

Peninsula and Area Agricultural Commission

Sandown: Farmer & District of North Saanich Field Tour Report

December 15th 2017

Purpose:

- To respond to North Saanich Council's referral of the Vision Sandown report.
- To review many of the 'agricultural' areas to determine their suitability for tilling, soil amendments, drainage and suitability for growing.

PAAC Members Present:

- Terry Michell, long-term Peninsula professional full-time farmer (Michell Farms)
- Satnam Dheenshaw, long-term Peninsula professional full-time farmer (Gobind Farms)
- Larry Sluggett, long-term Peninsula professional full-time farmer (Sluggett Farms)
- Bob Maxwell, retired soil surveyor, and long-term Peninsula professional part-time farmer (Fieldstone Farm)
- Bernadette Greene, Sandown Friend, and professional part-time market gardener (Greene's Market Garden)

Guests Present:

- Robin Herlinveaux, North Saanich, long-term Peninsula professional full-time farmer (Hazelmere Farm)
- Murray Weisenburger, North Saanich Councillor and PAAC Rep
- Ceclia Stock, North Saanich Councillor
- Jen Rashleigh, Sandown Friend, Farmers on 57th Urban Farm
- Spring Harrison, Sandown Friend, Stellar GPS Mapping and analyst

This team walked and dug soil inspection holes in the 'south fields', the active limestone removal area, and the northwest portion (mostly east end of northwest portion).

It became clear fairly quickly that an independent agrologist hired by the district would be beneficial to oversee the reclamation and drainage plan implementation – the importance of this point came up a number of times as we toured the site. The independent agrologist could both monitor and add detail to the Madrone Report where pertinent.

'South fields' – grassy area along Glamorgan Rd. (former parking area)

There was consensus amongst the farmers, of their own free will and observations:

- That this area has very good, fertile and farmable soils, suitable for many vegetable crops, perhaps some berries (especially if mounded and/or drained) and raised beds.
- That four test holes were dug across the fields, some to over 2 feet deep, and that no winter water was seen – quite surprising for 'marine' sandy-silty clay loam Peninsula soils. This shows the soils are high Class 2 improved capability.
- That this area could be farmed right away; the farmers voiced a few current methods they routinely apply. Eg: "Only needs tilling and you can plant here this spring" – Terry Michell
- Deer fence (8') should be constructed before any farming happens.
- That for summer-only crops this area does not necessarily need drainage; most sites showed no winter water at 2'.
- That for deep rooted water-sensitive perennials such as raspberries and tree fruits, the fields can be drained and should be drained with Big O.
- That the soils are not compacted, and during horse racing times cars drove on them only in August, September and October (according to the caretaker, Chris, of 40 years, whom we met at the site), when the soils were 'harder' and not compactable to any degree; similar to the Saanich Fairgrounds now.

- That the old field parking and access roads could be kept where necessary for tractor drive routes. Some could be cultivated, especially those with less gravels (~<40%); alternatively if not kept, the old parking lanes could be ploughed in/mixed into soil. If any new access roads are needed, those could be constructed in straight lines to facilitate irrigation line installations. This work should be done in suitable 'drier' soil times, summer and fall.
- That the 'south fields' farm area should be flagged off immediately as a 'no go' area for heavy machine and truck access. Farmers all mentioned this is the wrong time of year to be working on these soils with clayey subsoils; it will take a long time to heal the currently heavily rutted areas. An independent district agrologist should be monitoring this.
- That, respectfully, the developer, should be encouraged to find another place(s) to stockpile soil, possibly near the limestone track area where it will be needed, or the area on the east end of south fields close to the Stage 3 development site.
- That the soils of the south fields do not require top dressing of any type.
- That field drainage planning should tie into the plans of the main central drainage scheme(s).
- That to farm this area, farmers wondered where the farm worker housing will be.
- *"Areas should have been mapped out for appropriate locations for deposits of soil from commercial area. Hi-tech drone technology could be used to assess existing soil type/quality in grassed area."* – Terry (paraphrased). Spring Harrison: has the technology to do this work, would only require funding to pay for insurance.

Buildings in the central area: the Grandstand and the Jockey Building

- That the **Jockey Building** appears to be a suitable building for farm use, especially farm worker housing, and tool and machine storage. While the roof needs replacing, the trusses have been generally shown to be salvageable, and the exterior walls are generally in good shape. Could metal roofing from the stables be used for the roof? Farmers question why it needs to be taken down, when, with renovation, it could serve a variety of functions.
- That the **Grandstand** appears to be very well-built, with large steel beams and posts as the main frame structure, concrete ceilings, and resting on good concrete floor and pads. The group saw strong potential in the Grandstand for numerous agricultural uses, and strongly urges the district to have the

Grandstand assessed by a commercial building assessor or structural engineer with a view to repurposing. At least the bottom floor, but also the whole building, could fill a variety of functions.

- Possible uses for the grandstand building (provide rental revenue). The building is big enough to accommodate all these uses at once:
 - Permanent farm market location
 - Rental Freezer(s)
 - Rental Cooler(s)
 - Rental squash and other cold storage – requires only ventilation (“*I’m always maxed out for storage space for squash*” – Satnam)
 - Aggregating area
 - Commercial Kitchen for rental (full commercial kitchen in building now that could possibly be salvaged with Platform’s permission)
 - Other food processing
 - Farm worker housing
 - Community connections, they require rooms and equipment; University and college field schools, gardening/grower groups, Seed Savers Programs, teaching and lecture rooms for many subject areas. This would provide rental fees as well and possibly grants.
 - Etc.

- In the Grandstand there is no sign of water leaks or rust on the steel, all walls are straight and dry, doors open and close. Questions were raised as to what it would take to earthquake-proof the building, and whether a new roof is needed. But the general sentiment was that to replace a building such as this would cost far more than a renovation.

- If it was decided to keep the grandstand:
 - Remove glassed-in area to south of grandstand, replace those outer walls.
 - Remove interior walls to leave open space.

- The Grandstand could be a major location for farm worker housing for this farm and many others. Farm worker housing could be put on top floor; Satnam Dheenshaw, who is putting great effort and expense into providing farm worker housing for his own farms at this time, suggests many workers could be accommodated according to the regulations, on the top floor. “*Pointless to tear it down.*” -- Satnam

- Would there be funding available for the provision of this type of housing?
- If the decision is made to demolish the Grandstand, the cement pad should stay as a firm work site and/or composting pad. The land underneath will not be very easily remediated for agriculture, and the concrete pad could serve a variety of purposes. Interior power and water sources should be identified and safeguarded for future use.
- Also, the large asphalt area in front of the grandstand which seems to be about 3 to 4 inches thick should remain. Terry estimates that the asphalt pad alone would cost \$150,000 to replace (has had similar work done on his farm this past year).
- Concrete pads useful for many things:
 - parking
 - composting area
 - soil mixing area
 - manure pile
 - outdoor farm market area
 - Etc.
- That the gravel and asphalt roads near and entering the stands should be kept. These are good roads for public access and parking in the future, as well as farm vehicle areas, truck parking and loading areas. To replace these gravel and asphalt roads would be very expensive.
- That the need for farm buildings and infrastructure is significant and very expensive. For example, it was mentioned by one farmer that at his large farm of 400 to 500 acres they have 35,000 square feet of farm building coverage. The ratio of building area to farmland is not proportional, but the point here is that farms do require buildings and cover.

The newer race track and limestone area currently under excavation.

- The South racetrack straightaway has been excavated down to a very hard road base level. That may also need to be removed down to native material and possibly stockpiled.
- “Remediated’ means pulled back to a condition similar to what’s on the other side of the fence” (in southern grassy area) – Terry Michell
- Center of racetrack: a 2’ deep hole had no seeping water
 - Silty clay loam

- That Michell farms had received 200 truck loads of similar limestone from the racetrack when it was dug up and replaced with new limestone about 18 years ago, (over time, horses pulverize limestone to dust). The material was used on their fields to maintain the pH levels and add calcium. This provides useful information that when used in the appropriate amounts this limestone is beneficial to farmland crops. (Likely the crushed limestone was from the same original source). Larry reports paying \$50/tonne? (plus delivery) for limestone recently.
- That once the limestone, as required by the developer, is removed, the piled top soil should be used in the appropriate amounts to top dress the new fields. Likely a considerable amount of topsoil (est. ~40cm) will be required to adequately establish a 'new' Class 2 soil within and on the old racetrack oval.
- Much limestone crush has been removed from the West end racetrack curve. Similar material will need to be replaced to the 10 m ASL level to create the planned detention pond.
- Area directly to the southwest of the track – limestone needs to be scraped away and soil exposed before more topsoil is added.
- Perhaps an ad/article in the PNR asking for people (old-timers) who might know more of the history of how the track was constructed (what happened to the soil, etc.) would be useful?

The eastern area of the NW Sandown Area

- That the 'disturbed' environmental testing area was transected and it was agreed that these smaller areas just be left alone, they may be candidates for farm parking and storage – if proved environmentally safe.
- That the main ditch was very much in need of cleaning and deepening to be more effective.
- That a transect was walked along the openings and the roads to neighbouring Gobind Farms area. Four holes were excavated.
- That the holes showed no to little water to over 2 feet (60cm) deep and into the strongly mottled sandy silt loam to clay loam soils, indicative of class (2WD) soils.
- That the soils seen in this east part are very farmable, Class 2 'Parksville' soils. Soil conditions in the old racetrack area were viewed favorably by the group.

They felt that removing the vegetation to bring the soil to a good farming standard would not be difficult. Some areas where the topsoil has likely been removed would need some more remediation, for example sub-soiling and about 40cm of dark 'topsoil' placed.

- That it was agreed these soils could be farmed in the summer with only cleaned and deepened, and some new, ditches to remediate to nearly the same state as the northward Gobind Farm - which grow squash, strawberries and blueberries also on the Parksville Soil Series.
- That a Big O drainage company could drain these soils even further when coupled to a ditching plan, and for example, extend the growing season to grow winter crops such as brassicas. This is possible once the vegetation is removed and the fields broken, tilled and sub-soiled, to provide for a wide range of crops. It was agreed that there is likely enough fall or gradient for Big O, with Munro Rd ditch deepening and cleaning. It is note worthy that little to no soil water was seen at 2' depths in the middle of December.
- That the hawthorn thickets/trees could easily be removed by an excavator with a 'thumb' to grip the trees, lift them and shake out the top soil in place. This must take place only when soils are dry (June to September).
- Note the soils to the west were not seen, and it was understood that they get wetter towards Munro Rd; but still farmable. A soil survey in the NW area on December 6th showed some water at the surface, some water at about 30cm deep and some sites had no soil water. This area is farmable.
- We encourage a review of current 'Reports' with a view to reconsidering the feasibility of reclaiming the northwest corner, which is mapped as Class 2WD improved, by government survey.

House Site Buildings

- That it was agreed that the washroom building should be kept. Only small, localized areas of mold were seen, and the building could probably be renovated for less than a new building would cost. Tin roofing from the stables could possibly be used for a new roof. It has toilets and showers, so could be used for farm workers, or public use during farm markets.

- That it was agreed that the Caretaker's House should be kept if possible and renovated and a new roof put on. It would be valuable for rental income and/or farm worker housing. Or caretaker housing, if it is decided that a caretaker is needed.
- Parking area by small portable building near newer stables could be worth keeping. Parking areas are required for farming and will need to be built again if not retained now.

Summary:

Opportunities:

- Large areas of very farmable soils at Sandown; with drainage and even without drainage, these soils are farmable throughout the summer, with some ditch deepening and cleaning.
- Possible farm worker housing (grandstand, jockey building, caretaker's house).
- Many uses for grandstand
 - Permanent farm market location
 - Rental Freezer(s)
 - Rental Cooler(s)
 - Rental squash and other cold storage
 - Aggregating area
 - Commercial Kitchen for rental
 - Farm worker housing
 - Community connections: University and college field schools, gardening/ grower groups, Seed Savers Programs, teaching and lecture rooms for many subject areas.
- Uses for some parking areas/paved areas
 - parking
 - composting area
 - soil mixing area
 - manure pile
 - outdoor farm market area

- Limestone can be used for soil amendment
- Washrooms in salvageable shape
- Southern field practically ready to farm
- Some stables could be salvaged
- Very useful to leave piles of both 'topsoil' and limestone for future farm use
- Commercial kitchen appliances could possibly be salvaged

There was general agreement on the importance of:

1. retaining a Municipal agrologist
2. seeking more involvement by the Municipality in the transition and forward planning process
3. frequent communication among all stakeholders

Urgent Attention Needed:

- An independent agrologist would be beneficial to oversee the reclamation and drainage plan and protect the district's interests
- Rope off farmable areas to prevent machinery access
- Designate new soil stockpiling area
- When fencing is put in, ensure it is deer fencing along Glamorgan (*District to "top up" the cost of this from the 4' fencing developer is expected to install?*)
- Salvage/demolition decisions
- Structural engineer to assess keeping the grandstand building?
- It is important that all parties are aware of and have in hand the 'Reports' related to land restoration. And that the 'reports' are explained to the users - in the field would be preferred. Some parties reportedly do not have such 'Reports', and presumably may not understand the applications.

Compiled with notes taken during the tour by: R E Maxwell and B Greene, PAAC