

# Sustainable, local agriculture is the way forward

BY ARTHUR FALLICK AND KENT MULLINIX, SPECIAL TO THE SUN    SEPTEMBER 25, 2009

David Baxter's Sept. 8 column on how an aging population poses challenges for the British Columbia economy makes the compelling case that our population will grow older much faster, and that this has profound implications for what we require from our economy.

His analysis of the demographic and economic challenges facing British Columbia concludes with the assertion that "expanding and diversifying export markets and products will be fundamental to sustaining our standard of living and social programs as the population rapidly ages."

While the trends identified are not in dispute, the conclusions and their profound implications are less easy to accept at face value. Indeed, we contend that the combined effects of peak oil, peak water, climate change, rapid urbanization and the increasing population growth should compel B.C. to look for alternative strategies rather than unfettered consumption and increasing reliance on the international marketplace.

Two critical questions were posed in Baxter's article: "How can we, collectively and individually, best respond to the significant social and economic changes that will occur as the province's population ages?" and "How can we find the workers, the work and the productivity to ensure that our economy will provide the goods and services which we will require?"

We agree with Baxter's view that no matter how these questions are answered, strategically or otherwise, the quality of the rest of our lives will largely be determined by how well we respond to them. Based on our research and analysis at the Institute for Sustainable Horticulture at Kwantlen Polytechnic University however, we offer an alternative perspective as to where the most effective long-term strategies lie for strengthening and sustaining our local and regional economies.

We contend that Municipal Enabled Agriculture represents a structured approach that can respond substantively to the economic challenges that will increasingly beset B.C. (food security defined in terms of supply, and food sovereignty defined in terms of control). We believe that it is important and timely to challenge the prevailing mindset that sees increased consumption as the measure of success regardless of the implications on the resources depleted, ecological carnage created or the planning nightmares that are besetting our towns and cities.

We depart from convention in suggesting that human-scale, agri-food production based on bio-regional rather than geo-political boundaries represents an under-valued economic force that can transform how we design, plan and support our local communities. And we are working closely with a number of progressive municipalities throughout B.C. to explore how MEA can mitigate against the worst impacts of the environmental and economic challenges mentioned above while at the same time showcasing

practical ways through which to build the workforce (the next generation of urban farmers), the work (food security and agri-food production) and the productivity (urban agriculture as a significant municipal economic engine) that Baxter suggests is essential.

The more people become sequestered in cities and insulated from ecological engagement, the greater is the danger that we lose sight of the mounting economic, social and ecological burden that we are imposing on the earth's resources and systems. Despite spending an increasing amount of our disposable income on it, food has become little more than an urban sector throughput. We increasingly have little or nothing to do with its production, processing or marketing, and there is a growing awareness that our constant quest for cheaper products generates less obvious costs such as environmental degradation, loss of bio-diversity, loss of farmland and farmers, exploitation of labour and resources, as well as compromised health and nutrition, food safety and food security.

Evidence of these forces converging were felt in 2008 with an inflation rate of 1.2 per cent overall while food costs rose 7.3 per cent, cereal products 12.4 per cent and fruits and vegetables a staggering 26.9 per cent.

Our research is attempting to answer the question: How can urban and peri-urban agriculture be tied directly to the economic, social and ecological vitality of our cities? We believe the answer lies in part in building sustainable bio-regional, agri-food systems, as a necessary pre-condition for ensuring food sovereignty.

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