



Committee Meeting Date: May 3, 2007

To: Agriculture Committee

From: Heather Schoemaker, Manager, Corporate Relations

Date: April 26, 2007

Subject: **Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues: *Agriculture – Growing Pains***

Recommendation:

That the GVRD Board forward the report dated April 26, 2007, titled “Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues: *Agriculture – Growing Pains*” to member municipalities for their information and comment.

1. PURPOSE

To provide information to the Agriculture Committee on the March 21, 2007 Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogue: *Agriculture – Growing Pains*.

2. CONTEXT

The Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues is a series discussions intended to help decision makers shape the future of the region by presenting a range of views to challenge and stimulate fresh thought on a range of regional issues.

The attached summary (Attachment 1) provides an overview of the discussion of the dialogue. Further background information is available by request.

Attachment 2 provides a schedule and details on the 2007 Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues.

3. KEY MESSAGES

The dialogue focused on preserving a sustainable local food system and creating a viable agricultural sector in the region.

The dialogue also focused on the fact that the region’s growing population will increase the demand for food and that we are increasingly dependent on other countries for our food. There is uncertainty as to how climate change, water supply, geopolitics, and unsustainable land practices will affect food systems worldwide. It was questioned whether the agriculture system will continue to flourish given higher oil prices and dependence on oil for intensive agriculture production (e.g., transportation, refrigeration, processing, fertilizer). Participants in the dialogue saw these trends as emphasizing the need to strengthen local food systems.

The Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) was established to preserve farmland, but participants raised the following questions: How do we better manage the land for agriculture production? How do we reduce speculation and the conversion to non-agriculture uses of land (e.g., roads, rural residences, golf courses) in the ALR? Do we need additional measures? Possible solutions suggested to protect our best farmland include establishing covenants and public trusts, raising agricultural land taxes that are only due if the land use changes from farmland, and retaining ALR Crown Land to lease to new farmers, establishing firm boundaries around the ALR, which in turn will create incentives for municipalities to require densification of existing urban and industrial areas.

It was further suggested that a viable agriculture industry requires a strong local food system infrastructure for production, processing, distribution, and for developing new local market opportunities. An improved supply chain infrastructure will increase economic development and provide a secure, fair living wage for farmers and their employees, particularly when supported by institutional purchasing (e.g., universities, corporations, hospitals, government). Supply management systems are a good example of supportive legislation for agriculture.

In the same vein it was suggested that better communication and education can also support the viability of local agriculture. Buy-local campaigns, local food labeling, and urban agriculture initiatives (e.g., farm markets, community gardens) connect urban people with the rural communities and living systems upon which they depend. Farmers feel frustrated when imported food is not governed by the same standards to which Canadian farmers are held. Consumers are frustrated when they are unable to make choices and distinguish between local food and food imported from other countries. Labeling and education campaigns can encourage sustainable food purchasing and garner support for local food production. Farmers also need to do their part in establishing good relations with urban populations and their neighbours through appropriate and safe farm practices (e.g., noise and odour control at appropriate times, safe handling of food).

A further line of argument was that food security and building resilience into our local food systems help ensure that we continue to feed our population into the uncertain future. Poverty and lack of education generates barriers to wholesome and nutritious food access by disadvantaged and low-income sectors of the community. All levels of government and the private sector can address food security through new innovative food policies. Food Policy Councils are used to create a forum for examining complex issues, encouraging research and assessments, and developing and analyzing food policies. The Fraser Valley and GVRD are one agriculture system and planning together can ensure a consistent and effective integrated plan.

On the role of governments it was suggested that all levels of government have a role to play in protecting our farmland and farmers. Municipal governments have measures at their disposal to support a sustainable agricultural system through land-use policies and bylaws (e.g., smart growth), strengthening dialogue with the agricultural community, and by supporting agriculture's role in the local economy and in sustaining healthy communities. Local governments also need to advocate to senior governments appropriate legislation and tax incentives to support a sustainable food system. For example, municipalities cannot preserve the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) without provincial commitment.

Absent from the discussion was the perspective that local food policy needs to be aware of potential negative impacts on developing countries with agricultural sectors that are reliant on export markets. At the international level concern has been expressed that preferential policies, including tax policies and agriculture subsidies provided to farmers in the European Union and the United States, have detrimental impacts on the sustainability of the food system worldwide and particularly at the expense of vulnerable developing countries trying to develop an economic base. Such a perspective would not discourage the desire to protect farmland and ensure local disadvantaged groups have access to nutritious foods but it is certainly a perspective to be taken into account when policies, including essentially financial subsidies to agricultural industry and import substitution measures of one kind or another are being considered. A balanced view would be desirable and to some degree this appeared to be missing from the dialogue.

Attachments:

- 1 Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogue - Agriculture – *Growing Pains*
- 2 Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues 2007 Schedule
- 3 Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogue – Agriculture - Media Clippings

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Future of the Region Sustainability Dialogues Agriculture: *Growing Pains*

March 21, 2007

Newlands Golf and Country Club, Langley, BC.

Panel Members

- Dave Sands, Sustainable Agriculture Advocate and retired Regional Director for the South Coast Region, BC Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries
- Val Roddick, MLA Delta South
- Dick Klein Geltink, Chair of the BC Agriculture Council
- Herb Barbolet, Associate, Centre for Sustainable Community Development, SFU

Moderator: Rafe Mair

Chair: Chair Lois E. Jackson

Participants: 144

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Context: Tipping Points and the Future of Agriculture in this Region

We are at a tipping point in making agriculture viable in our region. The globalization of food production and distribution has led to a diminished reliance on growing food locally and an increasing dependence on importing food products. Although the Greater Vancouver region will continue to import and export agricultural products through its trade links, there is a need for sustaining local food production in the region given global trends and uncertainly related to climate change, diminishing oil supplies and unsustainable land practices that places one-third of the world's agricultural lands at risk. This reinforces the importance of protecting local food production as the need for self-reliance will likely increase in the future as a result of higher food prices and a decrease in the capacity of the global food baskets to provide for this region's food needs. Rising fuel and transportation costs, development pressures on agricultural land, and global trading of agricultural products are challenging the viability of farming in the region. Given these challenges, what is the future of our agriculture and food system? Will future generations be able to buy fresh, healthy nutritious food produced in the region? How do we maintain existing farmland and enhance its capacity? The agriculture and food industry is a vital component of Greater Vancouver's economic vitality, environmental landscape and social fabric, with its multiplier effects, contribution to regional jobs and quality of life to the region's growing population.

Planning for Agriculture

The Fraser Valley and the GVRD are considered one integrated, agricultural system. By planning together, the Valley and GVRD can be consistent in their approach and establish sensible plans and integrated land plans, efficient transportation systems and transportation routes, designated industrial park zones, common water use policies and rates, while protecting farmland and raising public awareness about the importance of the agricultural and food system.

The Role of Governments

Authority over the agricultural system rests at different levels of government from the municipal to the provincial to the federal level. There are currently legislative and policy

gaps in establishing a sustainable food system. For example, local and small-scale production has received regional recognition but not the necessary policies and regulations to support business development. Provincial commitment for protecting agricultural land and ensuring that farmers are able to make a living has not been evident in their policies and actions. Applications for Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) exclusions continue to fuel speculative land prices and the local food production support campaign, Buy BC, was withdrawn. Municipal governments have a key role to play in preserving farmland and supporting farmers through sensitive land-use policies, supportive bylaws, agriculture advisory committees and effective linkages to key commodity organizations, and recognition of the important contribution of agriculture to the local economy. Municipalities support the viability of agriculture by managing growth within existing urban boundaries, managing water supplies, ensuring efficient use of industrial land, and providing appropriate incentives for the next generation of farmers to continue farming.

Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR)

16% of the land base of the GVRD is in the Agricultural Land Reserve, and some people believe we may need to expand this reserve and create more farmland as our population continues to grow. There is a need to assess the agricultural productive capabilities of the ALR in terms of potential agricultural commodities and classes of farmland; however, it is even more critical to protect the ALR under provincial regulation to ensure the integrity of the ALR. After 34 years of ALR legislation, why do we still have exclusion applications on our prime farmlands? In the recent five years, the provincial average was over 71% approvals for ALR exclusions. With the Agricultural Land Commission Act, the Right to Farm legislation, and the amendments to the Municipal Act, we have some of the best legislation to protect farmland for the future, but living up to these policies is the issue. One solution under investigation is establishing conservation covenants on ALR land through the Land Conservancy and Land Commission for long term protection. Adopting smart growth principles to manage population growth reduces pressure for development of the ALR. Municipal governments can play a role in managing growth through more creative planning and densification. There won't be creative planning until we shut the door on expanding onto ALR land and set firm boundaries. One of the biggest impacts on agriculture is the demand from industry, so why don't we tax industrial land based on how efficiently it's being used? We need to consider how ALR decisions are made in terms of the democratic nature of the process and opportunities for appeal for decisions.

A critical issue is the issue of land valuation and the high prices of agricultural land that encourages farmers to develop rather than continue farming. One solution would be to increase the taxation on agricultural lands and then forgive it as long as the land remains as farmland. If that farmland is developed then back taxes have to be paid. Another solution is to establish covenants that are registered against title, which can purchase development rights, transfer development rights or lease development rights and are binding on the owner and government. A third-party trust pays the farmer the difference between the high value and the farmable value of the farmland. Crown land that is in the ALR should remain in the public trust and could be leased to young farmers to get them into farming. Long-term leasing provides an alternative farm ownership arrangement as well as land trusts, community supported agriculture and cooperative farms.

Economic Viability of Agriculture

The key to the preservation of agricultural land is focusing on the economic viability of the agricultural sector and the capacity of farmers to make a living and support their workers. Are we willing as a region to support farmers in adopting sustainable farming practices that enable them to compete in the global marketplace, particularly given existing and emerging

trade agreements? Supply management is one successful way to support local farmers rather than importers. These agreements may impact the legislative authority of municipalities and the province over farmers. There are also concerns with the impact of the Gateway programs (the expansion of regional transportation and port infrastructure) on the fragmentation of agricultural lands including pressure for farmland development and air quality issues.

Local Agriculture and Food System

The infrastructure for supplying local food to consumers, retail stores, restaurants and markets is weak. Consumer demand for local foods is increasing but while the demand is increasing, supply is not. The supply chain infrastructure limited and most of the food processors have moved out of the region. New supply chains need to be created and existing ones strengthened through supportive policies, regulations and incentives. Buy local initiatives driven by governmental and consumer campaigns help support this local food system. Consumers are also asking for clear marketing and labeling of foods to make informed choices about their food purchases. This is particularly critical for products that are produced, processed and packaged from outside the province. Farmers are supported by the BC Agriculture Council which deals with and advocates for a wide range of policies and programs that create an economic climate for the long-term viability of the agricultural sector.

Food Security

With the predicted oil crisis due to peak and decline of oil production and higher oil prices, the transportation and production of food will become increasingly costly. This uncertainty is compounded by other global issues including climate change, unsustainable land practices, declining surface and groundwater resources, and competition between using land for food or for biofuels. Faced with an uncertain future, it is the region's responsibility to retain options for local agricultural production for future generations. As food from foreign sources becomes more costly and unavailable, we must build more resilience into our trade and agricultural system, ensuring that we can feed our population. For example, a study in Richmond concluded that Richmond is food insecure and the land that is set aside for agriculture is under threat for development. How do we promote sustainable food systems and food security in our city? Governments need to take food security issues seriously and start developing appropriate food policies.

Food Policy and Food Policy Councils

Provincial food policy should primarily be focused on the supply of high quality food to British Columbians while protecting farmers. Establishing a Food Policy Council is one solution to developing local, integrated food policies across levels of government. Food policy councils can balance some of the urban - rural food and consumer issues by creating a forum for examining complex issues, deliberating various viewpoints and realities, encouraging baseline research and assessments, and developing public promotion campaigns. They can also encourage democratic participation and get citizens involved.

The Urban Connection

There is a gap between farmers and consumers – an urban-rural agricultural divide – and we need education to get the message out that food is part of our social fabric and central to our lives. One solution for connecting people to food production is to promote and develop an extensive urban agricultural system. Suggestions include planting urban rooftops, lanes, gardens, porches, and green zones in the city with food producing plants and promoting Farmers' Markets. What would urban agriculture look like in Yaletown? Not only would urban agriculture provide a considerable input of local food produce, but it would also provide a wide range of GVRD residents with a direct connection to agriculture. There is

evidence that access to green space, participation in gardening and farming, and consuming fresh, nutritious local foods contributes to general health and wellness.

Farm Practices, Wildlife and the Environment

There are a number of concerns raised about farming practices, particularly of practices adopted in manufacture-style barns and poultry barns that concentrate the number of animals and their resulting waste. Food handling courses should be mandatory to ensure that practices are acceptable, safe and clean. In general, farmers have a responsibility to maintain positive relations with their neighbours through such things as noise and odour control at appropriate times. The use of wood and coal in greenhouse heating systems and has raised concerns amongst local residents due to the resulting air quality impacts. There are also concerns about the practice of purchasing agriculture land to serve as holding ponds for excess water from upstream developments.

The Environmental Farm Program established by the BC Agricultural Council guides farmers in producing an environmental plan for their farms. There are connections between farming and wildlife protection. Farmers fields provide green space for birds and farmers leave spoils on their fields for birds; however, the success of bird conservation initiatives such as the Delta Farmland & Wildlife Trust has led to growing populations of waterfowl that create problems for farmers including their consumption of forage crops.

Attachment 2

FUTURE OF THE REGION SUSTAINABILITY DIALOGUES 2007 SCHEDULE

Note: Dialogues are hosted from 11:30 to 2 p.m. (lunch will be served from 11:30-12:00)

SOUTH

Eaglequest Coyote Creek Golf Club ~ 7778 152nd Street, Surrey

Labour and Immigration	Wednesday	7 February
Transportation	Wednesday	4 April
Housing	Wednesday	23 May
Industry	Wednesday	4 July
Drugs and Crime	Wednesday	19 September
Regional Economy	Wednesday	7 November

CENTRAL / NORTHEAST

Inlet Theatre ~ 100 Newport Drive, Port Moody

Labour and Immigration	Wednesday	14 March
Transportation	Wednesday	9 May
Housing	Wednesday	20 June
Industry	Wednesday	5 September
Drugs and Crime	Wednesday	17 October
Regional Economy	Wednesday	12 December

**Executive Plaza Hotel, Coquitlam for 12 December session*

NORTH SHORE

Hollyburn Country Club ~ 950 Crosscreek Road, West Vancouver

Labour and Immigration	Thursday	29 March
Transportation	Thursday	3 May
Housing	Thursday	7 June
Industry	Thursday	19 July
Drugs and Crime	Thursday	4 October
Regional Economy	Thursday	6 December

REGION-WIDE DIALOGUE

Wosk Centre – SFU ~ 580 West Hastings Street, Vancouver

Energy	Thursday	18 January
Fit / Fat	Wednesday	21 February
Security and Safety	Tuesday	8 May
Topic to be decided	Thursday	28 June
Topic to be decided	Thursday	25 October
Topic to be decided	Wednesday	28 November

SPECIAL REGION-WIDE DIALOGUE

Newlands Golf and Country Club ~ 21025 48th Ave, Langley

Agriculture	Wednesday	21 March
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