

Policy Brief: Agriculture Parks Model for the CRD

The focus of this Discussion Paper is the concept of 'Agriculture Parks' as a strategy local government can use to protect farmland and create access to land for farmers while also realizing a full range of other community and environmental benefits. The conventional role of parks is examined with a lens on how Ag Parks can be designed and managed to meet public objectives of recreation, ecosystem function and agricultural interest.

"An Ag Park is a combination of a working farm and a municipal park that is located at the urban edge. Ag Parks can serve as transition or buffer zones between urban and agricultural uses. They are designed for multiple uses that accommodate small farms, public areas and natural habitat". Sustainable Agriculture Education (SAGE)

The Challenge

Farmland is disappearing and becoming inaccessible to farmers due to the high price of land caused by population growth and urban development pressures in the CRD. While important and progressive, current public policy and land use planning tools are inadequate to address this challenge.

What is an "Agriculture Park"?

There are common themes and a range of different models. They may:

1. Preserve farmlands, predominantly on the urban edge
2. Increase public access to, and education about, food production
3. Provide assistance to farmers through providing access to land and/or "farm incubation" and training possibilities
4. Provide space for walking, picnicking and recreation
5. Act as a natural reserve area that provides valuable habitat and offers interpretive programming to educate about ecosystems, watersheds, and environmentally sustainable agricultural practices
6. Provide ways of financing park operations through programming, farm leases, agriculture production, and events.



Some features of agriculture parks that make them attractive to local governments and communities is that they allow small farm operations access to secure land and local markets. They provide fresh food, and an educational, environmental and an aesthetic amenity for nearby communities.

Role of Local Government and Parks

Planners today are realizing that many benefits emerge from stronger community and regional food systems and Ag Parks can be one mechanism among a number of strategies to get there. Traditionally Parks have been spaces for protecting significant natural spaces and ecosystems, preserving heritage and providing opportunities for learning and recreation. The new CRD Regional Parks Strategic Plan prioritizes the ability of regional parks to support the goals of the CRD Sustainability Strategy, which now encompasses local food security.

At the regional level CRD Parks protects and manages more than 13,000 hectares of natural areas in 33 regional parks and trails on southern Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands.

At the **municipal level**, Parks Departments have overseen the development of allotment and community gardens, as well as the installation of edible plantings in parks and boulevards.

There are implications for Parks departments as well as local governments in the creation of Ag Parks. One may be the need to change the definition of Parks or add another classification of parks within the local or regional parks system.

Other implications may be:

- Need to partner with food and agriculture community organizations, industry or academic partners to support the development and maintenance of Ag Parks
- Hire or train park managers and employees to better understand, manage and maintain agriculture features and activities in parks; create partnerships with organizations with expertise and capacity
- Develop policy related to new activities and public-private partnerships in Ag Parks
- Adjust parks planning, development and maintenance processes, schedules and activities
- Look at Parks Acquisition planning and priorities in relation to Ag Parks

The City of Victoria is partnering with two neighbourhoods on a **Community Orchard Project** and a community centre-based **Kitchen Garden Pilot**. A community orchard is a grove of fruit or nut trees in a **PUBLIC PARK** that is cared for and eaten by the community. The Kitchen Garden Pilot will transform 1800 square feet of decorative garden beds (currently maintained by City staff) into edible food gardens that will be managed by the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group.

The District of Saanich's Parks, Recreation and Culture Master Plan works towards implementing Key Strategic Objective #SWB-5: Local Food Production. It states:

“Explore the opportunities within the park and recreation system for individuals and communities to grow food locally”

Details about Ag Parks

The intention of Ag Parks is *not* to develop natural areas into farms. Each Ag Park is different based on the natural features, the community interests and needs, potential partners, resources available and the goals set out for the Park.

Some of the important benefits that can be afforded by Ag Park design are:

- Recreation opportunity from: walking, biking trails, and gardening/farming activities
- Protection of natural areas, stewardship of ecosystems, storm water management
- Education and learning activities
- Increased access to fresh fruits and vegetables and farm products
- Promotion of social cohesion and cultural celebration
- Access to diverse products/activities: beekeeping, livestock and poultry, berries, field and forage crops, herbs, milk, dairy and eggs, flowers, nursery crops, tree fruits and nuts, grapes, mushrooms, forest and wildcrafted products
- Community economic development and poverty reduction initiatives



Potential Features and Activities

1. Education and Outreach – demo sites, workshops, tours, camps, apprenticeships, volunteering
2. Training and Technical Programs – Incubator program, research, farm school, job training gardens
3. Agriculture programs – access to land and infrastructure for commercial growers, marketing, food hubs and value-added supports, leases,

Ag Parks are developed and managed under a range of models and agreements – often the public agency, in our case regional or local governments (potentially School District or other authority), would have jurisdiction over the Ag Park as a whole and manage the overall park and its components (most likely through the Parks and Recreation department). The public agency could then work with a partner (an existing organization or new entity) that would have the role of development, management and/or operations of the park under an agreement.

Ag Park Examples - Further information is detailed in the Discussion Paper.

British Columbia Examples

1. Newman Farm, Central Saanich
2. Haliburton Farm, Sanaich
3. Terra Nova Farm, Richmond
4. Loutet Park Urban Agriculture Project, City of North Vancouver
5. Colony Farm Regional Park, Metro Vancouver
6. MESA Farm Park Pilot, Langley
7. Ruckle Park, Saltspring Island

CRD Context

In the last three decades the population of the CRD has more than doubled, and is expected to increase by another 30% in the next three decades. This has led to significant development pressure on the region's farmland. As a result of this development pressure, farmland in the region currently sells for \$70,000 to \$100,000 an acre, a market value which is equivalent to land used for residential and industrial uses. Farm businesses can rarely provide adequate returns to justify this investment. As a result, new farmers struggle to enter the industry, and the region's stock of farmland is gradually being lost to non-agricultural uses. Most farms in the CRD are small to medium sized with 53% of farms under 10 acres, 43% between 10-129 acres and less than 5% over this size. In total, local farms generate over \$50 million in gross farm receipts with 729 farms making less than \$10,000 and 151 farms making from \$10,000 to \$24,999.

Taken together, these characteristics of low farm incomes and high land prices are creating significant barriers in terms of accessing land, farm succession, and for capital investment and innovation in the agriculture sector. The region's farmland and farmers are under threat and action is required to address and improve the situation. It is beneficial that the region's population is increasingly interested in and concerned about food security, and the importance of maintaining the capacity to produce local food.

The ability to make land accessible and expand production is a significant need in the region, as is making farming an attractive occupation and activity. Parks could have a role to play in protecting land for agricultural uses and providing access to farmers,

Possible Ag Park in the CRD: Panama Flats

Panama Flats was chosen as a case study because:

- It is a publicly owned piece of land
- The municipality has supportive policy in place
- The municipality will soon be entering into a public consultation and planning phase for the land
- Panama Flats has fertile agriculture land and has been farmed for over a century; it has an agricultural building that could be a "food hub"
- There are compatible other uses (recreation, watershed management and wildlife habitat)
- The land is in the Agriculture Land Reserve and abuts a residential area
- It is an agricultural land use planning issue



Panama Flats. CRD Natural Areas Atlas

Panama Flats Context

The 25 hectares that comprise Panama Flats sits near the urban containment boundary and is zoned A-1 Rural, with one third in the Agriculture Land Reserve. The flats are a natural floodplain and wetland that drain into Colquitz Creek. They provide habitat for hundreds of waterfowl and bird species and also play a vital role in stormwater management. Panama Flats is surrounded by clay based soils, but has very fertile "peat rich" soils. This area has been farmed since the early 1900's.

The Flats play a vital role in rainwater management for the Wilkinson Valley; recreation also has a role as the trails and routes along the perimeter are loved by dog walkers, bird watchers, and joggers alike. The Colquitz River was once full of salmon and community restoration efforts have been underway to bring

back the salmon. Panama Flats presents a very unique site for learning and research due to the extensive habitat; there are many opportunities for community engagement around restoration, ecology and stewardship of wetlands and watercourses. For decades the municipality, environmental and neighborhood organizations and residents have been exploring avenues to integrate flood management and human use in a way that supports and enhances the biodiversity of the area. This will be the focus in moving forward, however that lens may broaden to an agroecological approach to the site. Agroecology is the study of ecological processes that operate in agricultural production systems. It is about linking ecology, culture, economics, and society to sustain agricultural production, healthy environments and viable food and farming communities.

In February 2011 Saanich Council approved the purchase of Panama Flats for \$2.4 million, the following were outlined as the community benefits offered by the site:

- Floodplain Management
- Habitat
- Parks and Trails
- **Food Security**



Jurisdiction and Supporting Policy – District of Saanich

Local Area Plan

Panama Flats falls within the Carey Local Area; the Local Area Plan has as a goal to “**Retain contiguous agricultural parcels for agricultural use**”. The plan is also supportive of allotment gardens on unused portions of farmland.

Panama Flats Purchase Fact Sheet

It would appear that the development of Panama Flats as an Ag Park is envisioned, or at least supported by the District of Saanich, as stated here: “**As the owner, Saanich could act on this policy to preserve farm land and enhance food security. Leasing a portion of the lands for agricultural use compatible with the surrounding neighbourhood or community allotment gardens are options**”.

OCP

The Saanich OCP has a number of statements that support the retention of agriculture land and support the development of food growing opportunities for its citizens. Details outlined in the Discussion paper.

Parks Master Plan

In the Parks Master Plan, Under Key Strategic Objectives #SWB #-5: Local Food Production, it states:

“Explore the opportunities within the park and recreation system for individuals and communities to grow food locally.”

Could We Consider the Ag Park Model for Panama Flats?

The future use and development of Panama Flats is within the purview of the Saanich Parks and Recreation Department. They are currently entering into a consultation phase that will surely exhibit many different views on the appropriate use of this land. It is critical that this work is done with public consultation and consideration for the Strategic Plan of the District, the Official Community Plan and the Local Area Plan. Any development of an Ag Park at Panama Flats must be done in concert with planning for the other values of the park. The agriculture activities must be planned so that the ecosystem, recreational amenities and watershed management role of the floodplain are not compromised, but enhanced.

A consultation with key stakeholders and the general public is required to understand the needs and opportunities identified and supported by the community. The ideas that CR-FAIR has heard through various Food Roundtables, and conversations with agriculture and community stakeholders are to look at the development of:

- A Demonstration or Teaching and Learning Garden
- Community garden
- Nut and fruit tree project
- Leases to farmers
- Incubator farm
- Storage and farm market stand
- Packing and distribution centre



Other Park Features that could co-exist with the agricultural activities of the park:

- Recreation and Walking and Biking Trails
- Ecosystem and Watershed Stewardship and Interpretation
- Floodplain Management

Challenges

The major challenge identified with Panama Flats is the compatibility of stormwater management and floodplain function with year round food production interests. Current reports and new investigations into the hydrology of the site will be necessary to determine stormwater management opportunities. Downstream flooding must always be averted with any such planning.

NEXT STEPS

With an agricultural focus, some next steps include:

- Community consultation about the development of the Flats; this includes looking at the potential of agriculture uses, mapping potential land areas suitable for agriculture (alongside ecological systems and other values and uses)
- Review studies of land, soil, and water to determine land suitability and seasonality for agriculture
- Request new studies to be done as required
- Assessment of buildings and infrastructure, potential for food hub?
- Determine land access and infrastructure needs of interested growers
- Survey surrounding neighborhood residents and businesses to determine support and concerns for agricultural use on the flats and potential for consumer support
- Determine partnerships, interests, resources, and opportunities
- Explore potential funding
- Develop a plan for the “Way Forward”



Next Steps for the Capital Region

With the development of the Regional Food Strategy, it will be important to consider the role of Ag Parks in the CRD to promote goals for food and sustainability. There are many opportunities to look at the development of Agriculture Parks. Some of these include:

- Sandown Raceway, North Saanich
- Newman Farm, Central Saanich
- Panama Flats, Saanich
- Quick's Bottom, Saanich
- McConnell Farm, Metchosin
- Aylard Farm, Sooke

The creation of Ag Parks is an innovative, sustainable way to view the use and enjoyment of public land. It will be a new concept to many, but one that could provide diverse benefits for the community.

Some important steps that would be helpful in actualizing Ag Parks are:

- Increase public awareness about regional farmland issues and the benefits of Ag Parks.
- Secure a Policy Direction in the CRD's Regional Sustainability Strategy (RSS).
- Raise public awareness and support for agricultural uses on public lands, with a specific focus on parks or Ag Parks.
- Public and municipal advocacy for the expansion of the definition of parks within our municipalities and Regional District to include Ag Parks
- Raise awareness about the potential to accept gifts of farmland or purchase farmland that can honour the farm heritage and be kept in production through the Ag Park model
- Consider the potential to access the resources and infrastructure in place for Parks acquisition and management to support Ag Park acquisition, development and management

What you can do:

- Get involved in the CRD Regional Sustainability Strategy public consultations and any public meetings related to food and agriculture in your municipality
- Send your questions, thoughts and comments to regional and local government staff or CR-FAIR
- Subscribe to CR-FAIR's newsletter at <http://www.communitycouncil.ca/initiatives/crfair/index.html>

To contact the CRD, your municipality or electoral area visit: <http://www.crd.bc.ca/about/members.htm>

Acknowledgements

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References

This Policy Brief is a condensed version of a Policy Discussion Paper. More comprehensive information, and references are found in this Policy Discussion Paper at www.communitycouncil.ca/CRFAIR.

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