

**Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
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Title: Margaret Atwood Joins Prison Farms Campaign / Vancouver's Backyard Chickens I

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Jon Steinman: Welcome to Deconstructing Dinner – produced in Nelson, British Columbia at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY. I'm Jon Steinman. You can follow this weekly radio show through one of our 48 participating radio stations in Canada and the United States or through our Podcast and archived episodes linked to from our website at deconstructingdinner.ca. From there you can also stay updated through our Facebook and Twitter pages.

Today we visit with two ongoing subjects that we've been focusing on as of late, the future of Canada's rehabilitative and food producing prison farms and backyard hens. This will be the first of a two-part feature on the City of Vancouver's multi-year process, which, on June 8th, culminated into the official passing of a bylaw that permits the raising of up to four chickens per household. Because there are now many similar debates being waged among city councils across the country we'll launch this first of a two-part feature on Vancouver's efforts by looking back over the past few years to track just how this process first began, and perhaps other hopeful or illegal backyard chickeners can glean some pointers from Vancouver's efforts.

And on the prison farm front... some updates, on the ongoing campaign to save Canada's six prison farms – it's a topic we've been following closely and one that even more Canadians have become aware of following well-known Canadian author Margaret Atwood joining the fight. We'll learn about that and more including the now in place 24-hour citizen watch – set up across the street from Kingston, Ontario's Frontenac Institution, where residents there are keeping a close eye on the prison farm making sure that the 300 animal dairy herd does not get trucked off the property to auction.

increase music and fade out

JS: The Future of Canada's Prison Farms, it's a multi-part series here on the show – and the title of which is seeming to become more certain, closed.

Despite the ongoing and vocal opposition to the closure of Canada's over 100-year old prison farm program, Canada's Conservative led government appears to be carrying out their highly questionable decision as planned. In question were the quite hollow and in some cases shocking reasons provided for closing the farms, which have been operating as one of a number of rehabilitative and job-training programs managed by the Correctional Service of Canada. All three of Canada's opposition parties have too vocally denounced the decision and on our last episode on the issue airing back in April, Liberal members of Canada's Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security tabled motions calling for a halt to the closures until an independent review is conducted. Despite the opposition representing the majority of Canadians, the Conservative-led government is not obliged to listen leading many supporters of the prison farm program to call the ongoing closures as an affront to democracy.

Without many other political avenues available to opposition parties and Members of Parliament, Liberal MP Mark Holland rose on May 26th in the House of Commons and requested an emergency debate. Holland is the Liberal's opposition critic on Public Safety and National Security.

Speaker of the House: The Chair of the House noticed an application for an emergency debate from the honourable member from Ajax-Pickering, so I'll give you the member now.

Mark Holland: Thank you Mr. speaker. Pursuant to standing 52, I'm requesting an emergency debate on the closure of the prison farm program. Several irreplaceable components of the farm operation are set to be sold and dispersed by June of 2010. These include a heritage dairy herd with the prize-winning genetics of Frontenac Institution and a prized dairy herd of Westmorland Institution. The auction date for a gold herd standard at Rockwood Institution is also eminent. Once these herds have been dispersed they can never be re-established. In short Mr. Speaker, if these herds are allowed to be sold, it will mean the end of the prison farm program, one of the most successful programs we've had in the country in rehabilitating inmates.

I've had the occasion to visit all the nation's prison farms to meet with correctional officers who've told their stories about how these programs transform these men; the opportunity to work with animals and animal husbandry is something that's extremely effective. It is the leading edge in rehabilitation and yet this government is closing the program. Closing a program that they say costs \$4 million dollars and yet will provide no costing form. At a time when prison costs are soaring and government is spending literally billions and billions on prisons, it seems backward and extreme to be cutting or axing a program that is so desperately needed to help rehabilitate those that are about to re-enter. And given the fact that over 90% of inmates will leave prison and will re-enter, how they rehabilitate is essential. And when I talk to correctional officials who have been working over 30 years in the program tell me that they've never seen a single instance of violent recidivism, while I look into the eyes of men who talk to me about how this program has transformed their lives, I think it's extremely important that this House has a debate before the Conservatives shut down a program that has been this effective for more than 100 years. Thank you Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker: I thank the honourable member for his remarks and for the letter that you sent to the Speaker. I regret to inform that I don't believe that his requests doesn't meet the requirements for the provisions for an emergency debate. I'll be declining his request at this time.

JS: Member of Parliament for the Ontario riding of Ajax-Pickering Mark Holland – and an unsuccessful attempt on May 26th to introduce an emergency debate on the now in-process closure of Canada's Prison Farms.

While political avenues appear to have been exhausted; opponents to the closure on the ground seem to only be strengthening their campaign. On June 6th Canadian author Margaret Atwood joined the fight to save the farms at a rally attended by an estimated 1,000 people on the streets of Kingston, Ontario. Marchers made their way to the regional headquarters of the Correctional Service of Canada and posted their demands on the front door (a video of which is linked to on the Deconstructing Dinner website). With the march led by Margaret Atwood herself, her presence has no doubt helped further inform Canadians about the closures by encouraging a wave of new local and national media coverage. Deconstructing Dinner has put together here a short collage of audio from that June 6th rally featuring the words of Margaret Atwood, Sister Pauline Lally of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul and area farmer Aric McBay. The

original audio heard here is courtesy of the Save Our Prison Farms campaign.

soundbite

Protesters: We don't want those farms to go. Hey Hey Ho Ho, we don't want those farms to go!
Hey Hey Ho Ho, we don't want those farms to go!

Margaret Atwood: Government, are you listening? Are you living up to the promises on which you got elected long ago? Accountability, responsibility, transparency and access for the taxpayer.

Or have you shut yourselves up in a mental prison of your own construction? (applause) where on the taxpayers' dollar you need listen to nobody but yourselves, like some old-style absolute monarch surrounded by yes-men and flunkies? It's time to come down from your ideological palace and get down to Earth because that's where the food comes from. (applause)

Rehabilitating inmates is Correction's responsibility and reflects Canadian values, in ways that out-dated notions of punishment can never do. Canadians respect governments that listen and there is nothing wrong in a government that listens and changes its mind. (applause)

Aric McBay: Now this isn't just a matter of federal policies and budget cuts, we're choosing between two futures today. On one hand we have a future in which a farmer's work is valued and agriculture is vital, in which we can produce the food that we need and in which people are willing to stand up for the good of their communities. On the other hand we have a dimmer future in which farms are sacrificed for super-prisons and industrial development, in which prison rehabilitation is discarded for prison punishment and in which people are afraid to step out of line when the government makes a bad decision. I know the future I want.

Our demands are clear and simple. The Conservative government must accept a moratorium on prison farm closures and implement a full and independent review. Today we show our numbers and our commitment in a small act of civil disobedience, but if the government fails to address these concerns in a prompt and timely fashion, we'll use escalating measures of civil disobedience until the Conservatives have no choice but to act responsibly. (applause)

Protesters: Hey hey Ho Ho we don't want those farms to go! Hey Hey Ho Ho, we don't want those farms to go! Hey Hey Ho Ho, we don't want those farms to go! Hey Hey Ho Ho! (sounds from the protest - drums, music)

JS: Clips from the June 6th rally in Kingston Ontario where author Margaret Atwood joined the campaign to save Canada's prison farm program. Only one week later the campaign headed north to Ottawa where a full day of events was organized. About 150 people of all ages, ethnicities and political stripes gathered on Victoria Island in the Ottawa River for a Sacred Fire ceremony led by Peter Decontie from Maniwaki. Eighteen canoes then set out down the river to deliver their message in front of the Parliament building, a message that "Prison farms belong to all Canadians. Stop ignoring democracy. Save the farms now."

Joining the effort was the 97-year old spiritual and hereditary chief of the Algonquin Nation – William Commanda whose words are heard here being read by Romola Trebilcock.

drum music, singing and chanting.

Romola Trebilcock: I'm very grateful that Grandfather William Commanda, Algonquin Elder, was with us today to offer a prayer to launch the effort to save the prison farms. And these are his formal remarks:

Today we launch this prayer to save the prison farms from the sacred meeting grounds of my ancestors, Asinabka. With the system of justice that came with the colonization of our lands came the notions that crime equals punishment and that punishment equals incarceration and suffering. In the indigenous worldview, wrongdoing could be caused by not knowing better, therefore one needed to be taught. Or wrongdoing could be caused by sickness, therefore one needed to be healed. Indigenous peoples always knew Mother Earth was the greatest teacher and healer; and her stones, her soil, her waters, her plants and her animals brought us deep teaching and deep healing over the centuries. Our sacred relationship with Mother Earth has been defiled across the globe and today we see the disastrous consequences everywhere, everyday. We do not feel safe either.

Prison farms represent one way to reconcile broken souls with the source of all life. Today we light a fire for the prayer that indigenous values will be restored, to guide us all back to a reconnection with Mother Earth and each other. The spirit of the first baby bison born on a Canadian prison farm over twenty years ago and this crown of thorns plant from the same Saskatchewan farm Riverbend Institution and a stone vase given to Grandfather Commanda many years ago by Brian Bowers. A voice from the justice system and a voice from the community-join with our energies to transform hearts and minds to a deeper understanding of a complex issues we all need to grapple with together on this journey of life on Turtle Island.

soundbite

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner. Those were the words of William Commanda of the Algonquin Nation.

Also at the rally was the National Farmers Union's Jeff Peters who had only just witnessed former Minister of Public Safety Peter Van Loan walk by the rally being held on the lawn of Parliament Hill.

Jeff Peters: Farming is the backbone of our country, of all of rural Canada. And Peter Van Loan, I just saw him walk up the sidewalk with his head down, he's got a guilty conscience. he gave us one last look up there as if saying will they ever go away? And we will not quit! I promise you. We will not give in to what we see as an injustice for our democratic system.

JS: Also at the June 15th rally was political representation from Liberal members Mark Holland and Wayne Easter, the NDP's Alex Atamanenko and the Bloc Quebecois' Maria Mourani, who, despite being from Quebec where no prison farms are located, stood in solidarity with the effort and the principles upon which the campaign is based. Here's a clip of Wayne Easter, Maria Mourani and Alex Atamanenko addressing the rally.

Wayne Easter: Farm skills equal life skills. It's all about rehabilitation. Working with animals and seeing the purpose in life. I had one inmate who has been in the system all his life from either Dorchester or the Frontenac Institution who said, "I never became a real person until I actually got to work with these milk cows, with that dairy herd." They made him a real person because he related to the livestock, to the animals and he developed some love for those livestock. And that's what working on a prison farm does for these people, it gives them skills in life and makes them see the value of all living things, whether it's humans or whether it's animals. We're going to lose

that with this government and its entrenched decision, and that's sad.

Maria Mourani: We're here today because we really believe that the prison farms are essential to the rehabilitation of inmates. And in order to effect change we must show solidarity throughout all of Canada.

Alex Atamanenko: The idea that we have vital prison farms that contribute to the local economy, that have land set aside for the future for our food sovereignty and food security seems like a no-brainer. There shouldn't even be a debate on this. Yet we're here, we're having it.

JS: And the last clip to share from the June 15th rally in front of Canada's Parliament buildings is of Andrew McCann of Urban Agriculture Kingston.

Andrew McCann: Well we've always tried to stress in this campaign that this is a lightning rod issue that allows us to shine a light on misguided farm and food policy in general from our government, not just the Conservatives but other governments before them as well. We are asking to think about the prison farms as local food. One of the banners on the canoes here today says "Prison Farms equal local food," and that's a huge message that I think Canadians at this point and time understand much better their government, in terms of the direction of the future of agriculture and food systems in this country.

JS: Some other updates on the save our prison farms campaign include information gathered by Canada's National Farmers Union from an ad issued by the Government of Canada that points to just how much the milk being produced on those farms was valued at. The ad was seeking a milk supplier who can provide milk to three locations in Ontario where federal penitentiaries are located. Those facilities have long received milk produced on the prison farms, but if all goes as planned, that relationship will of course no longer exist. The value of the contract is at just under \$1 million dollars. With Kingston's Frontenac Institution also having provided milk to Quebec institutions, an ad will also need to be issued for that contract to likely bringing the value of the milk that had been produced at Frontenac to well over that \$1 million dollar figure. The Correctional Service of Canada has also confirmed that milk will no longer be supplied to area food banks as the farms had previously been doing. Beyond the milk are also the thousands of eggs that were too supplied by the Frontenac Institution to other federal penitentiaries.

soundbite

JS: Also to update you on are two new developments this past week. The City of Kingston has reaffirmed and strengthened a motion calling upon the Canadian government to reconsider the closures and also this past week, on June 14th was the setting up of a Community on Watch Station (otherwise known as COWS) – a 24-hour a day volunteer driven effort where prison farm supporters are now on watch for any attempts by the Correctional Service of Canada to truck the dairy herd off the property and be taken to auction. The Frontenac herd was scheduled to be sold off by the end of the month along with other herds at New Brunswick's Westmorland facility and Manitoba's Rockwood Institution. According to local dairy farmer and NFU member Dianne Dowling of the Save our Prison Farms Campaign, if any sign of the cows leaving is witnessed by a volunteer, a series of telephone calls will be initiated that will then reach hundreds of people who have signed up show up and block the trucks. Dowling is encouraging anyone living in the Kingston area to sign up by visiting the campaign website at saveourprisonfarms.ca.

soundbite

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner – produced at Kootenay Co-op Radio CJLY in Nelson, British Columbia. I'm Jon Steinman. If you've missed any of today's episode, it's archived on-line at deconstructingdinner.ca and posted under the June 17th 2010 broadcast. There you'll also find links to our ongoing series on this prison farms issue. And also on the site, links to our new iPhone and iPod touch app that allows for easy access to our weekly episodes and bonus content. And if you're a regular listener of the show, we also encourage you to support our work with a generous donation or voluntary subscription. Deconstructing Dinner is almost entirely funded by listener donations, and it seems like every year we fall well short of our modest budget that helps sustain this weekly show that's provided to you and to radio stations free of charge. So please support this independent radio show and podcast, again you can do so on our website at deconstructingdinner.ca or you can send a cheque or money order to Deconstructing Dinner, c/o Kootenay Co-op Radio, 308A Hall St., Nelson, BC, postal code V1L 1Y8. This address is also posted on our website and you can call 250-352-9600 for more information.

soundbite

JS: Backyard Chickens, another subject that we focus quite a lot of attention on here on the show and for good reason. Just as the prison farms issue encompasses so many important food security matters, raising chickens within urban centres is too a window into some fundamental social, health, environmental, political and animal welfare concerns to name just a few.

While many U.S. cities permit the raising of hens within city limits, many Canadian cities do not. The hometown of Deconstructing Dinner for one, here in Nelson, British Columbia does not permit backyard hens, this despite the city council having debated the issue over the past year. With that debate now seemingly off the table, local bylaw enforcement seems to be out in full force, having cracked down on Nelson resident Monica Nissen who we featured on a recent episode and since then yet another Nelson household has too been busted by city bylaw enforcement and their chickens are too now no longer within the city. But that's another story for another show, instead the focus today is how supporters of backyard hens can work with municipalities to encourage changes to prohibitive bylaws. There are many cities across Canada who are receiving that pressure, cities like Ottawa, Toronto, Waterloo, Calgary, Halifax and Kamloops to name a few, but the latest success story, is the City of Vancouver where on June 8th it became official, Vancouver residents can now raise backyard chickens just as neighbouring residents can in the cities of Surrey, Burnaby, New Westminster and Richmond.

So how did this all unfold in Vancouver, and what might other Canadian efforts learn from Vancouver's. One strategy employed that is worth reflecting on was the creation of a Food Policy Council within the city – a volunteer run group who advises the City of Vancouver on food systems issues.

In February 2007, the Food Policy Council proposed to the City that they adopt a Food Charter. The food charter was seen as a way to provide a foundation to future policy decisions on food system concerns, backyard hens being one of many possibilities. So let's step back a few years and reflect on this multi-year process that no doubt assisted the City towards this latest policy change, allowing backyard hens. On February 15th 2007, Barbara Joughin who was involved in the Food Policy Council's Food Charter sub-committee spoke to the City of Vancouver's Standing Committee of Council on Planning and Environment. Joughin demonstrates that even the food charter too, was backed up by some predecessor policies and goals such as the City's economic and sustainability visions.

Barbara Joughlin: We're asking you to adopt a Food Charter for the city of Vancouver because

there are some very strong benefits for doing so. As an advisory body to City Council the Food Policy Council has a mandate to develop a just and sustainable food system for the City of Vancouver and to provide advice to various city initiatives in that regard. We'll use the vision and the principles that are set out in the Food Charter, to guide us in our work towards achieving that mandate.

While it is not an action statement, the principles in the Food Charter contain the seeds of action and we really learned this when we took the draft of the Food Charter out into the community, met with people and heard their concerns about different food system issues in their neighbourhoods. We learned some other things as well; we learned the Food Charter is a very successful tool for engaging people in conversations about something they think is very important. That kind of citizen engagement has some very positive spin-offs for civic pride and for enhancing public trust. We also learned that the Food Charter has enormous potential for networking across city neighbourhoods and for inspiring people to initiate projects and actions to address local food security and food system issues in their neighbourhoods. It gets people working together in a very strong way.

Similarly the Food Charter acts as a reference document for food system policy within the city organization itself and can help the city reach some of its goals. For example, one of the Mayor's goals is to have the strongest local and regional economy in Canada and similarly one of the priorities given to council committees is to support economic development as a means of keeping our city current and at the forefront going into the future. And we know that initiatives that support local agriculture and food production keep dollars in our community; there are many examples of benefits to local economies from this kind of activity such as job creation, increased incomes for farmers and social enterprise, food businesses, these kinds of things.

Also, I'll mention but won't go into any detail about the very strong links that the Food Charter has to the city's sustainability mandate. As a final point, staff are currently dealing with different food system issues on an ongoing basis and this happens in separate departments; the Food Charter is very useful as a reference that can provide an overall vision for food system policy in the city. And those are some very brief comments on some of the main benefits of adopting the Food Charter. We ask that you do that and I'm going to turn it over now to Carol Christopher and she'll speak to some of the implications of doing so. Thank you very much.

JS: Barbara Joughin who, involved with the Vancouver Food Policy Council, was heard there introducing their proposed Food Charter to Vancouver's Standing Committee of Council on Planning and Environment.

Also helping speak to the proposed Food Charter back in February 2007 was Carol Christopher – also of the Vancouver Food Policy Council.

Carol Christopher: What are the implications of having a Food Charter? And I thought I would address my remarks to that question drawing on the experience of Kamloops and Toronto, cities that have had the Food Charter for the longest. The first thing I think we could expect from a Food Charter is that it will support the work of the Vancouver Food Policy Council as an advisory group and also the work of the Vancouver Food Policy Coordinator in her collaboration with staff around meeting the key goals of sustainability and social goals of the City. That's proven in the case in both Kamloops and Toronto, where they have said, in fact one of the key benefits that they have from their Charter is that it does provide an atmosphere or an environment that's supportive to staff that are working in that area of food policy.

The second point is about fundraising; both Toronto and Kamloops have leveraged their position with the city to raise funds for important projects that they are involved with. We would like to do the same here in Vancouver, we think being able to point to the Food Charter as an expression of support from City Council will enhance our capacity to do that.

The third point is about the community and catalyzing action in the community. We already have an early reading of how the community feels about the Food Charter. They're very excited about it; there are some in the community who already regard this as their guiding document for work that they're doing at the neighbourhood level. I asked people from the community to write brief letters of support for the Food Charter, I hope you've received those. I got copies of 34 letters and several of them are from institutions or organizations that are importantly involved with food policy work.

I want to give you just a few examples of the kind of things that are happening. I could do this for many cities but I'm only going to do it for Toronto because they do have a very broad range of things that they're working on. As an example, the Toronto Food Policy Council raised 3.5 million dollars to increase access to affordable and healthy food. As well, they're involved with a lot of research that's used in context around food and health in the city of Toronto. They do a lot of public events; it turns out that their city council is quite interested in having the City Hall be a "people place," so the Food Policy Council actually offers sponsored events in City Hall. And they actually sponsor a weekly farmer's market from Spring until Fall. I notice some smiling faces, if you'd like to do that we can certainly talk about that.

One of the things that I think they've done that is very important; they initiated a project called "Local Flavour Plus" which was something that was eventually spun off into a business contract with the University of Toronto, to provide local and organic foods into their food system. I think that's brilliant and I think there's every opportunity that something like that could happen in Vancouver as well. These are just a few of the kinds of activities that can be catalyzed in the community.

There's a huge amount of interest in the international community about climate change, the senior governments are coming on board, the public is aroused, the media is very interested and the thing that's important to realize is that food is a very major player in climate change. The energy costs of food are greater than the energy costs of individual private vehicles. For every metabolic calorie that we get out of our food, we have to put ten fossil fuel calories into it. And we don't really have to do that, that's the way the present system is organized, but it can be changed and if you look at the Food Charter you'll realize that a lot of what's there is concerned with shifting the kinds of behaviours in the food system, so that we shift that energy equation to a more balanced one.

So adopting the Food Charter reaffirms that Vancouver is very much a leader in this area. I'll close it with a quote from Wayne Roberts who is a coordinator of the Toronto Food Policy council and he says, "the Food Charter is my guiding document. It carries no power of enforcement. It does carry the power of ideas, of inspired individuals and empowered communities, and that's what gives us influence." It's in that spirit that the Vancouver Food Policy Council is very pleased and very proud to present the Vancouver Food Charter to you and to ask for its adoption."

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner. On today's episode, we're reflecting on the multi-year process that helped support the City of Vancouver's June 8th official adoption of a bylaw that permits the raising of backyard hens within city limits. With many supporters of backyard hens within

Canadian cities seeming to be having difficulty convincing city council's to change their prohibitive bylaws, today's broadcast is reflecting on the process that one city has gone through that has proven to be successful. It appears one of the key foundational policy documents that helped support the allowance of backyard hens, was Vancouver's Food Charter, which we just heard Carol Christopher speaking about back in February 2007. It was then that she and other members of the Vancouver Food Policy Council proposed that the city adopt the charter, which indeed they later did. The charter which is linked to on the Deconstructing Dinner website under today's June 17th episode presents a "vision for a food system which benefits our community and the environment. It sets out the City of Vancouver's commitment to the development of a coordinated municipal food policy, and animates our community's engagement and participation in conversations and actions related to food security in Vancouver."

Fast-forward to early 2009, that very Food Charter became a key piece in a motion put forward by City Councillor Andrea Reimer that called upon the city to investigate allowing backyard hens to be permitted within the City of Vancouver. That motion which is linked to on the Deconstructing Dinner website makes specific reference to the City's Food Charter and in particular it references the City's "commitment to the development of a coordinated municipal food policy that recognizes access to safe, sufficient, culturally appropriate and nutritious food as a basic human right for all Vancouver residents." This motion was presented to City Council in March 2009. Heard here is Mayor Gregor Robertson.

Mayor Gregor Robertson: We are moving onto motion #3 which is legalizing backyard hens, which needs to be moved by Councillor Reimer and I believe seconded by Councillor Deal. Councillor Reimer will you introduce your motion please?

Councillor Andrea Reimer: I thought it might be helpful to get a bit of clarification on where this motion comes from because I know there's been some confusion in the media around this. About a year ago a citizen wrote to previous council, quite upset that they were not legally allowed to keep hens or in this case two hens in the city of Vancouver. That letter was given to former Councillor Ladner as the liaison to the Food Policy Council. The Food Policy Council subsequently discussed it, struck a sub-committee, undertook five months of work, wrote a report, an election happened in the interim and it ended up on my desk as a former member of the Food Policy Council.

I know there's been many concerns brought forward about different aspects of hen husbandry in the City of Vancouver. However, it is my opinion that the Food Policy Council's work indicates that a number of other jurisdictions, in fact, that if a chicken were to make a decision to cross Boundary Road it could live there quite legally and healthily under the guidelines that Burnaby has for the keeping of hens. So, this motion which I'd also like to clarify, doesn't suggest that we simply wave a wand and pass the bylaw, but in order for staff to undertake policy work and be able to develop guidelines, they need direction from council to do that. And this motion seeks that direction from council.

Mayor Gregor Robertson: Thank you Councillor Reimer, we have received a request to speak to this motion and Council's in agreement that we will refer this motion to the Standing Committee of Planning and Environment this Thursday.

JS: Vancouver City Councillor Andrea Reimer and Mayor Gregor Robertson.

As indicated, that motion ended up in Committee on March 5th 2009. It was there where Councillors were able to question city staff on the motion and hear statements from guests. One

of the issues presented by Councillor David Cadman was concern over disease risks.

Councillor David Cadman: I want to pose a question to Nick Lucido.

What are the protocols that you're going to need in place to deal with the risk of Avian flu?

Nick Lucido: Essentially an up-to-date analysis of what the impacts might be, what protocol should be in place in case there is an outbreak, what are the risks, are there elevated risks of an outbreak and beyond Avian flu we want to look at other public health risks that are associated with it. So we would hopefully be able to have that within the next month or so and feed that back into the staff process.

Councillor David Cadman: So are we going to have to know who is keeping chickens?

Nick Lucido: That might be part of the protocol and that makes it much more complex. And this speaks to a permitting system or some kind of tracking system. I hope we don't have to, but if you have an outbreak in backyards, it may not spread as fast as it does in the concentrated industrial chicken raising plant. Certainly the outbreaks in Asia that are in part related to chickens of the backyard variety. And the concern is that chance of transmission to humans is a lot greater in that type of situation. We're not experts on this and that's why we've asked BCCDC, and perhaps through extension to World Health Organization and CDC Atlanta for a bit more information. There's conflicting information and two ends of the spectrum from even the medical and veterinary professionals. There was a workshop last year about this time in Abbotsford and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency who commented that the risk of Avian flu was increased in a backyard situation. And I think we've seen evidence from the Ministry of Agriculture report that actually would argue the other. So I think we're looking for clarity as much as Council is looking for clarity about; is it an acceptable risk that's being added? what are the risks and how do you mitigate those risks?

And I think there's some good suggestions about maintenance of the backyard flocks, cleaning of shoes and things like that. I guess when you enact a policy, it's aimed at the general population, but there's always a percentage of the population that don't comply with bylaws and perhaps don't adhere to policies and thus practices. So, we should be aiming at that population rather than, what I call, the responsible pet owners, chicken owners. I think that whatever your staff comes up with, I hope we have a chance to work with them on that, but they will be aiming those steps and procedures at the lowest common denominator rather than the best backyard chicken owner.

JS: Vancouver staff member Nick Lucido answering a question posed by Councillor David Cadman on disease risks among backyard hens. Another question posed by Cadman at that March 2009 committee was with respect to waste – a concern that has often been raised within other similar municipal conversations being held across the country.

Councillor David Cadman: What complications of this introduce, in terms of the waste/excrement? Such as the whole issue of how one processes a backyard chicken and the risks of Salmonella.

Nick Lucido: Again those are all risks that have been identified in the literature and we just want to get as much of the up-to-date science as we can. Again there's best practices that can be followed and I think those would minimize the risk. I think if Dr. Blatherwick were here today, he would say that you can never get zero risk so it's how much risk the community and the council is willing to accept.

There's an issue around the egg production, the use of eggs and the end of life issue with the chicken. So how do we dispose of the carcass? And are we going to end up with complaints of backyard slaughter of chickens for food purposes after their egg laying days are over. So those are a lot of the unanswered questions that need to be looked at.

JS: Also addressing the waste issue was Councillor Andrea Reimer who introduced the motion. Andrea brought up an often overlooked presence of other animals in the city, cats and dogs.

Councillor Andrea Reimer: We have cats and dogs. I've never owned a cat or a dog, but I'm going to guess that if you own one eventually they die and you have to do something with them. So how does that work?

Nick Lucido: I'm a dog owner and cat owner and ended up having to bury a small puppy in the backyard. I don't know if that would be, at least from our experience and I go back to 30 years of administrating the provision that you're proposing to eliminate and we did respond to complaints those years; some of them were around the backyard slaughter of not only chickens but one regarding a rather large ostrich or emu in the backyard. So those things do happen. There are ways of doing it in a rather humane way that's not impacting on your direct neighbours that can be done in a proper way. I suppose some people use the garbage system to dispose of dead carcasses as well even though that's contrary to provincial law.

Councillor Andrea Reimer: So basically our system right now is that if your pet dies of natural causes or even unnatural ones, you can take out a shovel and put it in your backyard?

Nick Lucido: I don't believe we have any laws or rules against that, no.

Councillor Andrea Reimer: Okay, interesting to know, thank you. As renter I look at every place I lived in totally differently now.

JS: Vancouver City Councillor Andrea Reimer who, on March 2009, introduced a motion designed to instruct the City to repeal the City's prohibition of raising backyard hens and develop a recommended set of guidelines and policies for permitting them. On June 8th 2010 that process was official over and hens are now legally permitted within the City, and so on today's episode and continuing into next week's, we're reflecting on the many steps that were taken to arrive at this latest and successful bylaw change because as it happens, many backyard hen hopefuls in other Canadian cities are finding themselves encountering some strong opposition.

Also at that March 2009 Committee meeting where the motion in Vancouver was first discussed, a number of speakers were invited to address the motion. The first person heard here had been raising chicken in the city for many years.

Resident 1: I was raised in and around Vancouver, my mother introduced her boys to backyard chicken keeping in Burnaby in the 1960s and we subsequently took our chickens with us to Richmond and Port Coquitlam. I guess I was sufficiently inspired by the experience that when I graduated I went into the faculty of Agriculture at UBC under the pre-veterinary medicine program and while at UBC I worked for Canada Agriculture in their poultry research facility in Agassiz. I think I'm reasonably well qualified to speak to the subject.

I eventually settled in Kitsilano, bought a house there in the early 1990s. At that time I thought that I would acquaint a new generation to the simple pleasures that I'd been afforded as a youth,

with backyard chicken keeping, but before doing so I consulted then Councillor Rankin because he was rumoured to be a bird keeper at his residence at Trout Lake. He told me at the time that the bylaw did not then allow for the keeping of chickens, but that if I was discreet, didn't keep a rooster and didn't cause a ruckus with my neighbours I should be able to get away with it. Which we did for a number of years and our very small flock became quite a novelty in the neighbourhood, with the garbage collectors, with the neighbours and with the kids from General Gordon Elementary and Montessori Preschool across the street. Many of them had never seen a live chicken before and thought that eggs came from the styrofoam box from Safeway, so it was a good lesson for the kids and it was a worthwhile endeavour.

I was recently re-acquainted with the debate with allow hens or poultry into the city and given my background I became quite actively involved. As it now stands, the City of Vancouver allows the keeping of 12 exotic birds. And exotic birds is not well defined and in fact, to previous speaker's point, I think you could keep 12 ostriches in your backyard and the City of Vancouver according to the bylaw. And to the best of my knowledge there've been no Avian influenza issues or animal welfare issues even though this is a longstanding bylaw.

To the subject of backyard poultry keeping and animal welfare, I think that we would all be in agreement that it's a far more humane alternative to commercial poultry production in which genetic alteration is used to promote egg production and growth and peak trimmings, what some would refer to as mutilation is required to reduce fighting between the stressed and crowded birds. I know that if chickens could talk, they would implore the animal rights activists to encourage Council to pass this bylaw because every 2 to 4 chickens that end up in a residence in Vancouver are going to be 2 to 4 chickens that are not in a battery cage in a commercial poultry production. Again, having seen both sides of this I can tell you that a backyard is Club Med for chickens compared to a space that is quite literally that big, that is afforded commercial. So I'm really hopeful that the animal rights and welfare activists get on board and not only don't oppose this but leave the crusade because it's a good thing. And it's a good thing that has been adopted by 65% of American cities. I'm quite frankly a little embarrassed that the City of Vancouver is not taking the leading on this, but is coming behind most of the cities in the United States and a good number of cities in British Columbia and Canada. So I'm hopeful that we follow the lead that's been established by Las Vegas, Minneapolis, Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Portland Oregon and Portland Maine.

To the subject of Avian influenza I would say most public health officials see small-scale poultry rearing as a response to the problem; essentially the low density and genetic diversity of backyard flocks contribute to the low viral load and keep the birds with stronger natural immune systems.

JS: This is Deconstructing Dinner. And that was a resident Vancouver addressing the City's Standing Committee of Council on Planning & Environment in March 2009. That meeting was where a motion calling for changes to the City's prohibition of backyard chickens was first discussed. We'll be extending this show into next week's but we'll hear from one more resident who spoke at that meeting – a newcomer to the City but someone who arrived from another city where backyard hens have long been permitted, Portland Oregon.

Resident 2: My name is Heather and I have an agricultural degree from Oregon State University and an emphasis with animal science. I'm a long-time backyard chicken owner and I sold products to backyard chicken people in Portland Oregon for ten years, so I think I'm a highly qualified person to discuss backyard chickens.

I came here from Portland about a year ago and Portland is a huge chicken city, everybody and

their brothers have got chickens in Portland, it's a veteran chicken-friendly city, they've had them for quite a long time. Everybody's gotten along, the shelters haven't filled up with chickens, city officials haven't been clogged with chicken complaints, it's the home of the Tour De Coops, which is beautiful and very popular. It's a tour of various chicken coops in the city where you get to see because people let their imaginations go while and build very beautiful chicken coops sometimes-see the different heritage breeds and their different gardens. Anyway it can be a really fun thing for the city; kids, families, communities, schools, everybody that comes into contact with backyard chickens likes them, it's just the people that don't know them yet that don't like them.

I want to mention that hens do not require roosters to make eggs and hens only cluck they don't crow, so those are the two biggest complaints and nobody's talking about roosters. Even if nobody prohibited roosters, if they crowed and bothered anybody, the noise bylaws would cover that so it would be fine. As for the waste; my two hens generate probably less than a cup of poop a day, it's less complicated than cleaning a litter box. You just chuck it in the composter, it's clean and you compost for a year. If anything, it's not enough manure, I still have to buy manure for my garden.

I wanted to mention that because I'm very qualified to talk about this issue and I'm very interested in this issue, I have actually talked to a BC Ministry of Agriculture and Land veterinarian about the Avian flu. I talked to him personally and he told me that they had a conference about this, this happened in February when I had this conversation, with other veterinarians and the government and their current view was that backyard small flocks were not a problem, an issue or something that they were worried about for Avian flu. They thought if anything, the backyard flocks, given that they're going to be very healthy, are going to have genetic diversity, they're going to be pets, they're owners will take them to the vet and they act as an early warning system for something that they don't even think is going to happen.

I also am aware that animal rights activists aren't quite sure how they feel about this issue and I probably have more in common with them than I do not have in common with them. I'm a humongous animal lover, it's what I studied in school, I've had animals all my life and I'll animals all my life, I keep them until they die of natural causes, I take them to the vet when necessary. The way I see it is these animal rights activists spent their days dealing with abused and neglected animals and the people who abuse and neglect those animals. How they (the animal rights activists) go through life without going insane, I have no idea. And I have the utmost respect, compassion and sympathy for people that do that everyday. I think that we're all on the same page; I think we all want healthy, happy chickens that don't have any problems and have veterinary care.

JS: That was audio from a March 2009 committee meeting of the City of Vancouver where a motion to repeal Vancouver's bylaw that had prohibited backyard hens was first discussed. On next week's episode, we'll continue with this feature on the successful efforts of Vancouver residents to encourage their City to allow backyard chickens. On June 8th 2010, it became official, that Vancouver residents can now raise backyard hens. Next week we'll hear more from that March 2009 meeting including opposition from animal welfare groups and we'll continue listening in on how the bylaw changed evolved up to the present day. In the meantime, you can access resources on today's topic by visiting the Deconstructing Dinner website at deconstructingdinner.ca and our June 17th 2010 broadcast. There you'll also find links to our ongoing series on Backyard Hens – a series that is a part of our broader series titled Farming in the City.

ending theme

That was this week's edition of Deconstructing Dinner, produced and recorded at Nelson, British Columbia's Kootenay Co-op Radio. I've been your host Jon Steinman. I thank my technical assistant John Ryan.

The theme music for Deconstructing Dinner is courtesy of Nelson-area resident Adham Shaikh.

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