

## Enabling Canada Lands' green community values

By Jim Wright

From the Garden City Lands blog at <http://gardencitylands.wordpress.com/13-our-upton-farm/>

“Since this land was bought and paid for once by the taxpayers of Canada, it should be left for the people of Canada. It should remain as greenspace for social and environmental reasons.” That applies to the Garden City lands, 136 acres of farmland in Richmond Centre, although it was said in defence of Upton Farm, Charlottetown.

Both properties are held by Canada Lands Company, a crown corporation. It sells federal property, usually after rehabilitating brownfields such as former military bases to add environmental and financial value. Less admirably, Canada Lands has treated the Garden City Lands and Upton Farm as greenfields to rezone for windfall profit at environmental loss.

Twenty months ago, the farm almost became a construction site. Canada Lands had got Charlottetown council approval before the Upton Farm Preservation Network sprang up, starting with a petition.

Canada Lands said it was too late. “You’ve got to understand that we bought this, and we’re a commercial company.” Besides, they added, developing the farm would curb urban sprawl.

Upton Farm Preservation said, “What we really need to do is engage the politicians at all three levels of government to come to a common vision and action so the land can be preserved for generations to come.”

That was wise. In contrast, we’ve trusted in Canada Lands being true to its mandate, “optimizing financial and community value . . . to produce the optimal benefit for . . . local communities.” The company aims for corporate social responsibility, including “paying careful attention to the environment in all our land dealings.”

Canada Lands is project managing the application to remove the Garden City lands from B.C.’s Agricultural Land Reserve. Unfortunately, that means it’s responsible for the Richmond Community Survey and Garden City lands open house survey, and citizens have shown that both surveys misled the public.

Regrettably too, Canada Lands has suggested it can sell the Garden City lands however it wants if the Agricultural Land Commission doesn’t remove them from the ALR. Even if it can legally do that, the implied attitude shows little sense of responsibility to Richmond.

When it entrusted the property to Canada Lands, the federal government intended it to be passed on largely to Richmond. Furthermore, all three Richmond uses for the property, which Richmond council approved unanimously, apply whether it is in or out of the ALR. Canada Lands should respect the intents in an ongoing way.

In implementing the Garden City lands agreements, the city has shown steadfast goodwill toward Canada Lands and its business partner, the Musqueam Indian Band. By going beyond its duty, the city has greatly helped the partners. If the application is rejected, it will be time for Canada Lands, along with the band, to pay back the goodwill. That would include ensuring the lands remain green and available for the local community’s ALR-permitted uses.

Whatever the commission decides, Richmond will still be dealing with Canada Lands, which will have power either in rezoning and subdivision or in renegotiation. Although we deserve reciprocal goodwill, we had better “hope for the best but prepare for the worst.” That will require a vocal, informed, active community.

We must ask our politicians at all three levels to stand up for the Richmond community. They must be ready to act quickly with us if the commission rejects the application, prompting renegotiations.

We can learn from Charlottetown’s people power. The city council there reversed its approval to develop Upton Farm. The premier promised to help save the farm. The local MP and federal government came onside. The people are now refining a new vision. And Canada Lands is trying to do what’s best for the environment and local community benefit.

Richmond’s people power can enable similar success.