

**PENINSULA & AREA AGRICULTURAL COMMISSION MEETING
COMMITTEE ROOM #1 – SAANICH MUNICIPAL HALL
THURSDAY MAY 11, 2023 7:00 PM**

In attendance: Robin Tunnicliffe in the Chair; Linda Geggie; Katie Underwood; Dianne Williamson; Anita Bull; Councillors De Vries (Saanich), Paltiel (C. Saanich) and Stock (N. Saanich) and Isobel Hoffmann, Recording Secretary.

Guests: Megan Halstead, Regional Agrologist; Cassidy Daskalchuck, Saanich Planning; Noah Brotman, CRD; Sheila McDonald, Haliburton Farm; Andrea Pickard, Planner Central Saanich, and Nicolas Denux, property owner.

Regrets: Satnam Dheenshaw; Terry Michell; Jenni Michell; Larry Sluggett

Minutes: Adoption of the March 9 2023 Minutes were deferred to the next meeting due to late circulation.

At the request of the Chair, members provided an update on their farm operations. Councillor Cecilia Stock from North Saanich was welcomed as the new representative from North Saanich.

TREASURER'S REPORT - Jenni Michell – not present

- Isobel reported that the expenses for the Farmers' Institute meeting last month have been processed through Saanich account and will be returned to the PAAC account. Costs were \$563.63, covering room rental, two \$100 honorariums, and food costs.

7701 EAST SAANICH ROAD – Rezoning & Development Permit, Central Saanich

Andrea Pickard, Central Saanich Planner, and Nicolas Denux, property owner, were present to elaborate on the application.

- The staff report considered at the May 8, 2023 Council meeting was circulated to members.
- A Land Use Amendment Bylaw, a Housing Agreement Bylaw and a Development Permit have been prepared. Prior to final adoption, a covenant will be a requirement.
- The redevelopment on East Saanich Road, just south of the village and 275 m from Mount Newton X Road, abuts agricultural land on the east side and has been referred to PAAC for comment because of the large variance requested on the east side of the building.
- The site presently has ten townhouses that are over 40 years old and in need of updates. The proposal calls for redevelopment the site to include 61 market rental apartment units in a 4 storey building, which would include 9 ground floor townhouses.
- The applicant is requesting a variance on the east side from 15.5 m (which includes an additional 5m for ALR) to 5m from the property line; Council has some concerns about the interface with agriculture.
- The tenants of the building will be required to sign a covenant so they are aware there could be odours, noise, dust and general farm activities starting early in the mornings.
- An increased boundary adjacent to ALR lands is to protect the farmers and the residents.
- There will be fencing and landscaping around the building, as well as tree retention.
- All storm water and run-off created by the building will be retained on the site.

- The 50-acre ALR property is owned by the Thompson family. They will be using farm machinery and irrigation perhaps starting as early as 5 am. Sometimes operations could go on round the clock.
- Neighbours to the south and north are within 7m of the proposed building and there are existing townhouses on the site. Conflicts on both sides of Mt. Newton have been very few.

PAAC discussion noted:

- This is a significant variance; the occupants on the east side of the building will be the ones to be most affected by the dust, smells and noise.
- A member noted they had a poultry farm in Saanich for 60 years near the Royal Oak/Cordova Bay intersection. They had covenants and buffer zones on the east and west sides and that was before any homes were built nearby.
- To get and retain organic certification at least an 8m setback is required. Would this proposed reduced setback be an issue for the farmer?
- Members were impressed with the shadow report as that is an important consideration from a farming perspective.
- The benefit of building rental housing in Central Saanich is acknowledged.
- The impact on the tenants from the clouds of dust could be significant; they won't be able to open windows or sit on the balconies or patios at times.
- The best practice is to have significant buffers around ALR land; however, it is recognized that affordable rental housing is also needed.
- It appears that the plans are well developed, but consideration should be given to a wider buffer. At the very least there should be as much screening as possible.
- Concern that this major variance could set a precedent.
- The idea of building "up" instead of sprawling out is a good decision

Andrea and the applicant responded:

- Due to the obvious stated concerns, this is why it is important to have a covenant so everyone is aware of the Right to Farm Act.
- All units will have heat pumps for heating and cooling so there will be no need to open windows.
- Because the units are rentals, if tenants don't like the situation they can move as there will be no financial investment on their part.
- The applicant advised he will speak to the engineers and landscape architects to ensure the storm water is handled properly and there is adequate screening and landscaping.
- Andrea noted that since she has worked at the District, the required 15.5 m buffer has rarely been used, although she pointed out that the majority of the zoning bylaw was drafted in 1978.
- In recent years there have been more variances; adjacent developments to 7701 East Saanich have received variances. Sometimes variances are as close as 2m with a hedge. No complaints have been received about variances in the past 10 years.
- Councillor Paltiel stated that Council makes decisions on a case-by-case basis.

PAAC discussion ensued:

- The best practice would be a 30 m setback from ALR lands; 15.5 m is the required setback according to current bylaws, but in reality this rarely happens.

- However, having a setback of at least half the requirement would help to reduce the impact of noise and dust, etc.
- Fencing should also be considered along the east boundary, especially if there are children residing in the building.
- The applicant should provide a Welcome Package to outline the issues and daily activities residents can expect living so close to farmland. Andrea noted that the Ministry of Agriculture has some literature on this topic.

MOTION: Moved by Linda Geggie and Seconded by Anita Bull: “Regarding the development at 7701 East Saanich Road which abuts onto agricultural lands on the east side of the building, the best practice for setbacks should be considered, including screening and buffering as much as possible.”

CARRIED

SPEAKER'S BUREAU – Noah Brotman, CRD – Foodlands Access Programme

- Many people, including four municipalities and community stakeholders, have been working on this programme over the past ten years to support access to farmland in the CRD.
- The cost of farmland is very expensive and this precludes young farmers from land access.
- Within the CRD, there is just over 16,000 ha of ALR, representing 7.1% of the area. An expected 27% population growth over the next 15 years will put significant pressure on our food lands. The 2018 Regional Growth Strategy notes a target to increase productive food lands by 5,000 ha by 2038.
- While the introduction of the ALR 50 years ago help to slow the loss of farmland, there is a need for more action to ensure that farmland is used for its intended purpose.
- Local food security has gained a lot of attention lately and the current CRD Board has expressed some real interest in this area.
- Some of the properties that have been considered for access lands to new farmers include:
 - Newman Farm in Central Saanich
 - Panama Flats in Saanich
 - Bear Hill Farm in Saanich/Central Saanich
- He has spoken with various stakeholders and farmers about our options, with the goal to narrow down what area could be supported and would be the most successful.
- For various reasons, Bear Hill in the north part of Saanich, and close to Central Saanich, seems the best option and is owned by the CRD. Once the land is cleared, the property would be about 5 acres, fenced and irrigated, with a healthy Garry Oak forest on the northern border.
- Currently the Garry Oak Meadow Preservation Society are the only users of the property.
- The property is an amazing resource that is not being used.
- The 5-acre parcel could be leased to one experienced farmer, or perhaps to five young farmers with 1 acre each.
- A business plan is being discussed considering the pros and cons and an RFQ is being prepared to determine if there are qualified farm operators interested in managing the site and to bring in young farmers. No one at the CRD is qualified to manage the site.
- The CRD would support accessing grants and would help with operations and any legal issues.

- Regarding the timeline: The RFQ would be issued this year; a service would be established at the CRD level in the fall and then we can move forward in 2024 on soil amendments, capital improvements, and discussions with farmers. 2025 is the target start up date.
- Some of the start up costs involved: removal of the existing barn (it has been condemned), wash stations, coolers, etc. There are many components and many opinions.
- A second proposal is to involve the Young Agrarians with the land matching programme.
- This programme is a great concept with a lot of potential, but it is not well known. The group hopes to expand their presence and they also have access to government funding.
- Working with the Young Agrarians would be a way to ensure new and young farmers can get access to farmland. The CRD would provide grant funding for start up costs of up to \$100,000, either with ten grants of \$10,000 or four grants of \$25,000.
- Suggested a minimum lease of 20 years, which would give security to the farmer.
- Aging and retiring farmers is something we have to consider; life long farmers who want to retire on their property and whose children do not want to take over the farm could lease out land while still living there – this is an innovative idea worth exploring and a win-win situation.
- The spirit of the programme going forward is how to ensure people who want to get into commercial food production have the availability to do this with land being so expensive.
- The Young Agrarians, who operate a land matching programme, want people with farming experience but there is not a lot of security offered.
- Whether the programme operates through a non-profit or a co-op group, start-up costs are still a factor; it could be a complex situation if government grants are received how to disperse the funds to cover land costs and other infrastructure (irrigation, fencing, greenhouses or even to purchase farm equipment, etc).
- He likes the idea of grant monies being used for investment on the land; more discussion is needed.
- A promotion campaign is being prepared – for both would-be farmers and land owners.

Discussion ensued, noting the following:

- A land owner on Brookleigh Road who recently applied to Saanich Council for a change to his property, would consider leasing a 1.25 acre portion of his ALR lands as he is not interested in farming.
- School District 63 has 83 acres of property with a Memorandum of Understanding with an agriculture group and want to establish a food hub; North Saanich staff are reviewing.
- Katie Underwood is a participant in the land matching programme; land security is important. In order to be motivated, the farmer leasing the property needs to know they have some “skin in the game”. She thought it could be restrictive to work with a non-profit.
- It is not about a non-profit being involved; it is an incubator farm programme. Non-profits can only lease and ensure there is equity and support land access. You could also do this with a group of farmers.
- Haliburton Farms has spent over \$22,000 on infrastructure; there is no power but solar panels have been installed. The farmers invest in the operation as it is cost-prohibitive to buy land.

Noah stated:

- The end goal is to increase the amount of land available for new and young farmers. At some point the RFU will be circulated to PAAC.

- He appreciated the suggestion that a letter of support be received from PAAC. The secretary to draft a letter and circulate to members.

CORRESPONDENCE

- a) 3983 Holland Avenue: Saanich Referral for Farm Worker Accommodation – DEFERRED to the June Meeting pending additional information.
- b) Email from Owen Wilson, 536 Brookleigh Road (application for non-farm use on ALR property considered at April 13 meeting) advised he has some acreage on his property he would be willing to lease to a farmer, noting he was unaware of the need and that he has no intention of farming. Robin will contact him and explore the offer further, perhaps with a referral to the Young Agrarians.
- c) Application to join PAAC from Barry McLean; suggest that he be invited to the June meeting and that background information on PAAC be email to him in the meantime.

AGRICULTURAL ISSUES: CURRENT

- a) **Water update – Mike Doehnel** – not present
- b) **Spring Farm Tour 2023 – Linda Geggie (Robin and Isobel)**
 - Isobel circulated some of the information to be included in a package for the bus tour, scheduled for Saturday June 10, 2023.
 - Timelines have to be adjusted as we have a 10am booking at Bilston Lavender Farm, which means leaving the first pickup spot at Michells by 9:00a.m. at the latest, and the second pickup from Saanich Hall leaving by 9:30 a.m.
 - A “Save the Date” notice was sent out at the beginning of March, and an official invite will be sent out within the next few days now that the 3 farms have been confirmed: Bilston Lavender Farm, Sea Bluff (lunch) and Stillmeadow Farm.
 - Katie will help Isobel set up Event Brite for people to register.
 - Numbers will be limited to around 45. Some people have asked if they can bring their children along; if there are spaces left on the bus, that should be no problem.
 - Robin has the lunch in hand and will be compensated for expenses.
 - A ticket will be issued to each participant to get a liquid refreshment at Bilston; Isobel will pay the bill before leaving.
 - Information to include in the package: Timetable of days events, a map, background info on each farm, an evaluation sheet, a PAAC brochure, a list of PAAC members, and perhaps a copy of the Annual Report.
 - Meghan will try to get some “swag” from the Ministry – pens, note books, shopping bags, etc.
 - One last meeting on June 8 before the event; hoping for a good turnout.

d) South Island Farmers' Institute Workshop – Sunday, April 17, 2023 (Katie)

- The event was very successful with out 50 people attending.
- Three speakers: Meghan Halstead, Regional Agrologist; Ben Glassen (Coombs Farmers' Institute) and a representative from District A – Vancouver Island; Amir *** with the mid-Island Farmers' Institute.
- Just about everyone signed up to join - \$25 fee per farm; the appropriate paperwork has been filed to officially start the South Island Farmers' Institute.
- At this time we have 32 members over 20 farms.
- The next step is to set up bank accounts.
- A brochure is in the works; samples were circulated. Unfortunately the acronym “SIFI” is taken.
- There was good networking, lots of sharing of ideas and a definite interest in establishing an institute.
- Linda took great notes and spoke about having a Farmer2Farmer workshop again next year; there hasn't been one since COVID. This is always such an informative workshop – again with a lot of networking – and farmers have the time in February to attend.
- It is hoped to hold other events throughout the season, at different locations. Perhaps one at Harvest Rd at Michells Farm.

OTHER BUSINESS

a) Vancouver Island Agriculture Adaptation Group – Bob Maxwell – not present

b) Vancouver Island AgriService Newsletter – Meghan Halstead

- Link to sign up: https://agriservicebc.campayn.com/contact_list_form/signup/110236

UPCOMING EVENTS/WEBINARS

- Spring Farm Tour – Saturday, June 10, 2023
- Saanich Fair September 2 to 4, 2023

NEXT MEETING: The next PAAC meeting is scheduled for Thursday, June 8, 2023 at 7:00 pm at the Saanich Municipal Hall, Committee Room No. 1.

ADJOURNMENT: The meeting adjourned at 8:45 pm

Isobel Hoffmann, Recording Secretary