

# Pitt Meadows mayor offended by mega home application on protected farmland

Residents says the city can no longer sit by as protected land is exploited by investors targeting lots for massive real estate projects.

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The owners of this 33-acre lot in Pitt Meadows, protected under the Agricultural Land Reserve, have applied to build a 31,000 square foot mega home on the property, drawing concern from residents and the city.

By: Matt Kieltyka Metro Published on

An "insulting" application for a mega-structure on Agricultural Land Reserve at the far end of a quiet rural road in Pitt Meadows has galvanized the community into action, its mayor says.

Mayor John Becker told Metro he expects his council to follow others, like those in Delta and Richmond, looking at regulating house sizes on protected farmland after residents were shocked to learn of an application for a massive 31,000 square foot estate home on a 33-acre lot on Ford Road.

The property, a former berry farm, was purchased by Sinominco Investment Group in 2011 and has already had two large residential structures built on it recently.

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Schedule 1 to the Minutes of the Planning Committee meeting of Richmond City Council held on Tuesday, February 7, 2017.

The thought of an even bigger structure built on the same lot has outraged neighbours concerned about valuable ALR land being taken advantage of during the region's housing affordability crisis.

One of those concerned neighbours happens to be Paul Kershaw, a professor at the University of British Columbia's School of Population Health and founder of Generation Squeeze who has become a prominent voice in Metro Vancouver's housing debate.

"That's not why we have an agricultural land reserve. Something is going crazy now when we're building almost hotel-sized structures on it," he said of the application four lots down the road from him. "We already have a problem with expensive home prices and if the land reserve is being created as this space where you can build homes more massive than can be built anywhere else, that's just contributing to the increase in overall prices while compromising the quality of the land."

Kim Grout, the CEO of the Agricultural Land Commission, the independent agency tasked with protecting B.C. farmland and enforcing ALR legislation, said she is concerned about the growing trend of so-called monster homes on protected farmland.

But the size of principle residences on ALR land is regulated by municipalities, not the ALC, she said.

"The principle dwelling is covered by the Local Government Act and so we ourselves aren't able to regulate it," Grout said. "If it's not in our regulation, we can't get involved in establishing criteria for it. But, of course, we encourage municipalities to do so."



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Grout said the ALC has worked with the Ministry of Agriculture and municipalities in the past on a bylaw standard to regulate home sizes on ALR land, but uptake has been "all over the map."

Some cities have taken action themselves.

Delta, for example, restricts single-family dwellings on agricultural land to 5,005 square feet.

The City of Richmond last month adopted a report proposing four possible bylaws that will go to public information meetings in March.

“So there will be discussion and public consultation and great debate in Richmond for two months, and then we’ll make a decision,” said Richmond Coun. Harold Steves, a farmer himself.

Kershaw questioned why his municipality hasn’t taken the same kind of action as Delta and Richmond.

“What’s frustrating about the Pitt Meadows example is that we’re sort of caught in this jurisdictional no-mans land,” he said. “The ALC says, ‘We don’t have any jurisdiction over the size of a home’ and then the municipality says, ‘Well, we don’t really have any bylaws that speak to the size of homes on acreage.’”

While Becker said he’d prefer the province to “step up to the plate with some kind of uniform approach” instead of having municipalities individually tackle it “in some piecemeal fashion”, he said it’s time for Pitt Meadows council to revisit the issue.

Becker said the city tried to tackle house sizes on ALR land (which makes up 85 per cent of Pitt Meadows) several years ago, but council’s efforts “went down in flames” due to the lack of public consultation.



JENNIFER GAUTHIER/METRO

The Agricultural Land Commission has worked with the Ministry of Agriculture and municipalities in the past on a bylaw standard to regulate home sizes on Agricultural Land Reserve, but uptake has been “all over the map,” said Kim Grout, CEO of the ALC.

This latest application has been the subject of discussion at in-camera council meetings and Becker believes there’s now a groundswell of support from residents.

“With respect to the specifics of this monster structure, it really has galvanized people’s attention that this is an issue,” the mayor told Metro. “Clearly – 31,000 square feet – I don’t call this a home. I call it a structure. To suggest that it [is a residence] is, frankly, an insult to my intelligence. You can call a horse a cow, but it’s not going to give milk.”

This time around, he's determined to do a better job engaging landowners, the Indo-Canadian community (which he said has a tradition of housing multiple generations on one property), investors and other stakeholders. "It is certainly my sense that there are sweet spots to be found on this where there is a reasonable restriction on the structure footprints of residences," he said. "As a community, we're going to have to deal with this."

The application for the estate home has not yet gone to council or been approved.