

Stopping rural sprawl: Island needs interim measures while land plan develops, says Federation of P.E.I. Municipalities

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CHARLOTTETOWN, P.E.I. — P.E.I. needs to restructure and reduce its many municipalities in addition to creating a provincewide land use plan in order to slow rural sprawl and maintain rapidly disappearing farmland.

That was the message from the Federation of P.E.I. Municipalities to members of the legislative assembly at an Oct. 3 standing committee on education and economic growth at the Coles Building in Charlottetown.

As P.E.I. has grown, new development has sprawled outside of municipal jurisdictions, which lowers the municipal tax base, decreases valuable farmland and uncontrollably changes the character of rural P.E.I., Satyajit Sen, a policy advisor with the federation, told the MLAs. The province's Department of Housing, Land and Communities has promised an official land use plan, and Sen says this is the way to limit sprawl and fight the housing crisis by increasing rural municipal density.

“(Sprawl causes) higher costs of public infrastructure and services, higher greenhouse gas emissions, deterioration of the landscape that attracts people to P.E.I., loss of farmland.”

Restructuring

Along with the plan, the province needs to restructure Island municipalities to include the properties that do not fall under local tax codes, he said. Ninety per cent of the province is privately owned, and most of that is unincorporated territory that does not contribute to the municipal tax base. Population density maps of the Island show new development has stretched outside of municipal boundaries and along roadsides. This has made services at municipalities difficult to maintain, with turnover in chief administrator officers, Sen said.

Essentially, the municipalities are subsidizing the unincorporated areas, whose residents are taking advantage of municipal services without paying local taxes, he said. Another factor in the low tax base for municipalities is P.E.I.'s property tax rate, which is the lowest in Canada and almost twice as low as neighbouring New Brunswick, Sen said. Given that a broad land use plan will take years to complete, Sen stressed the importance of interim measures to slow unplanned rural development, noting P.E.I. has lost 39 acres of farmland per day on average from 2016 to 2021.

“With the population growth, we see a lot of development and those developments are not necessarily good developments, because you don’t want a 50-lot or a 100-lot subdivision in the middle of nowhere, where there is no municipal water or central service. And that creates sprawl.”

The goal should be to encourage density in rural villages, which will keep the countryside filled with farms and grow the level of services and sense of community in the villages, Sen said, comparing it to villages in Ireland, Scotland, England and other parts of Europe.

Questions

After the presentation, Liberal MLA Robert Henderson asked about protecting farmland and enticing farmland owners not to sell.

Henderson owns farmland in O’Leary which is taxed under the local code, even though the land doesn’t use any municipal utilities or service — though the homestead does.

He asked what municipalities could do to make it more appealing to maintain that land as farmland to other landowners.

“They don’t want to become incorporated,” he said. “That’s why you can’t seem to expand your incorporative boundaries because everybody gets all fearful that, ‘I’m not getting anything back, and all I’m going to do is pay more.’”

Sen said municipalities already have the authority to regulate land through local zoning, but the most powerful tool for keeping farms as farms is a provincial land use plan, because most farms are not covered by municipal zoning.

Green MLA Peter Bevan-Baker asked about the differences between urban and rural density. Sen emphasized that planned rural growth in P.E.I. will lead to villages with more density and higher tax bases, but the province is not going to expand or amalgamate municipalities to the point of having large cities like Toronto or even Halifax.

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