

The Last Bread Basket

Posted By: Jason Youmans 04/07/2010

<http://www.mondaymag.com/articles/entry/the-last-bread-basket/news/>

For more three years, Ian Vantreight and son Ryan have been trying to convince Central Saanich municipal council to okay construction of a housing development on a rocky patch of the family's 750-acre holdings in the community. To hear the Vantreight's sell the idea, building the subdivision is crucial to the viability of their business as flower and food producers. Failure to permit the development, they say, would force them to sell farmland to pay down the hefty mortgage acquired after Ian bought out brother Michael's share of the farm in 2006 and—conjuring the “Better the devil you know” argument—they say new owners might not demonstrate the longtime farm family's commitment to agricultural pursuits.

Opponents of the plan—both inside and out of Central Saanich's boundaries—contend that permission to build the subdivision would mark the beginning of the end for Central Saanich as a rural enclave, and the abandonment of the Capital Regional District's Regional Growth Strategy as a visionary document for the South Island. As one Central Saanich resident wrote in a letter to the Peninsula News Review concerning development pressure building in his municipality, “The Barbarians are at the gate.”

In these days of growing interest to see Vancouver Island return to even a modest state of food self-sufficiency and knowledge of the environmental damage caused by the miles our produce travels, the controversy around the Vantreight development has brought into sharp focus the question of what could—and should—become of the South Island's last bread basket.

This land is farm land

That rural life holds pride of place in Central Saanich's identity is captured in its Official Community Plan (OCP). Updated in 2008, “Fundamental Principle” number one of the document is “Support Agriculture.”

“The residents of Central Saanich have expressed strong support for preservation of the agricultural land base, and the farming economy which depends on it,” reads the OCP. “Any future residential, commercial or industrial growth should be directed towards the established Urban Settlement Area. Agriculture is an important contributor to the local and regional economy, creating jobs, and generating revenues.”

Needless to say, the Vantreight family's development plan—which in its most recent incarnation calls for 57 single

family homes on 32 acres—will fall outside of that prescribed urban settlement area.

Central Saanich is home to approximately 16,000 residents. Its boundaries stretch the width of the Saanich Peninsula, with Saanich Inlet on its west coast and Cordova Channel and Island View Beach Regional Park on the east; its southern boundary begins just after Bear Hill Park while its northern boundary is marked by John Dean Provincial Park. Two large first nations reserves—Tsartlip and Tsawout—are also located there, on the west and east sides of the municipality, respectively.

Urban development has so far been constrained to three primary pockets: Brentwood Bay, Tanner Ridge and Saanichton, while Keating X Road boasts a large light-industrial area. The rest, by and large, is rural land. According to Central Saanich planner Bruce Greig, 24.39 square kilometres, or 59 percent of the Central Saanich land base, is held in the provincial Agricultural Land Reserve. How much of that land is currently in productive agricultural use—as opposed to providing equine playpens—is unclear, although the district has recently launched an agricultural commission to get definitive answers on the community's agricultural output.

From the outside, it's hard to tell whether the passions of those fighting against the thin edge of the development wedge echo the sentiments of the whole community. Turnout in the November 2008 municipal election was 33 percent, up from 28 percent in 2005, but nowhere near the turnout in the Highlands, another of the South Island's rural municipalities—and a southwest neighbour to Central Saanich—where development pressures were knocking at the door and 72.1 percent of voters cast a vote for the path they wished to see taken. And, much like the recent experience of Langford, each new resident that comes to Central Saanich helps erase the collective memory of what was there before.

Members of the Central Saanich Residents and Ratepayers Association have been vocal in their efforts to stymie the Vantreight plan and urge a cautious approach to any new development—even within the urban containment boundary.

“If I had to say there is an agenda, it's keeping things more or less as they are,” says Ratepayers chair Ian Cameron. “Most of the people who belong to this group, they certainly don't want to see large changes, and most of them don't



want to see many changes in Central Saanich.”

While Cameron says his principle interest is in the future of Vancouver Island's food supply, he admits a more selfish interest also binds his organization's members.

“These are people who believe that by and large, almost as a given, population density leads to higher property taxes. If you look at the population of municipalities in British Columbia and you correlate them against the tax paid by the average property owner, you'll find that it's almost a perfect correlation. The smallest municipalities have the lowest property tax, and it just goes right up from there,” he says.

Central Saanich municipal councillor John Garrison, however, is not so sure the Ratepayers' voices are the voice of his community.

“I personally don't see the majority of Central Saanich residents being unhappy with what's going on in Central Saanich,” says Garrison. As for the concerns of those speaking out against the Vantreight proposal, Garrison says, “It's reflective of a view of a segment of the community, but is it really reflective of the entire community? I don't know sometimes, but it's our job to sort it out.”

Tsartlip First Nation Chief Wayne Morris—whose band numbers more than 800—says that whatever happens in Central Saanich, he wishes his people were offered a greater stake in its future.

“Right now it seems that we are disregarded when it comes to any development,” he says. “Even though it is in our traditional territory, it doesn't seem like there's a need or a serious desire to consult with first nations—meaningful and sincere consultation, not just telling us what they're going to do. To me, that's how things are done right now. Whether it be done by fax or by e-mail, it's a consultation that doesn't mean much.”

Morris says the Tsartlip were sidelined in discussions of both the future of Woodwynn Farms and the proposed Senanus waterline (See sidebar).

Over the past few months, efforts to preserve the rural character of Central Saanich have grown legs outside of the municipality's borders. The Dogwood

Initiative, best known for its activism to ban oil tanker traffic in B.C.'s coastal waters, recently included the Vantreight plan as a focus of its "Our Homes are Not For Sale" campaign. Much like the looming development of Western Forest Product lands west of Sooke, Central Saanich is being pitched as a frontline in the war against urban sprawl. At a February CRD planning committee meeting where elements of the Vantreight proposal were up for discussion, a number of South Island farmers and food security advocates took the microphone to say that the Vantreight's financial straits were no reason to compromise the integrity of the community's agricultural land base.

Whither the farmers?

Preserving Central Saanich's rural trappings and maintaining it as a productive farming community are two very different issues. It's no secret that farming is a tough business, and getting harder with each passing year.

The Sluggett family of Central Saanich has been working the land for over a century. Larry Sluggett, who started getting his hands dirty 10 years ago after a career as a forester, knows the future of farming in his community depends on more than preservation of property in the Agricultural Land Reserve.

"There's actually a number of problems with farming," he says. "The biggest problem right now is that the farming community is becoming older and there's no young people getting into it because it's too expensive."

A 2009 report from the Farmlands Project suggests that farmland around the CRD is currently priced at \$70,000 to \$100,000 an acre, which means "land prices are prohibitive to undercapitalized new farmers who want to expand/diversify their operations."

Bob Thompson, a former Central Saanich councillor and farm advocate, echoes Sluggett's contention. "You've got a core of family farms that have been here for many generations, and it's always a question of what's going to happen with the next generation," he says. "I think that the challenge is what happens to farmland when it's sold. When a farm is sold, it often leads to becoming a rural estate. Which means that you see a large house, you might see a riding ring or two or stables. In other words, it's going to a different form of rural living, which in some cases is not supporting food production."

Sluggett says most farmers agree that \$25,000 an acre is about the top price a farmer could pay to earn enough off the land to pay down the mortgage on the property.

The past decade has already seen a

number of protected farm acreages in Central Saanich subdivided for estate living.

"There's a feeling that if this continues over time, a lot of the farmland will just be turned into a green space rather than producing food such as strawberries, corn and potatoes. In a lot of cases the land isn't used for anything. They don't even take the hay off of it. It just sits there," says Sluggett.

Central Saanich municipal council faces no small challenge. How to balance their public's desire for a rural lifestyle and support local farmers, while at the same time recognizing the efforts of local businesses to earn a buck. All of this, in the context of a region-wide wish to prevent the Gordon Head-ization—where residential development was partly a byproduct of the sale of the Vantreight family's original farm holdings—of the entire Saanich Peninsula from residents around the South Island.

And, as the Langford experience has taught the region over the last decade, decisions made in Central Saanich today will reverberate far outside their rural enclave tomorrow.

Tangled Webs: Scandals big and small

The past few years have provided plenty of ammunition for Central Saanich residents who believe close ties between certain key community members and local politicians mean the doors of development are ready to be thrown open.

The 2008 municipal elections in Central Saanich were rife with accusations of financial funny stuff. When the smoke cleared—after citizens pushed for a police investigation—the RCMP recommended 19 charges under the Local Government Act for irregularities related to campaign finance disclosure forms. Ultimately, the Crown did not pursue charges against the named individuals, saying their efforts would be unlikely to end in convictions.

During that election, Vantreight Farms spent more than \$9,400 schilling for its "Hill Project" and promoting candidates sympathetic to its property-development aspirations. This included \$500 to councillor Ron Kubek, and \$637.28 in-kind to Terry Siklenka. The Vantreights also donated \$695 to the unsuccessful mayoral campaign of Sean McNulty, who made no secret of the business-friendly approach he would take to governance if elected.

Raven Metals owner Randy Sewell—who made headlines in 2008 when, in a fit of property-rights pouting, cut down "a significant number" of trees protected under Central Saanich's bylaws after the council of the day refused to grant him a rezoning that would permit expansion of

his business onto the land formerly occupied by the unlucky trees—also put money behind candidates tilting to the pro-development side of the spectrum including Terry Siklenka, to whom he made an in-kind contribution of \$8,347.50.

The presence of realtor Ron Kubek on council—who proclaimed in his election platform, "I don't need a study to make a decision"—has caused a stir, especially following his candid thoughts on why the CRD should stay out of Central Saanich business ("You were not elected by the residents of Central Saanich—I was.") and the fact he continues to have multiple real estate listings in the community, including the recent subdivision of a Moodyville lot he owned to make room for two smaller houses instead of the one large one that would have been permitted on the lot under its original zoning.

Kubek was endorsed in the 2008 election by the board and executive of the Peninsula Co-op for his promise to support the gas and grocery outlet's efforts to build a new grocery store on an eight acre piece of farmland—albeit one outside of the Agricultural Land Reserve—on West Saanich Road. The Co-op also endorsed Terry Siklenka's candidacy based on his support of their expansion plans. The Co-op's involvement in the election upset some members who felt it inappropriate that an ostensibly democratic organization like the co-op should be endorsing candidates without consulting the membership, while spending \$16,000 in the process.

One Peninsula Co-op board director is well-known property developer and Central Saanich resident Gordon Denford. For years, Denford has been trying to convince the municipality to provide piped water to his 7,300 square foot waterfront home—complete with lap pool!—so he and his Senanus Drive neighbours can get off well water. In addition to higher taxes for other area residents, critics worry the provision of piped water to an neighbourhood outside Central Saanich's urban containment boundary will pave the way for lot subdivisions and future development. In the 2008 election Denford put money behind the campaigns of Ron Kubek and Sean McNulty. Denford wields considerable influence, as evidenced by Saanich Gulf-Island's MP Gary Lunn's attempt to pass off a \$1.1 million federal contribution to the pipeline project as a "green grant."

Meanwhile, Senanus waterline foes have obtained e-mails that show Central Saanich municipal staff engaged in less-than-objective communications with waterline supporters.