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by PETER MITHAM

DELTA – An irrigation system might be the best thing to come out of a major highway project planned for Delta, but local farmers want to make sure that it gets built.

That was the upshot of a consultation session the province's Agricultural Land Commission hosted for the agricultural community in Delta regarding the impact of the South Fraser Perimeter Road that is being planned as part of the province's ambitious Gateway project. Gateway will develop infrastructure to facilitate the movement of goods through the Lower Mainland, increasing local highway capacity and potentially freeing up space on commuter routes. Government estimates have tagged the multi-year project at approximately \$3 billion.

The project will require up to 260 acres of farmland, a fact that has drawn sharp criticism from both farmers and farmland advocates.

Delta is on track to lose more than 1,000 acres of farm land over the coming years, and the scale of the Gateway project – and the fact government didn't announce the final routing until this past summer – has fuelled mistrust of the government's plans.

"We've flipped back and forth and we're right back where we started," said Jack Bates, former chair of the Delta Farmers' Institute who oversaw the institute's dialogue on the project for four years. The current route of the road, which winds around the north side of Burns Bog, was the institute's second choice for a route. DFI supported the project from the start, Bates said, but it originally favoured an alignment south of the bog. He told the commission that opposition by residents in East Ladner nixed that option, while advocates of the bog pushed for an alignment that effectively returned the route to its original alignment. The prospect of an irrigation system that's estimated to cost \$18 million is welcome, but Bates noted that there's no requirement that it actually be built. Some expressed fears that it could be sacrificed if the government eventually decided it couldn't afford it.

"There's no guarantee it will be built," Bates told panel members. "Make sure this thing is built, at any cost, after the road is built."

Robert Butler, administrator of the DFI, was equally emphatic.

He told the panel the DFI originally took a co-operative approach because it believed that if the road was going to happen, it would be best to find a route that worked for all concerned.

That's not quite how it's worked out.

"To say we're unhappy with this would be an understatement," Butler said, describing the current plans as effectively expropriation without appropriate compensation to the farming community.

"It is our opinion that the proponent's application should be set aside until all the ag[ricultural] enhancement strategies are known," he said.

Butler also urged full disclosure regarding the sale of any lands deemed surplus to the project.

The feedback was a surprise to many members of the commission's panel, but commission chair Erik Karlsen expressed sympathy for the farmers' plight noting that the commission had been equally hobbled by Victoria's lack of disclosure regarding the project.