

A Little Slice of Paradise

In the months leading up to the last municipal election, a major topic of discussion was the Municipal Development Plan (MDP) and the Land Use Bylaw (LUB). We are not immune from the pressures of a rapidly increasing world population. As a wise fellow once said, “buy land, they ain’t makin’ it anymore”. As a result, in Canada and across the world, land use continues to be a hot topic, with statements of concern, and the oft repeated phrase, “we must preserve our farmland”. While the words are spoken, actions are often lacking. Where municipalities have tried to exercise their power to limit development, they are met with strong pushback from developers. These “developers” may be our neighbours looking for ways to generate income from lands that do not provide an adequate return from agriculture production, or sometimes the same public that purports to support the preservation of “farmland”.

In British Columbia, the Agriculture Land Reserve (ALR) was introduced by an NDP government that did not last past the following election. The ALR has lasted, but there is constant pressure to have it relaxed or repealed. In Quebec, a unique program has been introduced on the island of Laval, where funds are collected through a taxation scheme to buy up land that may be potential development property, and preserve it for agriculture. Attempts by our provincial government to lay groundwork for long range land use planning and conservation are criticized as an attack on property rights. The widely criticized bill 36 in Alberta, while far from perfect, does allow for the introduction of new land use policies like Tradable Development Credits, Conservation Easements and Conservation Directives.

It is estimated that for every acre taken out of agricultural production another three to ten acres are affected by that development. How long can we continue on that path? The recent weather events in Russia and Australia demonstrate how vulnerable we are with a population of almost 7 billion, and a rapidly shrinking land base upon which to produce food. Only 5% of Canada’s land is arable, and a very small portion of that is of high quality and in a favourable climate. Much of the rich soil of Southern Ontario, with a climate to rival California, has been covered in houses and asphalt, never to return to food production. Is this what the future holds for Alberta?

Our County supports a diverse blend of agriculture including crop and forage production, beef and dairy, and a variety of specialized operations. However demands for recreation and residential development continue to grow. Will we have the political will to develop clear and concise policies that will protect our treasure? I believe that if society wishes to preserve land for agriculture and recreation, then society must be prepared to compensate the present owners of the land for their contribution toward a sustainable future.

Over the next few months, your County Council will go through a process of examining the current MDP, talking and listening to residents, followed by a rewriting of our land use legislation. The intent is a common sense document that should reflect the views of the landowners, and balances the desires of current residents with the need to preserve and protect this resource for future generations.

Make sure your thoughts are added to the discussion. Please take part in a workshop or talk to your local Councilor about your vision for this little slice of paradise called Mountain View County.

