

Metro Vancouver weighs in on controversial plan for Southlands agricultural land

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The Southlands plan calls for 950 homes to be built on agricultural land.

Photograph by: Gerry Kahrman, Vancouver Sun

Metro Vancouver mayors are weighing in on a contentious development slated for Tsawwassen farm lands, which is seen as a test case for the regional growth strategy.

The plan, which calls for 950 homes to be built on agricultural land in an area known as Southlands, has already been approved by Delta council. But it must now receive a two-thirds majority vote from Metro Vancouver, which maintains agricultural land must be protected under the regional growth strategy.

The 217-hectare Southlands parcel is not in the Agricultural Land Reserve, but is outside Delta's designated urban containment boundary.

The issue has divided the Delta community, with more than 70 people speaking for and against it Thursday at a public hearing held by Metro. Another 511 written submissions were also received.

Those for the plan lauded the fact that Delta would have 80-per-cent control of the land for farming, while there would be increased opportunities to house young families and empty-nesting seniors.

Those against it lamented the loss of farmland and food security, and warned the influx of homes would create traffic bottlenecks and increase farm land speculation across the region.

"We need to sustain ourselves in the future. We should not allow the irreversible loss of farmland," said resident Kelly Bowman. "We need to preserve all of this land for farming, not just a portion of it."

Burnaby city council also sent in a submission saying the removal of the agricultural land would be significant, while TransLink said the development does not meet regional transportation goals because the site is not on or near the frequent transit network and most trips would be made by vehicle.

"It appears likely that Southlands would move the region farther away from the goals and targets set out in the regional transportation system, ultimately making those goals or targets more challenging to achieve in the long run," states the letter by TransLink's Bob Paddon.

Delta Mayor Lois Jackson said after the hearing that she expects common sense will prevail, noting that her council plans to put the 80 per cent of land back in the ALR.

"I don't think we could ever see (Southlands) farmed if it was left the way it is because it is too expensive," she said.

"We've all just gone to the wire in terms of protecting (farm land) and making it better for the farmer. Nobody has fought harder than I have to retain it."

Jackson said the Southlands situation is different than a recent case involving Langley Township, which took Metro to court after it refused to allow a massive development on agricultural lands near Trinity Western University and in North Murrayville. The judge ruled Metro didn't have the authority to tell the local municipality what to do.

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Metro will continue to accept written submissions until May 9 but hasn't yet said when it will make a decision.

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