

OPINION COLUMN

Mayor: Agricultural land preservation — the two-horned devil

Strathcona County Mayor Rod Frank

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There are 195 countries in the world — how many do you think are positioned to be net exporters of food and agricultural products?

100? 50? 30?

Would you believe six? That's right, 189 of the nations on Earth are not fortunate enough to be net exporters of food and agricultural products.

And guess who one of the big six is that has access to this market of 189 countries?

You got it — Canada; and the major source of the supply will be Western Canada, and our own home province of Alberta will lead the way. This is a golden opportunity, and no one in their right mind would waste such a scarce and valuable resource.

Jerry Bouma is an expert in the agriculture field (no pun intended!), and has written extensively on related issues. He notes that in the Edmonton area alone, agri-business is estimated to be worth \$820 million in direct sales, and \$6.5 billion annually when production and processing are included. That's a big pizza pie, i.e., a lot of jobs.

The problem: conflicting values

So what's the big problem? As Mr. Bouma writes, historically, land has been viewed as abundant in North America and there has been little thought to, and support for, preserving the best agricultural spaces.

A constellation of conflicting public values exacerbates the issue:

- Traditionalists/Agrarians: "It's my land; I can do what I want with it."
- Free marketers: "Let the market decide; besides, technology will increase productivity."
- Environmentalists: "Preserve the land at all costs — it's our heritage and we need food security."

In this contradictory mix of beliefs, a question persists: How, and what, lands should be preserved?

On top of the above, throw in that higher levels of government, for reasons of political expediency (survival?), have often abdicated any role in resolving the problem.

What's left? Frustrated citizens, business people, and politicians at the municipal level are the only ones left standing to figure it out. But it seems to be a potential time bomb that, again, 'no one in their right mind' would want to handle.

The predicament

Therein lays the quandary. Don't save the land, and burn your resource. Save the land, and burn yourself.

It's messed up. As Mr. Bouma remarks, "You are a leader in an area that is inherently conflicted."

But the issue of agricultural land preservation has to be faced up to. Time has now run out — after 150 years of use and misuse in our region, the supply of good arable land is dwindling. At the same time, in the modern world the reasons to preserve our agricultural lands have become too compelling to ignore, including:

- It is untenable to throw away any resource or talent. It is unthinkable to squander one that is worth \$6.5 billion to the Edmonton region alone.
- In Alberta, it employs over 50,000 jobs — 2.4 per cent of the province's workforce. And that just accounts for farming. It does not include all of the spin-off jobs, ranging from transportation, to food processing, and everything in between.
- Ensuring our most basic need is looked after — food. We do need to eat.
- "Smart growth" makes sense financially — densifying existing urban centres; preserving rural areas.

The opportunity

The reasons to lead become all the more important in Strathcona County, a specialized municipality that respects and values its rural heritage. Indeed, some areas of the county have over 85 per cent Class 1 and Class 2 soils — representing good, to very good, to excellent arable land, the best there is!

Fortunately, there is a way out of the mess. Landowners, business folks and environmentalists are and will be heard and respected. And Strathcona County, as always, will get the most out of its golden opportunities — that is my commitment to the people.

In my next column, we will look at some remarkable solutions, and move to solving the problem.

Join us at our first "Rod's Round Table," Topic: "Agricultural Land Preservation in Specialized Municipalities," July 2018. Please pre-register at rod.frank@strathcona.ca; we will announce details soon!

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