

Impact of Housing Density on Agriculture Presentation Delivered for the Open Forum/DPECA AGM May 17, 2022

My name is Bernadette Greene and I'm a fifth-generation grower who has lived in NS for more than 50 years. My parents came to NS in the mid-fifties, first farming by Mary's Café, and then in the early 1960's, establishing a wholesale nursery on Munro Rd.

For many years I was a market gardener and flower farmer, selling at the farm markets and to restaurants and florists. Over the last 15 years or so, I was also a member of the Agriculture Advisory Commission, the Community Planning Commission and the Community Agriculture Commission. I was appointed by Council to the Peninsula and Area Agriculture Commission, and was a member of the Regional Food and Agriculture Task Force. I was also a member of the team hired by the district to create the Sandown Transition Plan.

So many forces beyond our control affect the global food system, and the only way to ensure that we will have food security in the future is to control the lands that produce our food. I think it is absolutely fool-hardy to think that any other municipality or country is going to protect food-producing land to feed the people of North Saanich, if we won't even do it for ourselves.

Fortunately, I'm not the only one who thinks this way, which is one of the reasons we have the Regional Growth Strategy (or the RGS for short).

Among the RGS's primary objectives is keeping urban settlement compact and protecting the integrity of rural communities. The overarching intention of the RGS is to reduce development pressures on the Saanich Peninsula and other rural areas "to ensure that they remain strongly rooted in the agricultural...land base . . . allowing the rural countryside and natural landscape to remain as a durable fact of life in the Capital Region".

One of the ways it does this is by designating a specific area in the CRD to accommodate new regional growth which is contained within a border called the Urban Containment Boundary (UCB).

The RGS places North Saanich outside the UCB, and designates NS as a rural/residential municipality. Sidney is within the Urban Containment Boundary, where growth is intended to go.

The RGS was adopted by all the 13 CRD municipalities as recently as March, 2018. I just really want to emphasize this point: after many years of work on this by planners in 13 municipalities, after extensive review, public consultation and finally, a three-day mediation, all 13 municipalities agreed that this is a good plan that serves the needs of the whole region, that there is wisdom in having municipalities that are outside of the UCB.

People who advocate for sticking with our role in the RGS are not a bunch of selfish, entitled NIMBY's trying to protect our investments – this is a community of people who appreciate and understand the importance of communities such as ours, and as such, are best able to protect, preserve and enhance it for the health, well-being and sustainability of the entire region.

We are stewards of important resources: the agricultural lands that feed us, the trees that provide oxygen for us to breathe and mitigate the effects of climate change, the parks that enrich and

restore our spirits, the marine ecosystems that provide food, carbon storage, recreational opportunities and spiritual nourishment.

Other residents and Councils throughout the years have made those decisions that continue to protect this critical role in the region because the need has been validated again and again, most recently just 4 years ago. The rationale for this type of community is as great as ever as we continue to grow as a region. Future generations will need agricultural land, healthy oceans and natural areas too.

So, the RGS recognizes that there are other equally, if not more important land uses than housing. We have to keep that in mind as we contemplate important decisions regarding potential land use changes that will permanently impact our role in the region.

So, how DOES density threaten agriculture?

As our society moves away from our agrarian cultural background into a more urban one, fewer people understand the challenges of farming, and urban/rural tensions grow. This is where the wisdom of the RGS comes into play. People who choose to live in rural and agricultural communities tend to have different needs for their quality of life than urban dwellers do. Urban-minded people tend to support urban amenities and vote for similarly-minded Councillors, who might, perhaps support development on or subdivision of farmland. When urban-minded people live in the communities that already provide the amenities they're looking for, rural communities can continue to thrive without conflict. And even if the density is not all over the District, a change in the land-use perspective of Council could impact all areas of NS.

That's one of the reasons why the Urban Containment Boundary remains outside North Saanich, as the Regional Growth Strategy intended. To bring urban sprawl into NS, such as through the proposed McTavish area development, will set us up for many years of urban/rural conflict that I believe will not end well for our agricultural potential. Slowly but surely as we see everywhere there are rural communities adding urban densities, but eventually it seems, housing wins out over agriculture and environmental values.



Here's an aerial photo of Sidney in 1953, and another from 1966.



You can see at that point there's still a lot of farm land.

Now note how it's almost all disappeared only 14 years later, in 1980:



This is a dramatic example of how quickly farmland can disappear when urban values are brought to bear in land use decisions.

The Regional Food and Agriculture Strategy is part of the RGS.

“During the public engagement phase of the RGS update, stakeholder groups and members of the public expressed the greatest interest in food and agriculture systems out of all nine sustainability topics.

The updated 2018 Regional Growth Strategy targets increasing land in food production by 5,000 hectares by 2038.”

That’s 12,355 acres *put into* food production in the next 16 years by the municipalities who still have agricultural land.

“The Regional Food and Agriculture Strategy and the RGS work in tandem to guide planning and decision making in the region. . .

Food and agriculture are generally considered to be the sole responsibility of the Province and the Federal government. However, [they] have been unable to provide the level of attention and support required to see the integration and growth of a healthy, place-based local food and agricultural economy within a developing region like the CRD. There also appear to be gaps in the current responsibility framework in areas such as ... long-term agricultural land protection.”

Complicating this is the fact that many planners do not have the training to tackle food systems planning. A Kwantlen Polytechnic University survey of 435 professional planners and practitioners reveals that 67% did not take food related courses during their formal education. And

“while nearly one quarter of respondents indicated taking food related courses, few of the opportunities described provided information and skill development in the field of food systems planning.”

I checked out every bio on the website of the consultant Modus's team, and agriculture, farms and food systems were never mentioned once. So, we may have people who have no background in food systems planning at all creating the land use plan for a municipality made up of about 40% agricultural land. [Since I gave this talk, a Modus lead has confirmed that no one on their team has any formal food systems planning education. And while there is an agriculture consultant they use, he admitted she has not been consulted since May of 2021.]

This highlights the critical importance of our residents, you and me, to advocate for our food security. There is virtually nothing in the Engagement documents indicating a genuine attempt to address the 12,000 acres that need to go into food production to build food security.

A key problem greatly exacerbated by density is stormwater runoff:

The 2020 Annual Report of the Peninsula and Area Agriculture Commission (PAAC for short) sent to Council in early 2021 describes significant impacts of uphill developments on agriculture downhill. I'll read from it:

“Much of the most productive fields are lower laying lands that flood as early as late summer unexpectedly due to urban runoff being diverted to the lower lying agricultural producing areas. Some vegetable crops were abandoned in field in early October 2020 as they were completely submerged. . .

It is with great frustration that many of our local farmers continue to suffer the ravages of urban runoff. . . With high intensity storms now occurring at all times of the year, the resulting flooding not only destroys existing crops it also often leaves behind traces of various pollutants including oils, antifreeze, tire rubber and other urban waste. . .

Action is needed in the strongest of terms, not just more empty rhetoric. If Council wants farming to continue in this area it sure seems that they are doing their very best to drown this industry, both literally and figuratively. . .

If our local elected representatives truly want agriculture to continue [on] the Peninsula, they should do something and do it now. We are literally on our knees begging for substantive action.”

Many areas proposed for increased densities and infill in NS are uphill of agricultural land, including parts of Dean Park, the Terraces, the East Saanich/Cresswell Special Development Area, the Deep Cove commercial area and parts of McTavish. They say it can be mitigated through planning, but I'm sure

that was the intention with other developments of which the PAAC farmers now have to deal with the devastating effects.

I imagine planners and developers *intended* to engineer stormwater runoff when the upper Cresswell development was put in a couple of decades ago, but downhill, Bailiwick Farm found themselves ankle deep in water when the water table was altered through the process of the development. Bailiwick had to rip out all their blackberry crop, and replace it with crops that are better able to handle stormwater inundations.

That stormwater carries soils with it that often end up going into the ocean, lost forever to farming while polluting the ocean. Here's a photo of Saanich Inlet after the November floods. All that brown stuff is soil going into the ocean.



The PAAC 2021 Annual report mentions applications for exclusion from the ALR of numerous land parcels last year in Saanich because, among other reasons, the land parcels were small and interspersed with higher density residential buildings, similar to some of what is being suggested by the Project Team.

Another way that density will impact future food security is that it will remove large lots that are a sort of incubator for our future farmers. New farmers rarely come from urban areas. They are exposed to food production in childhood, either from farms or family gardens or 4-H, and already have some skills and familiarity when they begin their own farms. At present, rural-minded families are able to find large lots in NS where they can have vegetable gardens and keep livestock. Children grow up taking care of chickens or pigs, and helping to grow their family's food. They learn the skills needed, develop confidence, and if we're lucky, some choose to become our future food producers.

The McTavish area in particular is the most affordable area for young families in NS. The houses are generally older, and the lots are relatively large. It's where my husband and I were first able to afford a home in North Saanich, and where I grew our own food and had a farm stand, before moving to a larger property and expanding my market garden and flower farm. And that's where our daughter got bit by the farming bug and decided to start her own flower farm. Designating the McTavish area for density will bring in developer money that will price our young families out of the market. Keeping those large lots affordable for families requires that we keep the Urban Containment Boundary outside of North Saanich.



Here's a photo of our market garden in 2018. I share it to show you just how productive a small piece of land can be. That's less than about ½ acre in commercial production. I also want to draw your attention to the farmland in the distance. That beef cattle farm is actually 6 different parcels about 5 acres each, but owned by one farm family for 3 generations.



Here's another photo of it. You can see the expanse of farmland better, and the cattle grazing.



And here's what it looks like now, 3 ½ years later, since the parcels were sold to 6 different owners. It highlights how much productivity is lost as parcels get smaller and smaller. There are three houses so far – I imagine two or three more will follow. If they each add a secondary dwelling, that will be up to 12 households on that farmland, with their lawns, septic fields, driveways and parking. I share this because exclusion, subdivision and non-farm use applications come to the district and the ALC regularly, and at least a couple of members of our present Council have questioned whether subdivision threatens the productivity of Agricultural land.

The ability for home gardeners to produce their own food is a contribution to food security in itself. Any food that is locally produced doesn't have to be imported, making us more nimble and resilient in the face of threats to the global food system, as we have seen recently with issues such as the pandemic, the

November floods, drought, petroleum supply and global shipping insecurity. Our local food system sprang into action when the pandemic hit, and gaps on grocery stores shelves were expanding. Local farmers reported at-farm sales almost 400% greater than previous years, farmers who had been supplying restaurants which closed down created a food distribution hub to distribute food to the vulnerable, and growers switched to supplying more vegetable starter plants to people suddenly interested in growing their own food.

The cost of bringing food in from other countries does not have to be added to the cost of local food. The more affordable food is, the more money families will have to put towards other needs such as housing. Rising food prices disadvantage already struggling lower-income persons and families. When they are able to grow at least some of their own food, they have more money left to spend on rent or the mortgage. And our secondary suites program creates the ability for two families on large lots to grow their own food.

Densifying will also remove natural areas that, while not directly producing food, are important to agriculture for many reasons. Natural areas are habitat to the deeply interconnected web of pollinators, predators and prey that are key to a healthy agricultural ecosystem. The trees hold soil, nutrients and rainwater in place so they are available when they are needed, and so that stormwater doesn't inundate crops. Trees can also mitigate temperature, transpire moisture into the air, and create a buffer against strong winds that can flatten crops.

Perhaps one of the biggest dangers to future food security is that if the kinds of changes that are proposed are approved, the whole focus of our community and our planning staff and Council will shift away from our role as rural and agricultural. Resources will be spent on development, not growing our agricultural potential and food security. Building a resilient local food system will take work, focus, staff time and specific training. We cannot do that and build villages and commercial nooks too.

This is a critically important moment for NS. We have to decide if we're going to take our role in the RGS as a future source of food security seriously or not. What we do next with the OCP will have serious implications for future generations' food security in the region.

The Draft Vision and Goals put forward by the Project Team do little to address the impending food security crisis, our role in addressing it, and the need for the 12,000 acres of new food production. And it could in fact negatively impact food security significantly. We've just recently seen glimpses of this impending crisis through the pandemic, the heat dome, drought, wildfires and the recent devastating flooding events. Experts are predicting this may be the new normal. We need a rework of the Vision and Goals that focuses on proactive, innovative, and committed work to build our food security, making us a model of food production in the region. I think that's a vision that would resonate with far more NS residents and the wider region.

If you agree with me, please make sure to let the Official Community Plan Project Team and North Saanich District Council know.