

The Muddy Issue

By Jim Wright

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True or false: The recent Richmond Community Survey proved strong support for the agreement to develop the Garden City lands.

Despite what you may read in the papers or seen on TV, the statement is false. Most basically, that's because the Richmond Community Survey about the Garden City Lands was used to mold opinions under the guise of gathering them. It provides figures for support of the Garden City Lands agreement, as expressed early and late in the phone interviews, and those statistics seemingly show that respondents became more supportive while being interviewed. However, far from proving genuine support, the figures show that misleading methods beget misleading results.

To understand better, let's delve into an example. First, the context: only a minority of the respondents initially said they understood the ALR or were aware it includes the Garden City lands. So most had to rely on what the interviewers told them.

When asked the key question of whether ALR lands can be used for non-agricultural community use, only about a quarter of the respondents chose the incorrect answer.

Now the mind-boggling part. All the respondents were then told this: "In fact, lands in the ALR may only be used for agricultural and not for other community uses." Wrong!

The truth is that the Commission may permit non-farm use "on any terms the Commission considers advisable" (*ALC Act*, 29.1b). It happens often, typically for uses that don't compromise long-term viability for farming.

What's more, the "[survey](#)" [leaders](#)' own press release reflects that truth. It states that "playing fields, recreational and cultural amenities . . . would require application to the Agricultural Land Commission to either remove the land from the Agricultural Land Reserve or obtain special approval from the Agricultural Land Commission for 'non-farm use.'"

The falsity highlighted in this example was fed to the respondents at a pivotal point. It undoubtedly misled them, inflating the figures that the "survey" leaders construed as support.

The example is just the tip of the iceberg.

In any case, when 508 Richmond people consented to be interviewed, they trusted that their input would be gathered for the common good, not manipulated. Our trust was undermined. The issue was muddied.