

big ideas

Philip Hochstein

Space invaders

It's time to rethink our green zone

Two factors are clearly emerging as potential brakes on continued prosperity and economic growth in Greater Vancouver. The first is the worsening crisis in housing affordability and the second is the increasing difficulty in locating appropriately situated land for industrial use.

Limited land supply is a common contributing factor to both problems. Yet the Greater Vancouver Regional District's (GVRD) 1996 Livable Region Strategic Plan designates about 70 per cent of the region as a Green Zone, to be protected from urban growth. And a large chunk of that is accounted for by the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), which covers some 20 per cent of the GVRD.

While parts of the ALR contribute to food production, more than one quarter of GVRD ALR does not. In Richmond alone, 39 per cent of land in the ALR is not being used for farming.

The time has come to reclassify all ALR land that is not being used for food production for residential, commercial and industrial use.

The GVRD estimates that one-third of all Greater Vancouver households have problems finding and remaining in affordable housing. A recent federal government study identified Greater Vancouver as having the greatest incidence of working poor of any major city in Canada – and cited high housing costs as the reason.

A recent preliminary GVRD report concluded that we can build enough new housing to accommodate anticipated regional population growth to 2031 while still leaving the majority of the regional land base in green zones. But that theory is based on the shaky premise of aggressive densification in existing neighbourhoods.

No one is arguing the wisdom of densification, but the costs of development in our current residential areas, when compared with greenfield sites, could actually make new units less affordable.

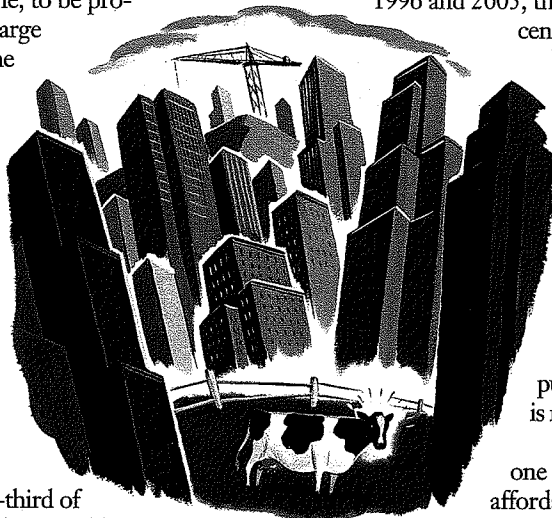
And getting land out of the ALR is next to impossible. Consider the application last year for development of the Garden City lands in Richmond. The rejected proposal – which had federal, municipal and Musqueam backing – would have resulted in a combination of density-friendly residential zoning, parkland and other public amenities. Instead, these lands remain locked up within the ALR, despite the strong likelihood that they will never be farmed.

This only increases pressure on newly developing and future-growth areas – where the GVRD report says one-fifth of the increase in housing demand will have to be met. The Garden City lands are centrally located and will soon be served by rapid transit. That's not true of new-growth areas stretching ever farther into the valley.

An alarming trend is also occurring with Greater Vancouver's industrial land base, which supports jobs for the region. Between 1996 and 2005, the GVRD's population grew by 13 per cent, while the industrial land base shrank by the same percentage, leaving a total of only about 10,600 hectares, or less than four per cent of the regional land base.

Today, more than 30 years after the ALR was established to combat the erosion of the farming land base in B.C., it is about time that we question whether the rationale for creating it is still valid. Without question, however, we must make better public use of land trapped in the ALR that is not serving an agricultural purpose.

Greater Vancouver continues to be one of Canada's urban jewels. But we need affordable housing and places to work to continue to grow. It's time to change our thinking on land-use policy and embrace progress instead of the status quo. ■



WHAT IS THE ALR?

The Agricultural Land Reserve was created by the provincial Land Commission Act of 1973. It includes private and public lands that may be farmed, forested or vacant, on which agriculture is recognized as the priority use. Though the boundaries have shifted over the years, the total area has remained relatively constant at approximately 4.7 million hectares, or about five per cent of the entire province.

Approximately 53,760 hectares, or 16 per cent of the land within the 21 municipalities and one electoral area comprising the Greater Vancouver Regional District fall within the ALR. □

Source: Agricultural Land Commission (alc.gov.bc.ca)

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