

by Scott Messenger  
illustration by Jason Blower



# Paving Paradise

A proposed highway threatens not only a single farm, but a microclimate that's beneficial to the entire city

**It's easy to** understand Janelle and Aaron Herbert's anxiety about the provincial highway and residential development planned for the area surrounding their northeast Edmonton property. The simple reason? It's too pretty a place to contemplate losing.

When Hollywood calls for an idyllic setting, it looks like their 140-acre farm, located at the end of a gravel road lined with wild chokecherry and silver willow. A driveway curls down a hill overlooking furrowed fields and ends at a 100-year-old clapboard farmhouse, its door swinging with the whims of the couple's three young children. For a backyard, there's an old-growth forest of poplar and spruce stretching to the city limits, marked by the North Saskatchewan River, the farm's water source.

The more complicated reason for the Herberts' worry, however, is that the property provides a unique and somewhat mysterious advantage to their business, Riverbend Gardens. Here, the land allows the couple to plant crops of vegetables and bedding plants two to three weeks earlier than their local competitors. Riverbend Gardens' lettuce and spinach hits the farmers' markets by June, and carrots and potatoes by early July. U-pick saskatoons are ready just a couple weeks later. Sweet corn matures here at the same time as in Taber. Often, they'll even manage a late fall crop of watermelon.

The reason for all of this is a microclimate in which the river, forest and soil together create optimal growing conditions. No one has determined exactly why the Herberts' farm acts this way, but, generally, microclimates — atmospheric bubbles where temperature and humidity differ from what surrounds them — arise from combinations of the way the land slopes to catch the sun, wind patterns, cooling and warming effects of bodies of water, soil composition and more. In some cases, the results may seem serendipitous, especially when

it lengthens the growing season as it does at Riverbend Gardens. "I couldn't replace what I have here now," says Janelle, a 31-year-old, self-identified "farmer in the city."

That's why they are fighting to reroute the roadway, which may pass through their land within the next decade as part of the City's plans to transform the now rural area into neighbourhoods for the expanding northeast. For Janelle, however, this has become as much a matter of cultivating coexistence for urban agriculture and urban growth as it is of protecting the house, farm buildings and irrigation system that, on proposed maps, lie beneath asphalt. "When are people going to wake up and say we need to preserve some land?" she asks.

In this part of the city — a pie slice bordered by Manning Drive, the Anthony Henday and the river — the tension dates back to the early 1980s, when Janelle's parents used the land for vegetables (her grandparents had it before them, but had both crops and hogs). Not exactly annexed for future growth, the land "was given to Edmonton [by the province] to say 'quit asking to annex St. Albert and Sherwood Park,'" says Councillor Ed Gibbons, whose ward encompasses the region, known as Horse Hill, which was named for its role in boarding horses once used to protect Fort Edmonton.

From council's perspective, the need for development here is clear. Recent years have seen steady population growth, says Gibbons. In fact, projections push Edmonton and area past two million by 2041. In the nearer term, growth at the Alberta Industrial Heartland and the proposed Edmonton Energy and Technology Park — those lynchpins in the local oil and gas processing industry located just northeast of the Herberts' farm — calls for some 80,000 workers. Many of them, the City anticipates, will want to live nearby. The new highway, an east-west corridor between Manning and Highway 21 proposed to run roughly along 195 Avenue, would ease local traffic congestion and pass heavy equipment along a new bridge over the river at the Herberts'. Sympathetic to the couple's situation, Gibbons would like to convince the province to move the bridge, but says a cliff to the north and a drainage area (which >>

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Aaron Herbert identifies as nothing more than an abandoned gravel quarry) to the south may fix what is now only “a line on the map.”

“I hope that the bridge doesn’t go through their land,” says Gibbons, “but it’s out of my hands.” The consolation, he adds, is that, even if likely, it isn’t imminent. “As far as I’m concerned, they’ve got the right to keep going for years and years.”

The timing of this issue bears irony — the couple’s commitment to farming is relatively recent. Growing up, “I swore I’d never be a farmer,” says Janelle. “I couldn’t wait to get out of here as a teenager.” She did after marrying Aaron when she was 22 years old, he about 25. They lived in town, where she was an occupational health assistant and Aaron worked as a steel fabricator. When the opportunity came to take over the land in 2006, Janelle was surprised by her husband’s excitement. Aaron quickly fell in love with farming. “It didn’t take me very long to realize how unhappy I was before,” he says. “I don’t want to do anything else now.”

Today, he and Janelle manage a seasonal staff of about 12 people to grow bedding plants and nearly two dozen varieties of vegetables — everything from purple potatoes, to pumpkins, to that sweet corn that rivals Taber’s, thanks to the extra weeks Riverbend Gardens gets in its season. They’re within easy access of the eight farmers’ markets they serve and have recently started supplying customers with weekly boxes of fresh produce. It all adds up to an income and standard of living on par with the Herberts’ friends in the city.

It also adds up to an opportunity some say Edmonton should strive to preserve. When Michael Walters, a former member of the Greater Edmonton Alliance (GEA) and Ward 10 candidate in the upcoming municipal election, helped lead the creation of an urban agriculture strategy, “The original question we asked was, ‘Where is our food going to come from in 25 years?’

“When you have an asset like those food producers with that kind of land and soil,” Walters says, “It gives you opportunities as a city to think bigger.”

That is, find ways to keep farms like Riverbend Gardens within the city limits, particularly if they contribute to the local food economy (the Herberts, incidentally, are among the minority in this region that do). But as part of the committee that completed the urban agriculture strategy, GEA member Debbie Hubbard was disappointed by its lack of guidelines for land-use decisions. She feels the document was rushed to allow Horse Hill

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development plans to be quickly approved, which happened this past February (only three councillors opposed it; Gibbons wasn't among them). "I think what citizens wanted was that same imagination that [the City] had with the river valley. And now it's a legacy," says Hubbard.

Janelle isn't against developing the area. Ideally, she'd like to see what Walters advises: the farms sectioned off along the river into their own neighbourhood, rather than divided into neighbourhoods governed by residential and commercial zoning as plans dictate. But she may be hard pressed to deny the potential market

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advantages of the Horse Hill plan — provided the highway is relocated.

If things unfold as predicted by Jerry Bouma, a consultant who worked with Walton International Group, a Horse Hill developer and majority landowner, the future could be fruitful for Riverbend Gardens. "The plan is to create an atmosphere that really embraces that dimension," he says of local agriculture. Market gardens would help define the culture of the new town, where greenhouses might stand in for strip malls.

For the Herberts, any alternative will be, they say, nothing short of devastating. The current highway alignment means trying to starting over elsewhere, and watching land with a unique climate and character disappear. It would also mean becoming young millionaires from the sale of their land, something that doesn't interest Janelle. "I already have everything I want. This is a renewable resource. It gives people a living forever. How can you put a price on that?"

Whether they stand in the way of progress, or represent a version we struggle to recognize, they'll keep fighting regardless of how futile it may prove. If nothing else, the prettiness of their place may one day lend itself to a sense of poignancy. That may be a cold comfort, but, if he has to, Aaron, for one, will take it.

"If a road does go through here, I want Edmonton to learn from it," he says. "I want it to be a black eye, something that they're not proud of, something that they should have done something about." 📧



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