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City's 'smart growth' claim questioned

By Matthew Hoekstra - Richmond Review - February 27, 2008

An urban environmental group is calling on the City of Richmond to strip the term "smart growth" from its planning documents for the Garden City lands.

Smart Growth BC executive director Cheeying Ho said in a Feb. 20 letter to the city a "key" smart growth principles was absent from a city survey circulated at recent open houses and online regarding the future of the contentious farmland parcel.

At issue is question 6a: "Do you support future development of Garden City Lands based on the Smart Growth principles?" The question's preamble states the three-way agreement to develop the property allows the city to follow "Smart Growth" principles: "building a complete community; building green; building economic vitality; and fostering a legacy."

But Ho notes there are 10 principles recognized by dozens of smart growth organizations and advocates across North America. Key among them, and missing from the questionnaire, is to "protect and enhance agricultural lands."

"For a project or proposal to be considered 'smart growth' it must incorporate not only some, but all of the principles," said Ho.

Ho is requesting the city remove the term from its planning documents for the lands.

"The protection and enhancement of ALR land is at the heart of every sustainable community. Food producing lands, whether they are currently being farmed or not, will continue to be an extremely valuable asset. As fuel and transportation costs rise, producing food in close proximity to current and future populations will be a food security issue for all citizens," said Ho.

At Monday's council meeting, senior planner Joe Erceg said the reference to smart growth in the survey was "generic" and not a reference to Smart Growth BC or its principles.

"In our view the reference was something distinct from Smart Growth BC."

But Coun. Harold Steves disagreed with staff's use of the term.

"Smart growth being applied to the Garden City lands is dead wrong. It is actually un-smart growth that the city is promoting because there isn't even a transit centre there, it's a 15-minute walk..." he said.

"Smart growth policies and programs do not apply to the Garden City lands. They're the exact antithesis of smart growth."

Richmond resident Shane McMillan told council the city has “mislead the public” in suggesting the agreement to develop the Garden City lands with the Musqueam and Canada Lands Company follows smart growth planning.

“Keeping the land in the (Agricultural Land Reserve) follows the principles of smart growth, removing the land and proceeding with development does not.”

Smart growth principles

1. Mix land uses
2. Build well-designed compact neighbourhoods
3. Provide a variety of transportation choices
4. Create diverse housing opportunities
5. Encourage growth in existing communities
6. Preserve open spaces, natural beauty, and environmentally sensitive areas
7. Protect and enhance agricultural lands
8. Utilize smarter, and cheaper infrastructure and green buildings
9. Foster a unique neighbourhood identity
10. Nurture engaged citizens

- source: Smart Growth BC

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