationists.

Now, before you jump on anyone who even has the audacity to suggest that the ALR be touched, let alone tinkered with, understand no one is talking about paving paradise to put up a parking lot.

Porter is building on the idea of a "new ruralism," in effect taking the principles of smart growth and new urbanism that are being hailed in the redevelopment of our urban areas and applying them to the rural edge where

suburbs meet farmland.

For example, he suggests planning laneways and cottage houses up against the agricultural edge instead of having rear yards turn their backs to the adjoining farmland. He advocates recreational uses on farmland, such as pedestrian trails and other safe places for people to enjoy the land.

He talks about promoting small scale, intensive agricultural production that is attractive to younger farmers who are willing to forge a direct producer-consumer relationship in the local community, perhaps at organic farmers' markets in mixed-use transit-oriented neighbourhoods — re-engineered suburban areas that become real places.

Edward Porter wants to preserve agricultural land.

He has a deep appreciation for the rural agricultural landscape, having grown up in Columbia, Tenn., where he watched Nashville's urban expansion swallow up the farmland he cher-

ished.

He decided to pursue an education in landscape architecture because he wanted to find ways of designing communities so that they "foster meaningful relationships with the places we seek to protect."

Porter argues that our current way of managing urban growth and preserving farmland pits agriculture and urban development against each other at the edge, defining that edge not as an area of great opportunity, but instead as a place simply to mitigate conflict. He rejects design devices like buffers that only reinforce antagonistic relationships.

The UBC student recently explained these ideas to a small audience gathered in Tsawwassen at a community forum organized to talk about how "smart growth" might improve the local quality of life in this south Delta suburban community.

Ironically, a week later, this

suburban "edge" condition was focused on at a formal design exercise organized by planners from throughout Greater Vancouver aimed at better managing future regional growth. They looked at a particular area in south Delta as a case study.

One of their proposals, which they termed revolutionary, focused on allowing some residential development on ALR land in the area to produce financial benefits that could be applied to enhancing other agricultural land to make it more productive.

These kinds of logical trade-offs move us away from the absolutes that have done little to foster smarter growth in our region.

The time for revolutionary thinking has arrived.

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