

# **Agricultural Area Plans: a future for agriculture?**

By Don Cameron Associates\*

Municipal planners in British Columbia (BC) deal with agricultural land issues on a regular basis. However, many are finding that their Official Community Plan (OCP) doesn't provide sufficient direction to address agricultural issues and concerns in a comprehensive manner. This is most often the case in municipalities with increasing urban development pressures, where agricultural land may be the most attractive land for a use other than agricultural production.

Since the early 1990's, many municipalities have developed Agricultural Area Plans. Agricultural area planning has emerged as a tool for municipalities faced with increasing urban development pressures on their agricultural land.

The BC public, and Canadians in general, have a genuine "soft spot" for farming and farmers. Often cited as the most trustworthy of any working group, the farmer's role in keeping food on our tables is admired and appreciated. In BC, the Agricultural Land Commission Act (ALCA) provides legislative support for agriculture. Recently in BC, additional support for local agriculture has been shown through various "Buy Local" and "Eat Local" campaigns.

The cornerstone of the agricultural land preservation program in BC is the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) supported by the ALCA. BC's ALR contains slightly more than 4.7 million hectares of land, representing five percent of the province's total landmass. A further 12.5 percent of the province has some agricultural capability. Of the more than 190 Municipalities and Regional Districts in BC, at least 75% have some of their land within the ALR.

Despite the acceptance of agriculture by the general public, BC's foodlands are under increasing urbanization and development pressures, and agricultural operators are often faced with the possibility of being "squeezed" from their land. High prices for agricultural land, even land in the ALR, has stretched the capacity of farmers to remain profitable.

It is increasingly important for many municipalities and regional districts to find ways to support the future profitability of agriculture, while balancing agricultural and non-agricultural needs. Agricultural Area Planning can be a useful tool for municipalities and regional districts to plan for the future. The process of developing an Agricultural Area Plan is often used as a way to promote local agriculture and to place importance on its protection. Agricultural Area Planning can help municipalities to plan for the sometimes conflicting urban and agricultural needs.

## **What do Agricultural Area Plans Involve?**

Agricultural area plans serve to provide greater focus to agricultural lands and activities by developing short and long-range plans to effectively deal with issues facing the farming community. Agricultural area plans can provide a useful tool for municipalities looking to effectively balance the needs of both the urban and farming communities and to secure a place for agriculture in the future growth of the municipality.

Agricultural area plans can and should be tailored to the individual needs of a municipality, but some common areas often covered by plans include background information, and options and strategies for dealing with:

- The agricultural edge – planning for the points where agricultural and non-agricultural land meet. In many municipalities, the agricultural land pattern has been shaped by urban development, and lengthy agricultural edges have resulted. It is often at the agricultural edge that the most pressing urban-rural conflicts arise, such as those related to the smells, noises and spray drifts often associated with the working landscape that includes progressive and profitable agricultural operations.
- Conflicting roles for “greenspace”. The agricultural landscape, and the “greenspace” it provides is highly valued in our communities. However, with increasing urban development in many regions, and the pressures on municipalities to provide recreational green spaces, agricultural land has become a place of conflict. There are increasing recreational uses of agricultural land today, often resulting in theft of farm products, and vandalism.
- Agriculture and the environment. In addition to the recreational pressures on agricultural land, there are strong environmental pressures related to water and streamside protection of fish, and the role agricultural land plays in sustaining wildlife habitats and populations. In many cases farmers are restricted in their operations as a result of strict environmental regulations.
- Services and infrastructure. Agricultural land is often regarded as land with “development potential” and because of that it has historically been divided by transportation networks to serve the urban community. This “fractured” agricultural land base becomes difficult to farm and the increasing amount of traffic brought into, or beside, agricultural land can bring with it increasing vandalism and theft on agricultural property.
- Legislation and policy. Local councils are finding it increasingly important to identify and understand the impacts of regional, provincial, federal and global agricultural policy, and to achieve greater integration of policy at the municipal level.

### **How are Agricultural Area Plans Prepared?**

Agricultural Area plans are best when built on a solid vision statement, prepared in cooperation with agricultural operators, municipal staff, and the non-farming community. Considerable public consultation is a requirement. Good Agricultural Area Plans will identify strategies for the future of agriculture in the municipality. There will be numerous recommendations developed in consultation with the farm community and others. There will be an implementation strategy and a local group or committee, often an Agricultural Advisory Committee, created to help local governing bodies to implement the strategies developed

Today’s municipal planners are forced to juggle many interests as they plan for the future of their area. What about agriculture? While agriculture as an industry has been growing consistently over the years, so has urban-rural conflict. The need for strong and well-prepared Agricultural Area Plans has never been greater.

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