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## **WAIKATO RIBBON DEVELOPMENT AND URBAN SPRAWL IS NOT GOOD FOR OUR PRODUCTIVE BASIN**

It is of increasing concern that New Zealand's residency is spreading along roads handy to towns and cities. One only has to fly over urban New Zealand to see what is going on. Of even more concern is the loss of good, food producing land to urban sprawl. More than that, many countries have been shocked into the fact that they can not feed themselves, and are reliant on imported food.

Let's explore some of the issues around this.

Firstly, the loss of food producing land. New Zealand is one big food producing property well away from the main markets. We have a huge competitive advantage with relatively regular rainfall, plenty of water for irrigation and relatively fertile and free draining soils. We have enough food to feed 35 million people.

As the increase in world population and demand for food plays out, New Zealand needs to be able to maximise food production to capitalise on those opportunities. Urban sprawl is taking up some of our best farmland. Take for example Hamilton, Palmerston North and Christchurch. These cities are centred on some of the best land in the world. The soils are described as "elite", on a world soil quality assessment basis, but the farms in the area are being broken up and covered with lifestyle blocks, houses, concrete drives and tennis courts. I understand that 7% of our good land in New Zealand is now in lifestyle blocks. That statistic is not good if you look at the big picture. How many ride on mowers do we have harvesting grass for the compost waste, when it should be going through cows for producing milk. Could we cut and collect lawns clippings, especially off some of the large park like gardens that abound in the Waikato, and deliver the cut grass to the farmer next door to feed to his cows?

Secondly, the people who arrive into the country from the cities and towns do not really understand, or more importantly want to understand, the farming way of life. They don't want dogs barking, machinery working into the night, calves and cows calling, let alone the smells associated with farming, in particular dairying.

Apparently some block dwellers were having a barbecue one night and did not like the cows grazing and plopping next door to their friends sitting around the barbecue table. So

the block dweller went and let the cows out of the paddock, much to the anger of the farmer. We can see these problems increasing as the urbanites put pressure on the farmers to meet their own expectations. Many have no understanding of the key issues for farming and are putting a lot of pressure on the farming community, to change to meet the expectations

Thirdly, ribbon development runs along the highways running away from the main towns and cities causing traffic congestion and other issues. These ribbon developments have also occurred in other countries with the same results.

Councils seem to be happy to allow subdivision of farms because they can obtain an increase in rates. Developers are happy to carry out the subdivision because they are making large profits. The farmer is happy to sell because he receives a premium for his land. The purchasers are happy because they can see value and space. So everybody appears to be happy but the main drivers here are money, profit and capital gain. Not maintaining land for farm production. Many sub-divisions have been allowed by Councils who now realise that they were done for all the wrong reasons.

In the late 60's, whilst I was in university, our professors spoke about the retention of food producing land as being crucial to New Zealand's future. The government and council needs to think about this and embrace the protection of productive land. Perhaps the zoning of special areas for close sub-division to produce small rural communities. An example might include Tauwhare, Te Miro etc.

So what can governments and/or councils do? Well we, as a nation, need to embrace the key role that agriculture has to play in our prosperity and our economy. We, as a nation, need to recognise that food production is what keeps us in accordance with our standard of living. Councils need to consider that the loss of food producing land will affect their prosperity in the medium and longer term. When times get tough, it's no use having a lot of lifestyle blocker's who are unable to pay the rates, whereas farmers, generally, will be able to pay the rates as they can still generate an income from the land.

Councils may also need to realise that some of the problems relative to block dwellers could end up at their door. Will farmers sue council for allowing all these townies on to their boundaries? Do we need more taxes to slow down the development? Is some form of Capital Gains Tax, on development of land suitable for agriculture production, an option? Should councils not allow the breaking up of economic units but allow a group of houses as a cluster? These cluster houses would have a common entrance and only be

of some 2,000m<sup>2</sup> per site and there would be a buffer zone between the farming paddocks and these properties. Should council require an economic report on all subdivisions where there will be a substantial loss of food producing land? Should councils insist that if a farmer has existing titles to subdivide that the lowest or non-producing land is available for subdivision rather than cutting into some of the best land on the property? Should the sub-division of 'retirement blocks' be allowed of right? Does the homestead really belong to the farm?

And yes I can hear people saying they would lose their rights and so on. And that's a valid argument too.

But, the world is getting hungry. There is about 20 days of dried stored food in the world. Production is static and demand is increasing. If other countries start trying to stockpile food to prevent shortages it is all going to get most interesting.

In summary, productive land is a fixed resource in the world. New Zealand has what the world wants which is surplus food and we need land to produce it. We, as a nation, need to protect our productive land for food production. The nation needs to embrace this and have a mandated policy to councils to prevent wholesale subdivision of land and losing it from agriculture production. It is clear the sub-divisions of rural land have been based on money and profit to various parties involved. Profit without adequate planning can give all the wrong signals to the market place. Councils need to consider the long term affect of breaking up all these productive farms for urbanisation. I guess at the end of the day the slogan "NO FARM, NO FOOD" will apply.

These are the opinions of Don Fraser of Fraser Farm Finance. Any decisions made should not be based on this article alone and appropriate professional assistance should be sought.

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