

NO•FARMS•NO•FOOD

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Three Cheers for Change

A “hired gun” has just being retained by applicants to argue in favour of rezoning 380 acres of agricultural land for residential, commercial and industrial uses. These lands have been used for food production since the 1700s. Through its PR firm the developers state the group opposed to their plan is small in number and deliberately misleading the public. The facts say otherwise.

With over 500 Save Our Farms signs on lawns in the neighbouring communities of Greenwich, Port Williams and Wolfville and over 2,500 signatures on an on-line petition, evidence of public support for protecting farmland grows stronger each day. “The debate regarding this loss of the Greenwich farmland started in 2005 and is expected to reach its conclusion this fall,” says Marilyn Cameron, a founding member of No Farms No Food (NF2). This volunteer-driven group is at the centre of the debate. NF2 is underscoring the need for three changes in the public discourse.

The first change No Farms No Food calls for is: Accurate Information.

Salt and Pepper Inc., (the hired PR firm) says: "Only one-third of the land [the developers] are proposing to have rezoned is actual farmland." (Media release August 26, 2010) whereas NF2 consistently refers to 380 acres of agricultural land at risk. NF2's 380 acre number is taken from documents published by the Planning Department of Kings County. Similarly, an Agricultural Impact Assessment released August 24th (completed by agrologist Gary Morton and paid for by the applicants) shows 80 percent not 33 percent, as claimed by an applicant, is farmland. On page 29 this assessment reports: "302.6 acres of Class 2, 3, and active 4" would be removed. (Farm buildings, waterways and open zones that serve the farms included in the development application cover other areas of the land).

The second change needed is: Meaningful Public Participation.

The developers' position is that the land is theirs, they have the right to decide what it's used for, and that public input is not necessary. At each public forum regarding farmland development insightful comments and information has been tabled by scores of community members. In 2008, Kings County approved “farm commercial” (C13) zoning as a compromise position. This sought balance between the community's will to accommodate the farmers' stated need to grow their farm businesses with the public's desire to retain much of the rural character of their community.

This new farm commercial zoning provided many new opportunities related to the applicants' farm businesses including the development of restaurants, fixed roof accommodations, lounges and retail and commercial endeavours related to agri-tourism. Dissatisfied by this outcome, Chris Parker, Municipal Councillor, and the applicants immediately launched a new development application. This left frustrated community members questioning how their work and opinion could be so promptly dismissed by their municipal representative and lead to the formation of No Farms No Food.

The third change needed is: Legislation to Recognize Farmland as an Essential Resource.

The developers' media firm claims those who want to rezone the land are doing it in the interest of future growth for the region. Interestingly, the PR firm is mute on the financial benefits which would likely accrue to the applicants as a result of proposed zoning change, implying that their goals are mainly altruistic.

"Kings County does not have to depend on the loss of farmland to accommodate the growth of our population or our economy," says Cameron.

Kings County has the capacity for over 16,000 new residential lots outside its towns and additional lots within. While Kings County is one of the fastest growing areas in Nova Scotia with respect to population county planners acknowledge current lots will be sufficient for many years to come.

Kings County is also recognized as the most important agricultural region in the province. Cameron holds that: "Growth in our economy, can, and should, be tied to agriculture." Current statistics show 604 active farms with over \$20 million in net cash receipts (Agricultural Profiling in Kings County, Nova Scotia, Agri-Food Canada, July 2010). Cameron notes that: "Many farms are already succeeding in creating new employment opportunities and a stronger farm economy by expanding their agricultural businesses by producing secondary products."

Not all farms thrive, but NF2 sees the permanent loss of farmland during downturns in the agricultural economy as a serious threat to Nova Scotia's ability to become more self-sufficient in food production. Retaining current farmland is essential to the anticipated need to expand food production in the years immediately ahead. Strong evidence continues to mount that increased self-sufficiency will be essential as oil prices peak and the transportation of food from faraway field becomes less economically feasible.

Through its on-line petition NF2 continues to gather public support for a "moratorium on any further development of Nova Scotia's agricultural land." Meanwhile, it is lobbying the provincial government for fair compensation for farmers through land-banking. The new government will soon release the report of its Agricultural Land Review Committee and may adopt new strategies to help struggling farmers at retirement.

"We do agree with the developers' PR firm that the land debate in the valley is where the old meets the new," says Cameron, "in Kings County a well-informed, organized opposition to the old practice of allowing urban areas to sprawl onto fertile lands is gaining ground." NF2 members are working within new food policy initiatives to take the emerging buy local movement to new heights and to increase Nova Scotia's food security. The group promotes the need for agricultural land-banking, new provincial legislation that will compensate retiring farmers while transferring farmland to a new generation of young farmers that is demonstrating a keen interest in sustainable farming. "The volunteer work of No Farms No Food members is key to the renewal of public interest and engagement regarding the emerging public debate of how we will feed ourselves when, not if, that need should arise," concludes Cameron.

For more information on the width and breadth of NF2's work and the fight to protect farmland from development, a visit to the website at www.nofarmsnofood.ca is warranted.

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