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PLANNERS ARE NOTED FOR working toward positive social, environmental and economic objectives, primarily related to land use. Among other things they may seek to preserve agricultural land, avoid ecologically destructive developments, promote public transit, and create high quality public spaces.

Although not trained as a planner, Harold Steves of Richmond may be considered an honorary planner. He is the longest-serving municipal councillor in B.C. (1968-1973, and 1977 to present). He first became active in municipal politics in the late 1950s, after his father's farm - along with most other farms in Richmond - was rezoned from agricultural to residential in an in camera City Council meeting. His father learned his land had been rezoned when he was denied a building permit. Other farmers found out about the change when they received tax bills with a 50-fold increase - they had lost their agricultural tax rate. There was a protest meeting.

"But the farmers didn't know how to fight City Hall," Steves says.

Most farmers accepted the seemingly inevitable and sold their land. Steves' father appealed to the assessment board, but was told that "the kind of farming he was doing was just not that important in the overall scheme of things." It was this experience that made Steves, then a student of agriculture at UBC, passionate about ensuring that food security be made a priority in the city and throughout region.

In the late 1960s he co-founded and became vice-chair of one of the first environmental groups in Canada, the Richmond Anti-Pollution Association. Its focus was on protecting Richmond's farmland and fishery, and to demand secondary treatment for sewage that was slated to be dumped raw into the Fraser River. The group was successful in this endeavor, aided by the fact that Steves was now sitting on Richmond City Council.

In 1968, Steves learned about a proposed super-port adjacent to the Sturgeon Banks, Richmond. A friend of his, coming back from duck hunting, found orange tape around a 100-acre area adjacent to Steves' farm. It was slated to become a super-port for oil tankers. Steves and his friends formed an opposition effort to canker traffic and led the first environmental demonstration in British Columbia under the aegis of Stop Pollution from Oil Spills at the Peace Arch border crossing, drawing some 6000 people. Some of his co-organizers later went on to form the precursor of Greenpeace.

His group successfully appealed to Council and got the zoning changed. When, some years later, a developer sought to create a series of subdivisions in the same 100-acre parcel, Steves was instrumental in getting this defeated and having the site designated to what is now a regional destination park, Garry Point. This oceanfront amenity connects with the Richmond Dyke trail popular with cyclists and pedestrians, which in turn connects with the Terra Nova Park in the north. Although many people were skeptical it would be a success, the Richmond trail system has since become a recreation model for the greater Vancouver region.

During the early 1970s, the New Democratic Party was elected to one term provincially and implemented a number of game-changing policy measures. Steves, sitting as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, played a decisive role in helping to establish the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). Although weakened by subsequent provincial governments, the ALR has afforded some level of protection to farmland throughout BC.

More recently, as part of ensuring food security for the region, Steves has worked with Kwantlen Polytechnic University to provide City-owned land where students can learn the craft of farming, and is working to establish allotment gardens on the 300 acres of farmland owned by the City. Steves is also campaigning against the construction of monster houses on agricultural land, in an effort to preserve the stock of lands dedicated to agricultural uses.

For the past 60 years Harold Steves has impacted community planning both as an activist and a politician. In these roles he has made an enormous difference in his city, in the region, and in the province. As early as the late 1950s, he saw the importance of regional food security before most people understood the role of local agriculture. Complementing his vision, Harold is an organizer with the ability to use the political system to achieve positive ends. Now 80, there is no sign of him stepping away from the work that he has been doing for the past six decades.