

SPEAKING NOTES – DAN SCHROETER, P.AG., TO RICHMOND COUNCIL, MAR.11/08

Your Worship, members of Richmond Council, ladies and gentlemen:

My report is focused on providing the Agricultural Land Commission with the agricultural component of the information that it typically considers in an exclusion application.

- A. Firstly, my report summarizes what is known about the Garden City lands' soils and agricultural capability. This is based on review of a brief inspection report of the subject by the ALC's staff agrologist, combined with a review of the drill logs from the recent geotechnical investigations carried out on the site. The soils and agricultural capability of the site has never been mapped by the Province; north of Westminster Highway, there is no provincial mapping west of No. 5 Road. In the absence of any detailed mapping, I've assumed that the ALC's assessment of the site is largely appropriate and that it can be improved to Class 3 capability, although only with much more work and expense than is typically encountered in more agricultural settings.
- B. Secondly, my report addresses the agricultural suitability of the site. Unlike capability which is determined through application of a known and rigorous methodology, agricultural suitability is a much more subjective notion. In my report, I have addressed it in the context of my understanding of the type of criteria that the ALC typically considers when it looks at this concept. In addition to capability considerations, these include several factors that look at the context of the land in question. For the subject property, I suggest that 6 additional factors are relevant to an assessment of suitability:
 1. The first of these is the position of the lands relative to the ALR and to existing farmed land. Key considerations here include:
 - a) the fact the property is a 'finger' of ALR land extending into urban Richmond
 - b) that there is no ALR land north, west or south of the property
 - c) that largely vacant ALR lands exist to the east, owned and partially occupied by the Department of National Defence
 - d) that there are no lands adjacent to the subject that are farmed; the closest farming to the subject is on small-holdings located well east on Westminster Highway or well south on No. 4 Road
 2. The second factor is the setting of the subject lands relative to surrounding land use. The main consideration here is that the land is surrounded on 3 sides by urban development, proximity to which poses additional constraints for agricultural use. These constraints include:
 - a) potential noise & odour conflicts

- b) predation control constraints
 - c) theft and vandalism issues
 - d) possible road icing from frost protection systems
3. A third factor involves access to/from the property. The main consideration here is that the property is surrounded by major roads and heavy volumes of traffic. This would pose additional access difficulties and increased safety concerns for any farm operator, as well as any farm suppliers.
4. A fourth factor is irrigation and drainage constraints. In this location, the only obvious source of irrigation water is the City's domestic system; for a farmer, this is an extremely expensive proposition. While a few farmers make limited use of the City's water system for small-scale applications, its use for large-scale irrigation of berries or vegetables, or for frost-protection or harvesting of cranberries is far too expensive to be a viable proposition for most farmers.
5. The fifth suitability factor involves the present condition of the subject property.
- a. About 6 acres in the northwest portion of the property along Alderbridge Way was filled by up to 2 m of fill, probably from construction excavation or demolition material. I note that in 1988, the ALC approved an application from FW Scales Trucking to deposit 50,000 m³ of fill. This is probably the source of the material in these 6 acres. It also appears that the peat layer in this portion of the site may have been scalped off prior to fill deposition.
 - b. Along the rest of Alderbridge Way and all along No. 4 Road, sub-soil material, probably from adjacent road and ditch development, appears to have been sidcast into the property to a distance averaging 50-60 feet but extending as far as 80 feet into the property.
 - c. Most or all of the site still contains debris from its former use as a base for radio towers. While the towers have been removed, foundations, guy-wires and other assorted debris remain on the property. In addition, there is an array of many thousands of meters of antenna cabling buried throughout the property.
 - d. Not even mentioned in my report is possible contamination from still earlier use of the property by the DND as a rifle range. I only became aware of this issue after I had finalized my report. I know there is a bit of a debate on, as to whether this would have resulted in any lead contamination of the site, and I don't have any information to contribute in this regard. However, I do know that this has proven to be the case at other discontinued rifle ranges and, from my point of view, it raises yet another caution when considering the agricultural suitability of the site.

- e. All of these legacies from the past use of the property serve to debilitate the site's underlying agricultural capability and they would all have to be remediated, at considerable expense, prior to any agricultural development.
6. The final suitability factor that I have identified is the lands' unusual overlying tenure: as surplus, vacant, federal Crown land the subject is subject to the Musqueam Nation's aboriginal title to the land and this imposes a profound constraint to the site's suitability for agricultural development.

These factors, while they don't necessarily preclude agricultural development (except perhaps for the last one), all serve to increase the complexity, cost and nature of any agricultural development that might be pursued on the site. I can't think of any comparable site in Richmond that faces the degree of challenge to potential agricultural development as this site. For these reasons I believe the site has low suitability for agriculture, despite its original, underlying agricultural capability.

- C. Thirdly, my report looks at possible food security considerations that would arise from the possible loss of this site from the ALR. It does so in the context of the three major crop categories identified in my report as being best suited to the subject property: vegetables, cranberries and blueberries.

For cranberries and blueberries, there clearly are no food security issues. Richmond, the Lower Mainland region and BC are all substantial net exporters of these crops. The Garden City site is not needed to ensure available local, regional or provincial supplies of these products.

For vegetables, Richmond, the Lower Mainland, as well as BC in total, clearly grow only a portion of their current consumption. However, the important thing to note here is that this is not due to any lack of available, capable land. Almost all vegetable production in BC occurs on Class 1-3 lands. In the Mainland Region's ALR in the mid-70s, it is estimated that there were about 184,000 acres of these higher capability lands out of a total ALR area of well over 400,000 acres. At that time only about half of these Class 1-3 lands were cultivated and, of this half, less than a third was in horticultural crops, including vegetables and fruit. Vegetable production in the region is estimated to have occurred on only 20,000 acres at this time. Over the past thirty years, little has changed, despite some loss of ALR lands as the region's population has grown. The total land base cultivated by farmers in the region is roughly the same as was 30 years ago – about 165,000 to 170,000 acres and, of this, still only about 20,000 acres are devoted to vegetable production. All of this clearly shows that the regional scope for increasing vegetable production is substantial – at least 8-fold - if economic conditions ever dictated the need or opportunity.

It should also be noted how very little land is needed to produce a region's vegetable consumption requirements. A 1977-79 research study that I coordinated concluded that the Province's vegetable requirements (considering only the vegetables that can be grown here) could be produced on less than 38,000 acres of Class 1-3 lands. While this amount

may have increased somewhat in the last 30 years as our population has grown, given that there is an estimated 2.5 million acres of Class 1-3 lands in the Province, this cannot be regarded as a daunting task for our resource base.

Given this, it does not seem reasonable, in either the regional or provincial context of land availability, to say that the subject lands will be needed to secure future vegetable production requirements.

The commentary I've just provided is only for vegetables. To be fair, I should point out that that same research program that I led in the late-70s into the productive capacity of BC's agricultural land base also came to the conclusion that for BC to produce all of the province's food requirements – at least for all of the agricultural products that can be produced here, including all animal products, - we would need to draw on almost all readily available lands within the provincial ALR. However, in this scenario, fully 95% of the land requirements identified were to produce feed for livestock products, including a whopping 80% for just beef alone. These requirements for beef production included the extensive grazing lands and rangelands that are typically used in BC in what is a very land-extensive production system. While this study result has sometimes been used to support the need to preserve all land in BC with agricultural capability, I believe that the result should be viewed in the wider context that BC consumers live next to the Canadian Prairies, which generate one of the largest surpluses of grain and beef production in the world.

7. Lastly, my report looks at the viability of farming in Richmond. Because the ALC sometimes places some weight on production economics when considering exclusion applications, I've included a look at current and near-term economics in my assessment. Given that, for the most part, the ALC's time reference is too long-term to provide them with supportable economic projections. I don't propose to dwell on this portion of my report too much. I'll just quickly summarize my findings.

For vegetables, which probably includes upwards to a hundred or more different crop enterprises, I haven't attempted any enterprise-by-enterprise examination. Rather, I've just examined the evidence of what is happening in Richmond and in the larger region with respect to vegetable acreage. Vegetable production has substantially declined in Richmond over the last 20 years. The acreage under production in Richmond, which was about only about 760 acres in 2006, is less than half of what it was 20 years ago. Over the same period, vegetable production in the GVRD and the wider Lower Mainland region has been very stable at around 12-13,000 acres in the GVRD and around 20,000 acres in the Lower Mainland.

The conclusion flowing from these data is that while overall vegetable acreage is more or less holding constant in the wider region, production in Richmond has not been sustainable. This is largely attributed to the higher cost of farming in Richmond compared to the outlying areas in the region. And this is the situation for all vegetable production in the City, most of which is not facing the urban pressure and additional constraints that cropping the subject lands would face. In this context, when lands in the

more agricultural parts of Richmond are having problems sustaining vegetable production, it does not seem reasonable to suggest that vegetable production on the subject lands is a viable land use.

For cranberries and blueberries, I carried out some market research and also set up two cost of production enterprise models for Richmond, based largely on previous work that I had done for these specific crops. For cranberries, I concluded that expansion of production in the more agricultural parts of Richmond is not currently viable and therefore any cranberry development on the subject lands would be even less attractive.

Blueberries have had some good returns lately because of recent increases in consumer demand related to perceived health benefits. Because of the lag involved in getting additional acreages in production, prices have risen in the face of this increase in demand. However, because of substantial new plantings throughout the blueberry growing areas of North America, including here in the Fraser Valley, I believe that it is very likely that the market will become substantially oversupplied in short order and prices and returns will decline precipitously. I would not recommend expansion of blueberry production to any grower anywhere in Richmond, let alone on the subject property, where I expect development and operating costs to be much higher than in other parts of Richmond.

In closing to your Worship and members of Council, I stand behind my analysis and findings. My work represents only one part of the comprehensive "Block Application" before you. I don't regard it as my role to tell you how to proceed. However, I would say that if it is mainly the agricultural aspects of this submission that are causing you uncertainty or concern, then I would suggest to you that the Agricultural Land Commission is the most appropriate forum to assess and adjudicate those concerns. Thank you.