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3. Housing In The ALR: Siting & Size

Discussion:

Unlike some jurisdictions, British Columbia has no criteria for the ownership of designated agricultural land. As a result, farmland may be owned by both farmers and non-farmers. What has been seen as a growing phenomenon, particularly in close proximity to urban centres, is the attractiveness of agricultural land for "country living" by what are essentially urban (or at least expatriate urban) residents. Chapter 2 "Perspectives On Farming" discusses this form of land use in some detail. Agricultural concerns include destabilizing farm communities, driving up land prices and the potential for increasing land use conflict.

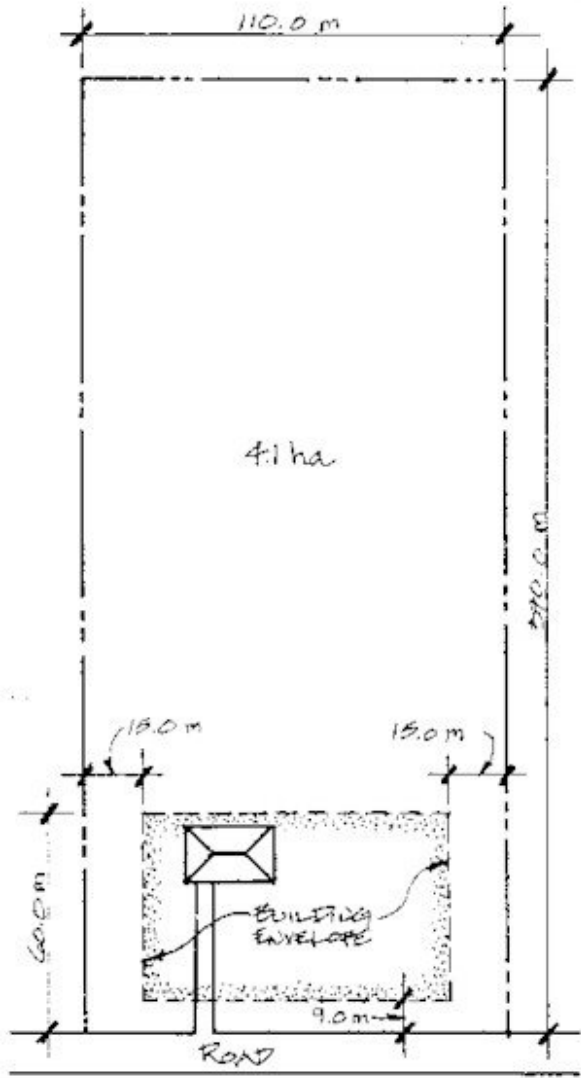
This form of land use is described varyingly as "rural residential", "country residential", "hobby farming", "gentrification of the countryside", "estate residential" or "living on acreage". Regardless of the name, the lot sizes targeted for such use range from relatively small (0.4 hectares or 1 acre) to relatively large lots as big as 8 hectares (20 acres). The residential unit is often large, and there is only modest or no agricultural use of the land at all.

Siting of Residences

Rural residential uses often have the immediate impact of taking land out of production or limiting the future potential for agricultural use. An increasing concern within the farm community has been the long term harm to the agricultural usefulness of the land base through insensitive residential siting. Homes placed in the middle of agricultural properties require lengthy driveways, consuming even more agricultural land, and make farm management difficult even if the rural residential owners are willing to lease a portion of their property to a nearby farmer. Siting regulations for houses should also attempt to reflect the principle of a shared responsibility for providing distance separation with adjoining agricultural uses.

Opportunities & Recommendations:

1. To reduce the impact of the siting of residential buildings in the ALR, it is suggested that siting criteria be established within local government zoning and rural land use bylaws to require residences within the ALR to be located within the front portion of a legal parcel based on the following:
 - - maximum setbacks:
 - - from front lot line 60 metres; and
 - - minimum setbacks:
 - - from front lot line 6 to 9 metres; and
 - - from side lot lines 15 metres.



Notes on Siting Diagram

Lot Size: 110m x 370m = 4.1 ha (10.1 ac.)

Residential Setbacks:

- Minimum: — Front - 9m (29.5 ft.)
 — Side - 15m (49.2 ft.)
- Maximum: — Front - 60m (196.9 ft.)

A Note on Setbacks:

In urban residential areas, building setbacks from side property lines are often 2M or less. Greater setbacks are proposed in agricultural areas. While setbacks may vary in different circumstances, an appropriate minimum side lot line setback for principal farm structures is considered to be about 15m. In order to ensure residential uses share in providing distance separation to help reduce potential conflicts between adjoining properties, a 15m side lot line setback for residences is also suggested, particularly for larger properties. In the case of front lot lines the road right-of-way, often 20m in width, provide additional separation.

Residential Building Envelope

(this example): — 3,920 sq.m

Residence Size

— 350
 (single floor ground sq.m
 coverage and ancillary (3,766
 uses - this example): sq.ft.)

Percentage of Building Envelope utilized by Residence and ancillary uses = 9%

Result

With a maximum setback of 60m, 84% of the property (in this example) is maintained free of any residential intrusion.

The building envelope remains sufficiently large, allowing considerable flexibility, even with a relatively large home on the property.

2. That the basic setback provisions form part of the Bylaw Standards developed under Section 916 of the *Municipal Act* for adoption within local government zoning or rural land use bylaws.
3. In cases where topography or other physical features clearly limit the usable building envelope, variances to the siting criteria could be considered by the Board of Variance based upon the principle of limiting the impact on agricultural land, particularly land with high agricultural capability, through the appropriate siting of residential structures and ancillary uses.

Besides maximum and minimum setbacks for dwellings in the ALR, there are other considerations concerning the siting of residential uses which have the potential to be land consumptive, cause agricultural inefficiencies or heighten the capitalization of farm land.

The area or "building envelope" where dwellings and associated uses may be located is a product of lot line setbacks, lot size and lot configuration. In the 4.1 ha. lot size example on the preceding page, the building envelope is about 3,920 sq. m. or almost 0.4 ha. (1 acre). Besides the actual dwelling, there are several possible associated or ancillary residential (as opposed to farm) uses such as driveways, detached garages for non-farm vehicles, yards / septic field areas and other landscaping features, garden/storage sheds, artificial ponds not serving farm drainage needs, swimming pools and tennis courts. To protect as large a portion of the land base for farm use as possible, ancillary residential uses should be maintained within a specified "residential" building envelope in close proximity to the dwelling unit.

Given land costs and a desire to maximize the available land base for farming, most farmers will prudently site dwellings and other domestic uses in a manner that provides the greatest "agricultural" advantage. These same guiding principles, however, may not govern the siting considerations of persons living in the ALR for reasons other than farming. Consideration should, therefore, be given to the size and location of the building envelope available to locate a dwelling and other ancillary uses - an area that has been called by one municipality the "Home Plate"².

4. That the Agricultural Land Commission, with the involvement of MAF, local governments and representatives of the farm community, undertake a policy review of the siting of residential uses in the ALR. Besides other objectives, the policy should:
 - i. ensure farmers have the opportunity for large homes and generous building envelopes within which to site residential and ancillary uses;
 - ii. maximize the amount of land available for farm use on any given parcel;
 - iii. ensure efficient field utilization, including the use of machinery, by lessening the impact of parcel severance by residential and ancillary uses;

- iv. lessen the attractiveness to non-farm residents interested in the ALR as a site for rural/estate residential uses and hobby farms; and
- v. lessen the impact of unduly high residential capitalization of properties in the ALR by non-farm residents.

Size of Residences

Besides the siting of residential buildings, a second concern is the actual size of residences in agricultural areas. While one home per parcel is an outright use in the ALR, the *Agricultural Land Commission Act* and most local bylaws do not place limits on the size of residences in the Reserve. Farm homes come in every shape, size and variety of architectural styles. It is not uncommon for a farm home to be larger than its urban counterpart. The size of farm properties affords greater siting flexibility and is less confining than urban residential lots. In fact, the opportunity to build very large homes is one reason that an increasing number of non-farm families are finding it attractive to live in the ALR. A reversal of this desire for large country 'estate' homes in agricultural areas should not be anticipated - at least in the short term. Transportation and communication advances continuously shrink the time / distance relationships between the city and the countryside, making it increasingly feasible for the "urban" resident to live in a rural setting in the city's near-hinterland.

There are a number of definable impacts of this trend. Large homes, combined with poor siting, can create a building footprint that is land consumptive. But of greater concern are the people attracted to the concept of owning a large home in the countryside. Invariably the rural resident is either a non-farmer with little or no interest in agriculture or a pseudo-farmer at best. It is this lack of interest and understanding of farming that has the larger potential negative impact on the farm community. On property owned by a non-farm resident, bona fide agriculture may be consciously eliminated. Beyond site specific impacts, complaints against farm practices or specific types of operations can increase, escalating to demands by rural residents for a regulatory response by local governments that will, in all likelihood, be agriculturally restrictive. As the grip of rural residential use takes hold, farm families become politically marginalized and can feel alienated even within long-standing farm communities.

Being able to build large homes in the ALR draws non-farm residents to the Reserve



The building of large homes in the ALR also represents a considerable capital investment. Once an agricultural property contains a huge home the value of the land and improvements will, in all likelihood, be pushed beyond the means of most farm families. This can be tough on a nearby operator wishing to expand or a person wishing to begin farming. The property values may move beyond farmland prices. This has obvious long term implications for maintaining cohesive farm communities.

Placing limits on the size of residential buildings in the ALR has been viewed cautiously by the farm community. Some farmers, due to family size or lifestyle choices, may simply desire a large home. Another important consideration is a desire by some farm operators to have members of their extended family live with them in the same home and assist with the farm operation. For some farm families, this may be in preference to building a second dwelling for farm help and indeed may be a less land consumptive option. The development of policies setting a limit on the size of residential buildings should, therefore, be designed to allow 'large' farm homes but curtail the growing trend of building 'mega' homes for non-farm residents in the ALR.

In developing a policy of this type, the objectives should be in no doubt. It is not targeted at limiting the potential for farm families to have large homes. It is, however, aimed directly at dissuading persons from purchasing farm properties for the purpose of building excessively large non-farm homes in the ALR. However, it should be recognized that eliminating the excessively large home will not end the possibility of non-farm families living in an agricultural area. It will influence how the land is used and the desire by some to live in the ALR. For those who desire a 'mega' home, such aspirations should be directed at non-ALR land.

It is not enough to simply secure the agricultural land base for farm use; it must also remain financially accessible to farm families with few encumbrances. The 'mega' home can work at cross purposes to this objective.

Opportunities & Suggestions:

1. To address the concern for 'mega' homes in the ALR, that the Province assume a greater leadership role by considering the establishment of a base maximum 'footprint' for single family dwellings in the ALR.
2. That the ALC and MAF, in consultation with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and local government representatives, consider two options for implementing a limit on the size of residences in the ALR.
 - An amendment to the *Agricultural Land Commission Act*, regulations or a general order of the Commission establishing a base maximum; or
 - That the base maximum footprint form part of the Bylaw Standards developed under Section 916 of the Municipal Act for adoption within local government zoning or rural land use bylaws.

In either above case, provision should be made to modify the policy if reasonable justification is provided by a local jurisdiction. As a model, the Commission's home occupation General Order has the potential for local flexibility (see General Order #997/95 - Agricultural Land Reserve Home Occupation Policy - ALC Handbook page 2-6-15). In the case of Bylaw Standards established under Section 916 of the Municipal Act, flexibility is possible at the time the Standards are established and published (see Municipal Act, Sec. 916(3)) or at the time of bylaw approval by the Minister.

Establishing Policies concerning the siting and size of residential uses in the ALR should be based on the principle of:

***"Farmland
for Farmers and Farming"***