

On December 2nd at UPEI, the Institute of Island Studies (IIS) hosted the second in a series of public symposia on issues dear to the hearts of Islanders. In this case, it was on the use and abuse of land and entitled *Island Land Use Policy at an Impasse?* As was the case with the water symposium, more than 100 people attended. My job was to serve as rapporteur, summarizing the main themes, both from the speakers and discussion with the audience. On this evening the two speakers were veteran observers of Island land use change Jean-Paul (JP) Arsenault and Ian Petrie. JP has served as Executive Secretary to the Round Table on Resource Land Use and Stewardship and the Commission on Land and Local Governance, and was a member of the team providing support to the Commission on the *Lands Protection Act*. Ian has spent three decades with the CBC, in three provinces, covering resource issues, mainly agriculture. Once again, Stratford councillor Diane Griffin served as moderator.

JP Arsenault reminded the audience that, despite at least six comprehensive land use reports and 410 recommendations over the past 40 years, 90% of PEI is still not covered by a land use plan and there are 30,000 vacant lots ready to be developed. Depending on who you are, this could be good or bad news. Using three case studies, he showed the challenges associated with unfettered land development, and speculated on the factors that led to approval of these parcels of land.

Ian Petrie recapped what he felt were the main events that led to the problems facing PEI farming (and especially potato farming). He painted a bleak future of the Island family farm as it is currently structured. He reminded us that, unlike the situation in North America, European governments recognize the link between economic security and environmental protection and implemented systems, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, that value and subsidize farming.

Not surprisingly, I found a lot of parallels between what was said at this land use symposium and the earlier session on water issues. Most importantly, there is a growing distrust among the main stakeholders and, regardless of political stripe, governments have consistently failed to achieve consensus among the various groups and have failed to say 'No' to lobbying, even if doing so would have been in the best long-term interests of farming. It is clear that developing a comprehensive approach to land use cannot be done without also taking an equally inclusive and principled approach to water use. What makes the situation more complex, both for policy development and in communicating a way forward with the general public, is that land and water use planning is becoming more entangled with competing visions of economic development and population growth.

The words 'crisis' and 'devastation' came up several times during the night. Unfortunately, these words have been used so frequently that they have started to lose their impact, especially with the general public. So, although you might not see it taking place as you drive across the Island, over the next generation land use and family farming are going to change fundamentally, likely not for the better for farmers and for our Island communities. By and large, the implementation

or enforcement of land use legislation has not kept pace with these changes on the land and we are ill-prepared to handle the changes that are still to come.

Two other words were used or implied throughout the conversation. The first was ‘ownership’ and what it means to ‘own land’. I’m convinced that many people haven’t the foggiest idea of what they are allowed to do on ‘their land’. Moreover, there is likely a broad range of opinion on what they should be allowed to do. Although it wasn’t mentioned explicitly, the other word that seemed to reflect the presentations and discussion was ‘stewardship’. It seems as though every group feels that they are the best stewards of PEI’s land. Stewardship, like sustainability, seems to be one of those sentiments that looks great on paper but is not so great when applied in your own backyard. I like to think of stewardship as it was expressed by John Sawhill, the former President and CEO of The Nature Conservancy. He said that, “a society is defined not only by what it creates but by what it refuses to destroy.”

These comments reflect the perspective of the rapporteur and may not necessarily reflect the attitudes or opinions of the panelists at the land symposium.

Dr. Jim Randall
Coordinator, Master of Arts Island Studies Program, UPEI