

## Motivated to Smart Farm: A Personal Story

Two years after my wife Sandy and I moved from East Van to a spectacular five-acre property on the Sunshine Coast, 40 acres of ALR forest next to us was bulldozed and carved into eight more five-acre lots. Twenty-five years earlier, the land we were on was cleared, bulldozed and removed from ALR just the same—so it wasn't like we were on any higher moral ground to complain about the loss of precious wilderness or farmland. That was until we saw the covenants. Buyers of these lots are legally bound to build a minimum 3000 square foot home with a minimum two-car garage. The forest wasn't just cleared and removed from the ALR: it was cleared to build estate lots. This just didn't seem fair at all.

Let me back things up here. When we first moved onto the land, Sandy and I had this wildly ambitious dream: we wanted to build an artist retreat on a farm just a short ferry ride away from the big city. Ok, before you paint a picture of hemp wearing, ec- hippies, don't. We were both at the peak of our careers when we made the move to Gibsons—Sandy in the film Industry and myself in theatre and writing—when we decided to live the dream. Of course, that dream vanished in a fast descending fog of reality (“What do you mean we have to put in another septic field? What's a septic field?”) and we were left wondering what on earth we were doing. One day, glumly overlooking our empty fields, my wife turned to me. “We're zoned for farming, right?” I nodded. “And we're artists,” she continued, “So let's be an art farm”.

Those two words juxtaposed was all the fertilizer we needed. We had no idea what the term “art farm” meant but it didn't matter. We gave ourselves that name, and people—from all sorts of backgrounds and professions—showed up, throwing their thoughts, ideas and projects into the mix. We started a non-profit organization called “Deer Crossing the Art Farm”, running arts and nature-driven programming on our property and out in the community, and the art farm harvest grew bigger and bigger every year. From festivals to productions to workshops to community-building initiatives, it was hard to keep up with the bounty!

Then we started to explore how we could create, you know, a ‘farm’ on the art farm. Clearly we had the art side taken care of, the farm side... not so much. We aren't farmers. We have all the respect in the world for farmers, but we aren't the ones to make it happen. So we set out to recruit some young farmers onto the land.

Our first challenge was where to house them? There is one 1000 square foot home that we live in and a one-room cabin in the woods. We could bring in volunteers for a few weeks at a time but no farming family was going to pick up and move to a piece of land with nowhere to live and no ownership stake in the land themselves. Our ownership situation was tenuous enough, as it was. Sandy and I shared ownership of the land with my parents. It was, truth be told, the only way we could make the leap in the first place. My parents were supportive of our vision but had no desire to live on the land themselves. We realized if we were going to buy my parents out, invest in more housing and start a farm, we'd need more than one other family to make this happen: Two more, at the very least. Yet when we proposed a cluster development (that would take up the same or less square footage than your average 4000 square foot estate home) to our local planner he explained that our current zoning wouldn't allow it.

Which brings us back to those eight 5-acre covenanted lots beside us. How is it that, in an age of food security crises and the sky-rocketing value of land, where the average age of farmers is late 50s and creeping higher, our 'current zoning' allows for estate developments such as the one next door to us, but doesn't allow for a low footprint cluster development that might actually make farming viable for the next generation of farmers?

This is the issue the Smart Farm Project tries to address. There are, it turns out, many challenges to developing a small farm co-housing model. From the legal quandaries around ownership, the economic feasibility of small farming, to complications of zoning, small-farm co-housing is not a simple endeavor. It is, however, an exciting one. This project has been inspiring from the get-go. Whether you're a regional planner, a farming advocate, an economic development officer, a retiree, a non-profit organization, a farm, a farmer or someone just like me with nothing but a vision and relentless (some might say: naïve) determination, we hope the outcomes of this exploration into small farm co-housing helps you kick-start some smart farms of your own. This has brought the dream a whole lot closer to reality for us. May it do the same for you and yours'.

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