

Anne Murray: Southlands plans recall historic fight for farmland in South Delta

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Publish Date: November 19, 2009



The future of the Southlands in South Delta, previously the Spetifore farm, is once again up in the air. Century Group has [plans](#) to build 1,900 houses, community amenities, and small-scale agriculture on its 215-hectare, agriculturally zoned property. Prior to considering this proposal, Delta is conducting a [review](#) of the Tsawwassen Area Plan (TAP). Recommendations made by the review committee to Delta council could include allowing the development to go forward.

As part of the TAP review, a series of five, themed public meetings have been held. Only the agriculture forum touched on the Southlands development, and no open-mike questions were allowed. It is difficult to gauge the public mood, although invited speaker **Wendy Holm**, a well-known agrologist, was greeted with applause when she said, "I don't think those quality soils should be growing houses." She explained that normal farm management practices could make farming viable there, as it was in the past when potatoes and other crops were successful grown.

The environment meeting focused on the physical effects of climate change, such as flooding, yet no discussion has taken place around maintaining biological abundance and diversity, which is curious given the high ecological status of Delta. The municipality is part of the top-rated important bird area in Canada, as designated under BirdLife International, with more globally significant species found here than in any of the other 600 or so sites in Canada. In winter, when the fields lie fallow, they provide exceptional habitat for tens of thousands of waterfowl, dozens of raptors, and other migrant and wintering birds.

Even partially developing the Southlands for dense housing complexes would involve masses of fill being trucked in, and an enormous change in character for the quiet communities of Tsawwassen, Boundary Bay, and Beach Grove. These are just two reasons why, almost exactly 20 years ago, the local citizens said a resounding no to development, and helped change the course of B.C. political history.

The Tsawwassen Development Ltd. (TDL) proposal of 1988 included 1,900 homes and a golf course. At that time, many other golf course and condominium developments were proposed for Delta, as speculators took advantage of the newly passed B.C. order-in-council 1141 allowing golf courses as an outright use of farmland. With dollar signs in their eyes and a massively over-predicted demand for golf, developers optioned 44 properties around Boundary Bay. The first of these to go to public hearing, on April 25, 1989, was a golf course beside the dike at 72 Street. Its development in the heart of Delta farmland and wildlife habitat was opposed by a small group of concerned citizens and tenant farmers, who were briskly ignored by the pro-development council of the day. On May 1, 1989, the same evening that the TDL public hearing began, the 72 Street golf course passed third reading—a decision later challenged by Boundary Bay Conservation Committee in both the B.C. Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal. The golf course was eventually built; it has since changed ownership.

Thanks in part to the extensive media publicity that attended the Boundary Bay golf courses, the TDL public hearing attracted a high level of community interest from the start. Every night, crowds packed into the old city hall, where it was standing room only. Faced with a development that would dwarf their community, citizens spoke on agriculture, wildlife, traffic, fill and flood proofing, earthquake risks, transportation, business opportunities, schools, golf, recreation, and quality of life. Some held banners declaring “Herons eat voles, not golf balls”. For 25 evenings, until cut off by the mayor, hundreds of people got up to speak and hundreds of hours of testimony were given, in what proved to be the longest public hearing in Canadian history.

The community nonetheless felt their message had fallen on deaf ears. Almost immediately, 500 people gathered at a public meeting at the high school gym, volunteering to work on committees to keep the issue alive. “Say no to TDL” bumper stickers sprouted on cars and were seen as far away as Ontario. A festival was organized to celebrate the value of the Southlands, from voles to great blue herons to the local cows. A plebiscite, or citizen’s vote, was held, headed by a local retired judge and other professionals, and it attracted over 6,000 votes to one polling booth, a far higher turnout than the municipal election. The vote was a resounding 94-percent no to development, and as a consequence the council turned down the TDL proposal. In the next election, the mayor and most of the council were voted out of office.

The ripples from this stone in the quiet pool of South Delta were felt across British Columbia. Combined with the other golf course development proposals, TDL had galvanized interest in farmland issues. Order-in-council 1141 revealed the fragility of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), proving it could be subject to political interference and conflict of interest. In the provincial election of 1991, the Socred government was ousted from parliament, and **Mike Harcourt**'s NDP was voted in, on a platform that included farmland protection and support for the ALR. The first action of the new legislature was to rescind order-in-council 1141.

One aspect of the Southlands property is that, although it's zoned agricultural in Delta's official community plan, it has not been in the ALR since a controversial exclusion by the provincial government in 1981. Following Century Group's acquisition of title, the original property was split, and 89 hectares were sold to form part of the [Boundary Bay Regional Park](#) in 1995. The group's current plans, arrived at through a long process involving interested locals, envision enhancing wildlife habitat, lessening dependence on the car, and embracing agricultural urbanism.

Worthy as these goals appear, it is difficult to see how they could ever be achieved. Wildlife habitat cannot be enhanced by diminishing the extent of sensitive ecosystems, or by introducing more disturbance in the shape of humans, dogs, and cats. Reduction in car use requires increased building density in a town core and better transit, neither of which is achieved by developing a fringe community. As for agricultural urbanism, reducing the amount of farmland by building 1,900 houses on it can only exacerbate the many problems facing farming in the Lower Mainland today.

[Anne Murray](#) is the author of two books on Lower Mainland nature and ecological history, [Tracing Our Past: A Heritage Guide to Boundary Bay](#) and [A Nature Guide to Boundary Bay](#).

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