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Effort to save farm tangled in red tape

Ian Vantreight is lucky his great grandpappy settled in here. If he'd joined the other toffs who decided to be gentleman farmers in what was Rhodesia, he'd really have something to complain about.

BY TIMES COLONIST (VICTORIA) JANUARY 21, 2008

Ian Vantreight is lucky his great grandpappy settled in here. If he'd joined the other toffs who decided to be gentleman farmers in what was Rhodesia, he'd really have something to complain about.

It's assumed that what Robert Mugabe has done in turfing white farmers out of their holdings in Zimbabwe is responsible for emptying Africa's breadbasket.

Not all of what they grew, though, had to do with filling hungry bellies: Some of those farmers made a pile by growing tobacco for export.

In our corner of the world, where Vantreight is tied to his fields by red tape, people talk about the need to preserve farmland around here for food security.

For Pete's sake: Mostly, the guy grows daffodils. Chew on a few of them and you'll wish you hadn't.

The idea that people on this end of the Island should be able to feed themselves on what is grown locally is the kind of thing socialists in sandals preach -- though their idea of self-sufficiency seems to require endless support by the state. But there's no doubt that local stuff tastes better.

When John Vantreight first sunk his mattock into the Saanich sod in 1884, a concern for security of a food supply made sense. But thanks to pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation and advances in seed propagation, farms can grow far more food to the acre.

When the pioneer first thought of selling some of his produce, getting it to customers before it spoiled was a real challenge. Now, though, improved harvesting, packaging, storage and transportation gets food to the table far quicker and fresher.

And where the first Central Saanich Vantreight had horse power to feed, acres were needed to grow its fuel. Tractors and other machines don't need that.

With so much food being produced for less, the value of food-growing land is being left behind by the inflating value of land for building above, travelling

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over or whacking a golf ball on.

That means the latest Vantreights, who are finding it difficult to rely solely on farming, must either be able to use some of their land for some other more lucrative purpose or pull up their fourth-generation stakes and move on.

Now, this heritage thing can be overdone: I'd hate to feel obliged to carry on my maternal great-grandfather's enterprise. It had a lot to do with whisky and involved rowing boats late at night in the cold, I've been told.

And if carrying on the tradition was as important to young Ian as he makes it sound, he'd still be driving a horse. He sure wouldn't be growing daffodils.

One of the things that's lasted from the rumbustious premiership of Dave Barrett is the Agricultural Land Reserve, which is designed to prevent the alienation of farmable land for other purposes, particularly the fertile soils around Victoria, Vancouver and Kelowna.

Part of the Vantreight property is within the reserve, and part of that is a driveway, which doesn't hold much promise for any bulbs put down there.

Virtually all the land Vantreight wants to use for a "green" housing development is tied up in nannyish zoning restrictions, designations under the Official Community Plan, and the requirements of regional growth strategies. Central Saanich councillors have decided all this red tape can't be unravelled. Even a public hearing, apparently, would be more trouble than it's worth -- to them.

This is land that was deliberately excluded from the ALR because it was too rocky to farm. It may be that the local politicians think the Garry oaks that grow there should be saved, but they can't claim that they're preserving farmland, or security of food supply, by turning their thumbs down at Vantreight's proposal -- and their noses up.

There's a certain snootiness about council's position -- a dream that the municipality is destined to be a charming rural enclave forever; an anticipation, perhaps, that if the daffodils go, and the Vantreights with them, rich hobby farmers will move in, raising the community tone.

And when the stone gateposts go up, and the speed limit is lowered, the rest of us can drive by and admire the mansions and manicured lawns and persuade ourselves that we're in the country.

Then we can go home and fill a vase with spindly daffodils from Holland and chew on dodgy vegetables from China.

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