

# *Feeding the Apartment Dwellers*

A Planning Strategy to Enhance the Long-term Viability of Contemporary Farming in Canada's Urban Regions

by **Kari Huhtala, MCIP, Karen Thomas, Jim Hiley, and Elizabeth Kenney**

*The city of Richmond, located immediately south of Vancouver on the Fraser River Delta, has demonstrated excellence in the management of rapid urban growth in the past twenty-five years.*

Between 1971 and 1996, the population on roughly 7,800 hectares rose from about 60,000 to nearly 150,000. By 1996, 50,000 private dwellings had been constructed, with 80 per cent being less than thirty years old. The city has received numerous awards for the creative way it has managed urban expansion in a confined area of mineral soils. However, with limited opportunities for further expansion, city council and administration have recognized the need for a new planning approach that ensures compatibility between urban development and contemporary farming, an activity that accounts for most of the land use in Richmond's non-urban areas.

Urban expansion within Richmond and structural changes in agricultural production, resulting from shifting global market conditions, have placed extreme pressures on some of Canada's most intensive agricultural producers. According to the 1981 to 1996 Census of Agriculture from Statistics Canada, Richmond lost about one-third of its farms along with most of the inventory and capital value in sheep and lambs, as well as in dairy and beef cattle. By 1996, the remaining 250 farms had a total farm area of about 3,000 hectares, with producers reporting nearly \$100 million in annual income and expenses from the production of small fruits, field vegetables and greenhouse flowers. During the latest revision of the Official Community Plan, citizens not only recognized the significant alterations to Richmond's farms in the past thirty years but also expressed considerable support for the continuation of viable agricultural operations.

## **Richmond's Agricultural Viability Strategy**

With this clear expression of the public's interest, city council directed its urban development division to produce a plan that ensured the long-term viability of Richmond's farms. The Richmond Agricultural Viability Strategy emerged from an extensive consultation process involving Richmond's citizens and, with guidance from the Richmond Farmers' Institute, the agri-food industry. The strategy is premised on the assumptions that land currently being farmed will remain in production, and that farms must be economically viable. It contains a city-wide management plan so that the interests of the farming community are incorporated sooner in the municipality's planning and service-delivery processes. It also includes "agricultural nodal management areas" that ensure local plans reflect the diversity of farming and associated issues in the city. Central to the strategy are procedures to maintain open lines of communication between the farming community, city council and administration by means of an agricultural advisory committee, a designated councillor, and a staff agricultural liaison person. While comprehensive in scope and substance, the success of the strategy is closely linked to several initiatives of the provincial government.

## **A supportive provincial planning framework**

Provincial legislation and programs provide a framework that enables implementation of the strategy. Farming in Richmond occurs in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), part of a 4.7 million-hectare land base protected for agricultural production by provincial legislation. From its inception in 1973, the Land Reserve Commission has permitted the removal of 584 hectares from Richmond's part of the ALR, and has allowed only a few withdrawals after 1988, mostly for reasons involving soil conditions and difficulties in farming certain parcels. In 1995, the provincial government introduced the Strengthening Farming Initiative to secure the place of the agri-food industry within local government planning processes. As part of the initiative, the Farm Practices Protection (Right to Farm) Act was introduced and the Local Government Act was amended.

Also launched were new programs such as "Agri-teams" in which a Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (BCMAFF) regional agrologist and a Land Reserve Commission planner support local governments on agricultural issues. In the "AgFocus" program, BCMAFF's specialist in geographic information systems (GIS) can assist planners with agricultural land-use inventories and GIS applications for plan and by-law development. Local planners can also obtain provincial funding and topical literature. Together, the provincial policy of farmland preservation and the Strengthening Farming Initiative are increasing opportunities for proactive agricultural land-use planning in British Columbia.

## **Relevant information, effectively managed**

To enhance the way in which planners and elected officials understand Richmond's farming areas, federal and provincial agricultural specialists developed an information base within a corporate geographic information system. Two particular areas of coverage represent the range of information needed to characterize Richmond's farming areas. Federal personnel used the original soil survey report in electronic form to derive regional landscape units that display a uniform pattern of topography, soils, vegetation, and local climate. In terms of agricultural land use, provincial personnel employed the BCMAFF hierarchical coding system to make an inventory of crops, livestock, structures, and buildings in each land parcel of the ALR. The data, recorded in electronic spreadsheets, were integrated into the GIS and custom tools linked the inventory to the city's cadastral layer for geographic display and analysis. The integrated databases directly contributed to the strategy via the definition of "agricultural nodal management areas."

## **Agricultural nodal management areas**

Taken collectively, producers' decisions regarding crop and livestock production, in the context of weather, land resources, local regulations, adjacent land uses, and relationships with other landowners, contribute to the evolution of distinct farming districts. Local producers and a BCMAFF

agricultural specialist used a combination of expert knowledge and the integrated databases to summarize the geographic distribution of these factors into "agricultural nodal management areas" (ANMAs). These spatial units are the basis for the development of locally relevant plans. The Gilmore ANMA, for example, bounded by condominiums, arterial roads and the Fraser River, contains productive, fairly well-drained mineral soils that support vegetable, forage and dairy production (Figure 1). Several large, non-farm residences and a golf course create the potential for land-use conflicts in this ANMA. In contrast, East Richmond 3 ANMA is characterized by a high water table, the Fraser River, and several major provincial highways. Effective management of the water table by municipal personnel and local producers is critical to the cranberry, blueberry, mixed-vegetable and nursery products of the deep organic soils in the ANMA. Plans for these ANMAs reflect their distinctive bio-physical and socio-economic characteristics, as well as the different issues that concern farm families and their many neighbours.

**Lessons learned**

The Richmond Agricultural Viability Strategy is a unique product of the fortuitous convergence of motivated people and appropriate programs. The key drivers were public support for and political commitment to the continuation of viable agricultural production in Richmond. In response, the urban development division demonstrated the leadership necessary to position Richmond's agricultural producers within the municipal planning process. Finally, a supportive provincial framework provided the justification for the research and inventory activities that delivered new, more relevant information on Richmond's farms to the planning process.

Could this strategy be applied to other jurisdictions in British Columbia and Canada? The preliminary answer is yes, as Canadians from every region have consistently expressed similar support for farming and its related processing industries. The planning community may wish to scrutinize the reasons why a sincere political commitment at the local level has not followed these other expressions of public support for a viable agri-food industry. Through such an examination, planners may gain the insights needed to apply the Richmond planning approach, or a suitable variant of it, to other Canadian municipalities.

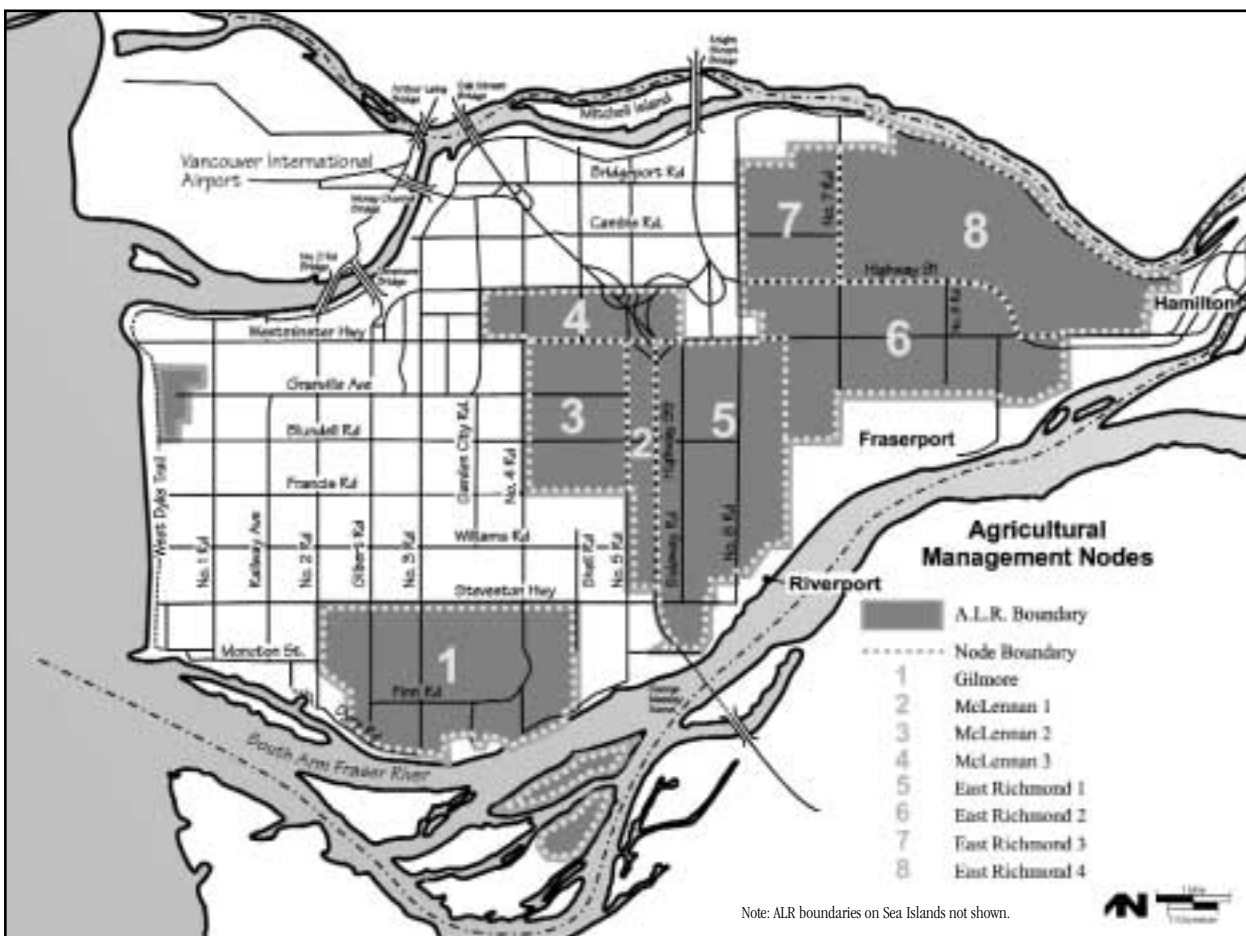
**Summary**

In their efforts to promote orderly growth within urban regions of Canada, planners identify the requirements of many different land uses and provide realistic options to balance them. At present, the planning processes they follow often concentrate on the demands of urban-related development, and pay minimal attention to the requirements of contemporary agricultural production. Planners in a municipality of the Greater Vancouver Metropolitan Region have demonstrated the type of approach and strategy needed to realize more sustainable growth in Canada's rapidly urbanizing regions.

**Sommaire**

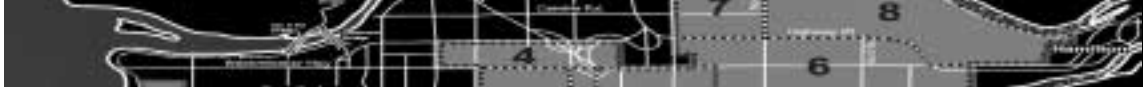
*L'urbaniste qui a pour souci d'encourager une croissance saine dans les régions urbaines canadiennes doit reconnaître les différents besoins d'utilisation du territoire et présenter des solutions réalistes. Les processus actuels, en ce qui a trait à l'aménagement, tiennent compte des besoins urbains plutôt que de ceux des producteurs agricoles. Des urbanistes de la région métropolitaine de Vancouver ont créé une stratégie d'aménagement permettant d'accommoder une croissance plus soutenue dans les zones urbaines canadiennes.*

**Figure 1  
Agricultural Management Nodes**



Note: ALR boundaries on Sea Islands not shown.

Courtesy of the City of Richmond



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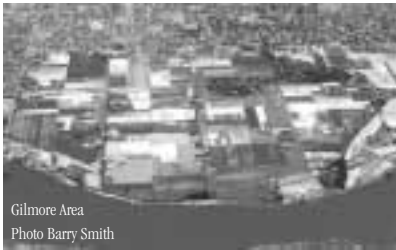
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For summaries of the review process, please refer to:  
www.city.richmond.bc.ca/planning/agriculture/survey\_report.htm  
www.city.richmond.bc.ca/planning/agriculture/publicworkshop\_2000.htm



Gilmore Area  
Photo Barry Smith

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# The Cornerstones of Community-Building

by **Bryan Tuckey, MCIP RPP**

*Discussions on growth management have been prominent in 2001. Comparisons to the "smart growth" program in the United States are common, placing the growth issue at the forefront of current planning challenges.*

Using the "smart growth" issue to galvanize programs and educate political leaders, the public, and their peers, the staff of York Region Planning and Development Services has focused its attention on demonstrating state-of-the-art growth management programs in York Region and the Greater Toronto Area (GTA).

York Region is one of the fastest-growing areas in Ontario. Effective growth management plays a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing the quality of life enjoyed by its growing, changing population. Growth management also influences the region's economic competitiveness, contributing to its success in attracting and keeping job-rich industries and businesses.

Since the approval of the regional official plan in October 1994, York Region has had a comprehensive strategy for growth management and community building. The official plan builds on three interrelated concepts: sustainable natural environment, healthy communities, and economic vitality. These elements provide the cornerstones of the region's growth management program, regional structure policy, and community-building planning approach. They also support York's clear focus on quality of life.

The preservation and enhancement of the natural environment is exemplified in aggressive policy endeavours, such as the adoption of the "Greening of York Region" and "Regional Land Securement" strategies. Healthy communities are diverse places to live, work, play, and learn, where the built environment is sustainable and features high-quality design that produces safe, accessible, human-scale neighbourhoods. And finally, the theme of economic vitality refers to the role that a healthy economy and business environment plays in maintaining a high quality of life for citizens. A prosperous, business-supportive economy ensures that the job market keeps pace with population growth.

The six key principles that implement the region's growth management strategy demonstrate the interconnectedness of the three themes:

- Firm urban boundaries within which most of the population and employment will occur;
- A system of centres and corridors that provide a focus for residential and commercial development;
- Comprehensive plans for new communities that are compact, well designed and transit-supportive;
- Identification and protection of a system of green areas and spaces;
- Analysis of the fiscal impact of new development; and
- Protection of agricultural and rural uses.

Since it approved the official plan, York Regional Council has supported a series of strategic initiatives that complement, implement and enhance the region's collaborative, inclusive and comprehensive approach to managing growth. Each of these initiatives was seen as innovative when council approved the program. New programs include:

- A twenty-five-year financial forecast of development charges;
- Long-range water and sewer strategies;
- An integrated plan for the regional transit system and transportation;
- A "Greening of York Region" strategy;
- A "greenlands" strategy; and
- Vision 2026 (York Region's strategic plan).

In an ongoing effort to manage rapid growth, the region established firm boundaries that may be altered only by amendment of the official plan. The official plan structure provides an innovative and comprehensive community-building framework. In York Region, council requires all new developments to complete detailed fiscal analyses involving long-range strategies for infrastructure.