

Submission to the Assessment Review Panel

Local Farms Alliance-prepared by John Lowan

We need to let the Assessment Review Panel know that we have had insufficient notice to prepare and present a submission. We did not receive any notice from the panel of this public review, although we represent farms which are under appeal for split classification in Saanich. Saanich is likely to be the most controversial area in the Province, having had 204 farms reassessed last year. There is significant public awareness of the issues here, yet local people were given, at best, only a few days to prepare a submission. We checked the Panel website frequently for months for notice of any public meetings and twice tried to get on a list to be notified, unsuccessfully. A friend let us know about the public meeting, yesterday, one day before the panel meeting. We are requesting permission to send a more complete submission at a later date. We would also comment that the timing set for the panel meetings is unfortunate, being in the middle of harvest for many farmers. We would also encourage the Panel to consider holding an additional meeting in this area with plenty of notice given to local farms and farm support organizations.

How may government encourage small farms and local produce?

- Establish a farm advocacy office that actively supports small farms with expertise. The advocates could approach potential and existing small farms and advise on successful crops or livestock and methods for specific soils and locations, marketing and sales, could provide legal and tax assessment advice, and could discuss grants and resources available from the government.
- Ensure supportive tax assessment. Choose assessors with small farm backgrounds to specialize in communicating with and encouraging farmers. Provide an advocate who supports and advises small farmers in the face of the huge and professional Assessment Authority. The advocate could prepare and present appeals with or on behalf of farmers who are currently overwhelmed by the complexity of the Appeal process and the very poor chance of successfully appealing a BC Assessment ruling (about 1 in 20 appeals are successful).
- Discourage the wholesale use of split assessments by BC Assessment. Small farms are now subject to intense scrutiny by the Assessors to see if there is any piece of the farm that is not being 'actively farmed'. That piece will then be subject to 'Residential classification'. This drives taxes up on the farms by huge amounts. Currently no consideration is given to sections of the farm that are essentially not possible to farm, such as rocky outcrops, bogs, forests-they are often taxed at rates that are the same as if the farm was subdividable land, etc.
- Reduce regulatory structures that penalize small farms-for example limits on egg production, restrictions on farm processing of meat, restriction on direct milk sales.
- While ensuring proof of farm income by accessing revenue Canada information, maintain a farm threshold income that increases with the acreage of the farm. For example a five acre farm could have a threshold of \$500 per acre or \$2500.
- Eliminate minimum farm sizes to encourage small farming-for example a very productive one acre can grow enough food to satisfy many people.

- Create a new category (as in Ontario) in the BC Assessment Act to recognize and not tax land that cannot be actively farmed without destroying natural habitat, for example old growth forest, riparian zones, watershed, bogs, wildlife areas, etc.
- Extend the ALR or a similar farm protection area to any farm that requested it, regardless of soil zones and size. Soils can be dramatically improved by proper farming methods.
- Allow farm worker housing on any legitimate farm.
- Encourage small farming co-operatives that share and exchange farms, leaseholds, expertise and farm workers.
- Encourage many farm markets that sell local produce. The current markets are not able to sustain the demand for this produce. It should be possible to provide land, for example sections of community parks, for a weekly market.
- Eliminate tax on any land that has been given an easement to a Land Conservation Society.
- Provide BC Agriculture with a mandate to support small farms and the local production of food.
- Transfer the authority for Farm Assessment from Small Business and Revenue to the Agriculture Ministry under leadership who understands the necessity of small farms for food security.

In short, eliminate or streamline all regulations that inhibit small farm growth and production and provide information and access to supportive government agencies.

Respectfully,

John Lowan

