

Farmland questions critical in discussions on area plan



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COMMUNITY COMMENT

It is obvious the hot button in South Delta, at least in Tsawwassen, these days is the Southlands proposal.

Public Forum #5 for the Tsawwassen Area Plan Committee (TAPC) was the future of agricultural lands and Southlands. The design was for 100 to 200 people so there were just not the human resources nor the space available to coordinate small group discussion for the 860 people who showed up and registered. Hence the format was compromised, but was held to within its planned four hours.

While much was discussed, only some of the information is relevant to TAPC efforts. I believe we need to get our questions clear and focused; otherwise we will not end up with satisfactory answers.

So let's take a crack at a framework:

- The area plan looks at land use, not specific proposals.

- The Southlands proposal (part 1) was submitted to Delta council earlier this year. Council has put it "on hold" until the area plan has been revised and presented to council.

- Revising the area plan will take us well into 2010 and into a public hearing.

- The Southlands will come back on the council agenda only after that.

- The Southlands proposal in whatever form emerges will, after scrutiny by planning and debate by council, be submitted to its own public hearing.

Delta's Official Community Plan states as one of its primary goals: "Delta will protect the natural environment, agricultural lands, and heritage features." The Delta motto that appears on the crest is: "Ours to preserve by hand and heart."

As for the area plan revisions, I believe the questions that should be on the TAPC table include:

- If land is currently zoned agricultural, should we attempt to pro-

tect it from rezoning as called for in the OCP goals?

- Under what circumstances should we allow/encourage rezoning of agricultural land?

- If a developer acquires a piece of agricultural land, is that sufficient grounds to look at a rezoning application?

- If a developer acquires land and refuses to farm it, is that grounds for rezoning?

- Should provincial and municipal laws be stronger to persuade the land owner to actually farm land that is zoned for agriculture?

The answers to these questions and others will have to be applied uniformly to all three large agricultural areas within the area plan, and will be precedence for all other agricultural land throughout South Delta. They are not trivial questions. This will be an interesting time for the TAPC and the community.

Ian Robertson is a member of the TAPC, and was vice chair of the committee that drafted the original area plan in 1990. This column represents his own views and not those of the committee nor those of the Corporation of Delta.