Activist says UBC Farm may soon grow condos; University's Board of Governors denies farm in danger
Shawn Conner. **Vancouver Courier**. Vancouver, B.C.: Sep 10, 2008. pg. 12

The last working farm in Vancouver is under threat, according to Mel Lehan, and he's determined to save it.

Besides growing produce, the UBC Farm/Centre for Sustainable Food Systems serves as a research site for sustainability education, supports native plants and animals, and acts as a teaching base. But UBC's Board of Governors is reassessing the farm and its future.

"They now call it 'potential housing land,'" said Lehan, a community activist, teacher, and former candidate for parks board and the provincial legislature. "They've designated it for housing development, and I'm absolutely convinced, if we weren't having a big campaign to save the farm, it would've been gone by now."

According to the website www.campusplan.ubc.ca, UBC is now in the fourth of six phases with a three-year schedule. "The UBC Farm... is definitely part of the Vancouver campus plan review," UBC associate vice-president, Nancy Knight, is quoted as saying in a report called "What's the Plan." The report goes on to say, "The current operations for UBC Farm are located within a much larger future housing reserve which is formally designated in the UBC Official Community Plan."

But Stephen Owen, vice-president of external legal and community relations, says there's no need to worry. "As far as the farm goes, there are a number of principles that area of campus is acting under. One of them is that there will be a farm, and that it won't be removed. In fact, we have just received a technical report recommending the area under cultivation be at least doubled." He adds that whatever is done in that area will be a demonstration site of the best possible global sustainability practices.

"And in the next year, during the planning stages, there will be full consultation... while there's understandable concern, because of increased housing development mostly in other parts of the campus, people should feel very secure that all points of view will be looked at. I say to anyone in favour of keeping the farm and ensuring it's kept intact as an ecosystem, they're on the right track, because that's what the university is looking towards."

But Lehan believes that the farm is in danger.

"It's still their [the Board of Governors'] desire to move it somewhere else, and take this prime real estate and sell it for luxury condos. If they can't get either of those two, they want to keep diminishing the size of the farm until it gets smaller and smaller."

Any changes would jeopardize the ecosystem of the farm, which is located in the middle of a woodlot, Lehan argues.

"There are bees on the farm, and those bees must have that woodlot around them," he said. "Without blackberries, bees can't create honey. You get rid of the forest around it, and you've basically destroyed the bees."

Lehan believes public pressure, combined with the coming Olympics and elections, will at least stall development plans.

"But we want to save it permanently." With the farm, said Lehan, "we have food security right in the heart of the city. Most cities don't have this."

Since becoming involved a month ago, Lehan has collected 2,000 signatures on a petition. The number of people aware of the farm has surprised him.

"I thought I'd have to explain it to a lot of people, but everywhere I go, people seem to know about it. Anyone who's grown up in Vancouver has probably gone out there as a child."

Lehan, who has run for the parks board and city council, says collecting signatures for the cause has been the easiest thing he's done.

"Everybody wants to save the farm," he said. "It's so much more than just food there. But at the core of everything, in the future, with climate change, we're going to have to produce much more food locally so we don't have big trucks transporting it from Chile, and planes flying it from Europe to Toronto."

Credit: Shawn Conner; Vancouver Courier