

Small farming towns should be supported like resort municipalities

by Doug Holmes

Every year the provincial government provides \$13 million in dedicated funding to help 14 small resort municipalities pay for infrastructure and amenities crucial to the tourism sector. It is acknowledged that without this support, these towns would not have the means to provide key infrastructure needed to advance the industry that drives their local economies.

The challenges facing small resort towns, where high visitor demand places a strain on infrastructure beyond what their local tax bases can support, is similar to the challenges facing small agricultural towns like Summerland. Our tax bases are simply too small to support widely dispersed infrastructure, including many miles of roads, irrigation water systems, and flood control infrastructure.

Property taxes, the primary source of revenue for local government, were designed to cover the cost of servicing property. However, in Summerland, for every \$1 collected in property taxes from lands in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), it costs more than \$3 to service those properties, and the ratio is increasing as costs increase and infrastructure ages.

Rural municipalities also face significant growth and other pressures on their land that present challenges for supporting the integrity of the ALR and ensuring farmland remains available for food production.

Summerland Council has been working with other farming municipalities and lobbying the Province to point out that the sustainability of agriculture cannot be separated from the sustainability of the infrastructure needed to service agricultural lands.

We had a constructive meeting with Finance Minister Brenda Bailey and Finance Ministry staff at the Union of BC Municipalities (UBCM) convention in September 2025 where we discussed ideas to help small farming municipalities alleviate revenue shortfalls to better provide infrastructure to agricultural properties.

As a result of that meeting, Council has submitted a proposal to the government to create an Agricultural Municipality Initiative (AMI) modelled on the successful Resort Municipality Initiative (RMI) that was established in 2006.

Just as the RMI is designed to support small, tourism-based municipalities to build their tourism infrastructure, the idea of an AMI program would be to help small, agriculture-based municipalities build infrastructure in support of agriculture and food security.

Like the RMI, an AMI program could fund projects that result in key outcomes, for example improving the sustainability of the agri-food sector or making land available for farming, with eligible municipalities receiving annual fixed base funding and a performance-based lift.

The number of RMI participants is limited to a manageable group of municipalities and the same approach could be used for an AMI program with specific eligibility criteria to be established. There are about a dozen agriculture-oriented municipalities in BC with populations of less than 20,000 but approximately 2,000 ha or more of land in the ALR.

We are scattered around the province but we meet annually at the UBCM convention and keep in contact at other times. We are all proud of our agricultural roots and we see ourselves as partners in the protection of BC farmland. However, it needs to be recognized that the ALR is a provincial priority and it exists to ensure food security for all British Columbians, not just those of us living in farming towns. It is therefore reasonable to expect the provincial government to support the role of municipalities in providing the infrastructure needed to ensure the sustainability of agriculture.

Doug Holmes is the mayor of Summerland