

ABBOTSFORD CHAMBER OF COMMERCE STATEMENT OF POLICY

AGRICULTURE – Adopted January 18, 2011

The Value of Agriculture

Agriculture is a primary or “wealth creation” industry. Additional primary industries include forestry, mining, oil and gas and fishing. Agriculture creates wealth and grows the economy.

Agriculture is Business

There is a continuous widening of the *agriculture knowledge* gap, amongst British Columbia residents, along the rural urban divide, that creates a diminishing recognition of agriculture operations as a true business in the traditional definition and perception.

Agriculture in Abbotsford

Abbotsford is the most industrious agricultural community in the province and, in fact, the entire country. Abbotsford is home to more than 1,300 farms with 22,500 hectares of land under active cultivation.

A 2008 report prepared by the Abbotsford Chamber of Commerce, in partnership with the BC Ministry of Agriculture, values the economic effect of agriculture/agri-business in Abbotsford at 1.8 billion dollars annually. The 2010 values are conservatively estimated at 2.1 billion dollars.

This value represented 34% of the economic activity in the City of Abbotsford in 2008. In addition to significant dollar values, agriculture and agri-business creates one-in-four private sector jobs and one-in-five of all jobs in the city.

Agriculture is, by a significant amount, the largest sector of Abbotsford's economy. Economic development trending shows that no single industry sector is likely to surpass agriculture within the near, or long term in the City of Abbotsford

In fact, not only is agriculture big business in Abbotsford, it is the largest concentration of agriculture, measured both by output and dollar value, in Canada.

Abbotsford is the **AGRICULTURE CAPITAL OF CANADA**.

The complete report *The Economic Impact of Agriculture in Abbotsford* can be found at www.abbotsfordchamber.com

Agriculture Land in Abbotsford

Abbotsford has some of the richest soils in Canada if not all of North America. The fertile soil, combined with a temperate climate, and an abundance of reliable water sources creates an ideal location for extensive soil, and non-soil based agriculture. Additional land suitable for soil-based agriculture is no longer being created. Reclamation efforts, in depleted gravel extraction areas, only adds a small volume to the agriculture land base.

Agricultural zoned lands have become a catch all for a plethora of uses, many of them not related to agriculture. Many non agriculture uses in fact permanently render the land impotent for future commercial agriculture uses and subsequently causes a reduction in the city's wealth generation potential.

Commercial, industrial, and urban residential land classifications have very strict rules, and regulations on what the land can, and cannot, be used for as well as the character, size and placement of buildings on the land. The regulations in regards to agricultural land are not as stringent.

Land in Relationship to the Economic Effect of Agriculture

The ability of agriculture to grow and develop in the future depends directly on the quantity, quality, and proximity of agriculture land available for expansion.

Although non-soil based agriculture operations like poultry, greenhouse, and mushroom can be very successful and sustainable on a relatively small footprint of land, often as small as 5 acres, agriculture, by its very nature, is a land intensive and dependent industry. Many agricultural industries such as, but not limited to, ground crops utilizing native soils and livestock operations particularly, consume vast land areas.

Soil based and non-soil based agricultural businesses have different servicing needs. Non-soil based agriculture does not require a particular or specific soil quality however they do require appropriate access and egress, connections to sewer and water and sufficient electrification.

Agri-Business operations, essential in the supply, service, and success of agriculture operations, have varying land requirements however, with rare exceptions, do not need "agricultural zoned land" per se. They do require reasonable proximity and access and egress to their customers to provide cost effective and reliable service.

As with any industry, sustainable growth is a constant and desired objective. The agriculture industry in Abbotsford is rapidly becoming constrained from further growth, and by extrapolation additional contribution to the economy, due to agriculture appropriate lands being permanently diverted to non agriculture uses.

Planning for Maximum Return on Agricultural Lands

Working within the confines of the Local Government Act, the Community Charter and the Agricultural Land Reserve, the City of Abbotsford is the single largest regulatory agency with the ability to affect uses on agricultural land. The nature of use of agricultural land ultimately determines the potential economic effect of the industry on the local economy.

A standard of *highest and best use* needs to be applied when determining appropriate land use in agricultural zones. The propensity of those in the position to affect changes to land use policy to consider rezoning away from agriculture to other non agricultural uses is troubling.

As agriculture is a primary, wealth creating industry dependent on a secure and affordable land base, the erosion of agriculture lands is of grave social and economic concern. Every hectare of land diverted to non agricultural uses has a significant, negative effect on the ability of agriculture to contribute to the economy of Abbotsford.

Planning for Agriculture Sustainability

Unsustainable urban sprawl style growth in the city over the past decades has created pressure on City planners and leaders to utilize traditional agriculture lands for alternate uses. The boundaries of the agricultural land reserve and the legislative regulations and subsequent powers and decisions of the Agricultural Land Commission have prevented a massive exodus of agricultural land to alternative uses but has not totally deterred a consistent stream of applications, some successful, to remove land from the agriculture economy.

Allowable uses, within the agriculture land reserve (ALR) system, but still under the purview of the City, have permitted a plethora of non-agricultural development that, in many cases, has rendered the land permanently impotent for agriculture wealth creation.

Examples include, but are not limited to, massive estate developments, gravels and soils extraction, truck parking, agri-industrial uses not related to production, home site placing, minimal use qualifying as farm use, added to numerous City led initiatives to have considerable tracks of lands removed, en-block, from the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Urban Rural Interface / Conflict

The City, through zoning bylaws and the official community plan, has the authority to determine appropriate use including scale, form, character, and location of agriculture and agri-industrial operations.

Land use conflicts are more prevalent in jurisdictions that have not been, by deliberate planning, buffered to eliminate, or at least reduce, the potential for use conflict along interface zones. Generally, a system of buffering by distance or a phased system of uses, controlled by zoning, ensures that neighbouring uses do not create undue interference in the use and enjoyment of property.

Examples of conflicts due to insufficient land use conflict mitigation include noise complaints generated by the use of avian predation devices, airborne dust, feather exhaust migrating off property, odour issues related to on farm activities and traffic management related to allowed agriculture land use.

Residential use, by those not in the agriculture industry, continues to create the majority of urban rural conflict and will not be mitigated, or even contained at current levels, until the development of strictly urban use on, or in proximity of agriculture land is curtailed or prevented.

Agricultural Industry Growth

Growth of the agriculture industry in Abbotsford is desirable. Even modest growth in the largest economic segment will return a significant addition to the gross domestic product of the City. A 5% growth in the agriculture sector would result in a 100 million dollar increase in the economy of Abbotsford.

Best practices, and capital investment, will produce growth in the agricultural industry on the existing land to a finite point. Additional growth beyond this point will require additional land dedicated to agriculture wealth creation uses.

Like any resource-based economic activity, agriculture depends on a sustained, productive and financially accessible land base.

Land availability, cost and proximity are key to facilitating growth in the agriculture sector. Existing agriculture and agri-business companies needing additional land to expand require proximity to their existing operations. Conflicting, or non agriculture uses, on lands in proximity to existing agricultural businesses render them unavailable for purchase and consolidation.

When the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) was established over 30 years ago, food security was a primary focus. Over the years the ALR has also been the foundation for widespread agricultural development, producing a diversity of products for local consumption and for export.

Growth of other sectors of the economy, and in particular in urban regions, has made it increasingly important to ensure that planning for agricultural development is fully integrated with planning for community development. The importance of the agricultural land base needs to be heralded and respected throughout our society and reflected in decisions by all levels of government, enterprises and individuals.

The Chamber has an important and essential role to help ensure that Abbotsford, and all its residents, continue to enjoy and prosper from the economic effect agricultural land currently provides and the legacies created for generations to come.

Conclusion

The Chamber believes that if all levels of Government encourage investment and a sustained commitment to Agriculture through fostering a positive business climate coupled with land use policies creating certainty of land, dedicated to agriculture wealth creation, the industry can achieve tremendous growth, create jobs and stimulate significant economic activity in Abbotsford.