

Farmland, too, has a 'community need:' I call it vision and planning



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The Lower Mainland continues to grow, and the trend in population increase shows no sign of abating. People will continue to migrate to our little corner of the world, whether in small trickles at times, or in vast waves of new immigrants. This means there may be about two million additional people within the metropolitan Vancouver by 2056. They will need to be housed, creating a need for one million new homes.

Technological advances will continue and the nature and character of industry will change. Yet people will still work and work places will occupy land — some more intensively than others.

We will always need to eat; therefore, we will continue to need to secure a food supply, albeit with our efforts impacted by climate change and peak oil on international distribution.

We have a finite supply of land in our region, since it is geographically constrained by water, rugged mountainous terrain and an international border.

These are a few basic realities that shape our decision-making about how we will use that finite land base in the future.

Despite the fact that we in metro

Vancouver have demonstrated how to re-use urban land to accommodate growth — especially in Vancouver's downtown — there is growing pressure within the region to remove land from the province's Agricultural Land Reserve more than 30 years after the government of the day acted to protect lands then thought to have agricultural capability.

Proponents of excluding certain lands from the ALR within the Lower Mainland point to high housing prices and the trend of continued growth as the reasons to make more land available for housing and jobs.

Ironically, the advocates for removing agricultural land from the ALR cling to a relatively new provision in the Agricultural Land Commission's mandate that justifies such removal based on "community need" — something some argue is an illegal consideration, given the current legislation that governs the ALR. Yet it is nonetheless ironic that the same people who argue that community need should trump agricultural capability also reject the role that the ALR plays as a de facto urban-growth boundary. They argue that the only criterion for including lands within the ALR should be agricultural capability.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the debate, the positions are just as entrenched and principle often trumps logic. There are environmentalists unwilling to make certain land-use trade-offs for more intensive forms of agriculture that would result in increased food production and that have no deleterious impact on the land. There are also those who look purely at the aesthetic value of open space, yet are unwilling to accept the realities of farming.

When the ALR was established, there was little planning rationale provided.

Granted, regional planning that has since followed has considered how the green space within metropolitan areas might co-exist with other urban uses. But little consideration has been given to how agriculture activity on lands within the ALR functions to support local food security. Even less consideration has been given as to how we plan our communities where they interface at their edge with agricultural lands.

Patrick Condon, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of B.C., worries about the gradual and continuous erosion of the Agricultural Land Reserve with this lack of planning.

"Gradually, exclusions will continue to be approved as communities contend that 'community need' compels the change. Absent a vision for how this is to be done [and] we will continue to have more 'backyards to cows' projects dominated by low-density residential developments, without the benefit of vision for sustainability to inform their planning."

When land is removed from the ALR using the community need provision, what guarantee is there that sprawl won't result if the ALR boundary was, in effect, the urban growth boundary? Can gains for agricultural viability and food security be leveraged when a decision is made to exclude certain lands from the ALR based on community need? These kinds of questions can't be answered, given the absence of a plan and a common vision for the future of the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Some, such as Condon and his colleagues at UBC who pioneered a visual planning exercise for the GVRD called Sustainability By Design, have suggested even more controversial approaches. For example, Condon suggests blurring somewhat the line between urban

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and rural at the edge if it can be shown that the benefits to agriculture outweigh the losses.

One solution might be to place higher density development at the edge — or even straddling the ALR — to combat what Condon calls "backyards to cows," the typical low-density suburban pattern that turns its back to the farm activity and sees the adjoining ALR lands as simply the next available block available for development.

Condon argues the gain in land value that results from the up-zoning to the high density resi-

dential use could then be transferred to support local intensive agriculture — the kind of activity that would produce food for local consumption.

Most Lower Mainland farms practise large-scale industrial agriculture, producing products for export markets. Only with the kind of financial support that might come from this transfer of value can local food security be ensured.

These ideas and others need to be considered if we are going to be successful in concentrating growth and saving farmland in our urban regions.

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