

Hutterite colony to farm over 15,000 chickens plus manufacturing operation

Commercial fishers and environmental organizations raise pollution concerns

By Patricia Barrett

A new Hutterite colony that will be established on the Armstrong-Gimli municipal border intends to farm over 15,000 chickens, an unspecified number of cattle and sheep and set up a manufacturing operation to make hog barn parts.

Members of the Crystal Spring Hutterite Colony from Ste. Agathe appeared as a delegation at the RM of Armstrong's regular council meeting Feb. 11 to discuss plans for land they had purchased (Section 28-18-3E) on the west side of Road 15E, which forms the border between the two municipalities.

Willow Creek, or its tributaries, runs through the Hutterite-owned land and along Road 107N. It flows east, emptying into Lake Winnipeg between the Siglavik and Miklavik subdivisions in the RM of Gimli.

The meeting drew residents from both Armstrong and Gimli, Lake Winnipeg commercial fishers and representatives from the People for



Edward Kleinsasser of Crystal Spring colony.

the Preservation of the Willow Island Coastal Wetlands (P4P), the Coalition to Save Lake Winnipeg (Coalition) and the Gimli Environmental Advisory Committee.

"For the chickens, we're talking of,



EXPRESS PHOTOS BY PATRICIA BARRETT
Armstrong residents Joe and Steve with Lake Winnipeg commercial fisher Bill Buckels (middle) have concerns about the colony operation.

say, a round number of 15,000 layers — that's selling eggs. And then the broilers — meat chickens," said Edward Kleinsasser, who was joined by fellow colony members David Kleinsasser and Jerry Waldner. Kleinsasser didn't say how many "meat" chickens would be raised.

When asked by Coun. Adam Krochenski how many cattle and sheep

would be farmed, Kleinsasser didn't have a number.

"It's kind of a hobby farm at this point in St. Agathe," said Kleinsasser. "But here, because the possibility is here, we have more bush and pasture ... so I wouldn't be surprised if we go more into that."

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RCMP investigates firearm offences

Submitted

On Feb. 7, 2020, Gypsumville RCMP responded to several 911 calls reporting that a male was carrying a long gun and walking on the Main Road in Little Saskatchewan First Nation.

Another call was received stating that the male suspect had just pointed the firearm at a victim and demanded his snowmobile. The victim refused and got away safely.

Officers responded and made several patrols in the area. Further investigation led RCMP to an area in Fair-

ford First Nation.

RCMP located the suspect and he was arrested without incident. No firearm was recovered at that time.

Police Dog Services attended the scene and conducted a search. A long gun was located buried in the snow and was seized by police.

Aaron Sumner, 32, of Fairford First Nation, has been charged with numerous offences including robbery with a firearm, pointing a firearm, careless use of a firearm, possession of a weapon for a dangerous purpose



EXPRESS PHOTO SUBMITTED

RCMP police dog services located a long gun buried in the snow.

and using a firearm in the commission of an offence.

RCMP continue to investigate.

> CHICKENS, FROM PG. 11

The colony does "not intend to build a hog barn," he said, but it does make parts for hog barns, employing 15-20 non-colony people in Ste. Agathe on a full-time basis. And the colony is considering expanding that manufacturing in Armstrong as it already works with Gimli-based Faroex. The new colony would "probably" be hiring non-colony workers.

Reeve Susan Smerchanski said there's a hog-raising stigma associated with Hutterite colonies, and she knows some colonies have added a manufacturing component alongside agriculture. She cited colonies involved in the concrete and kitchen cabinet industry, as well as in fire truck manufacturing (the RM purchased a new truck for its Fraserwood fire department from a colony in the south).

As to when they plan to build the new colony, Kleinsasser said they'll probably start some digging this summer. They also need to figure out where to place the buildings.

"I guess we would start with where we are going to place the colony, where does it fit?" said Kleinsasser. "There's Willow Creek. We'd probably have the buildings next to the Willow Creek, and further up there'd be barns or the shops, going maybe west from the Willow Creek, more up on the hill."

In response to Smerchanski's question about population, David Kleinsasser said there will be about 97 people on the new colony.

Coun. Krochenski also raised the issue of how the colony's operations will impact RM roads.

Kleinsasser said the same number of trucks have been hauling grain out of the fields up to now and that won't change, but there may be some extra truck traffic while they're building. "And we'll get after you guys to

make sure they're in good shape," said Kleinsasser. "Let's face it, in the end you'll have more money because the property tax bill will be huge. So you'll have a lot of more money to fix those roads and keep them up."

Council didn't ask how the new colony intends to manage its animal manures, whether it will be stockpiling it on open fields or using it as fertilizer, and how it will handle any by-products created during its equipment manufacturing processes. But the reeve did say residents are concerned about the environment, the water and the lake.

"There are rules to follow regarding the spreading of manure and all the rest of it for any kind of farming operation that you have, whether it's the chickens or hogs or whatever," said Smerchanski. "There's always rules to follow to make sure we are protecting that water system."

Kleinsasser said the colony doesn't want to risk the health of its members and is also cognizant of the fishing industry on Lake Winnipeg.

"At Willow Creek we'll have our kids play along there, so we want that to be nice and clean," said Kleinsasser. "We want to be safe and environmentally friendly as much as anybody else."

As for two sections of neighbouring land the colony wants to purchase from the RM (the NW and NE of 29-18-30), the reeve said council hadn't had an opportunity to discuss it. Council would have to consider all interested purchasers and publicly advertise the sale.

After the delegation wrapped up, the Express asked council what the colony intends to do with the two sections it wants to purchase.

"They just want to leave it to enjoy the beauty of nature," said Smerchanski. "For hiking, biking, skiing trails, listening to the birds, picking berries.

Just natural habitat."

CAO Corrie Larsen added the colony said the RM it intends to have no buildings on those sections if it's the successful purchaser.

Fred Veldink of the Coalition asked Smerchanski whether council would have to re-zone the colony's present section from agricultural to industrial in order to accommodate manufacturing.

"We'll have to work through that. It's a process," said Smerchanski. "It won't be excluded, we'll work through that."

An Armstrong resident who didn't give his name told the Express the land the colony owns is wet and on a rise. Rain and snowmelt — along with possible manure leakages — flow downhill and make their way to the creek as "everything flows into the creek and out to the lake."

One of the Lake Winnipeg commercial fishers who attended the meeting said by email he has grave concerns about the potential for agricultural and human wastes to enter the Willow Creek watershed and further pollute the lake.

"Every working day I directly witness the downstream damage caused by agricultural pollution and untreated human and animal waste, and the destruction of wetlands and wetland filters by factory farms," said Bill Buckels, who lives in the RM of Gimli.

"I'm completely shocked and firmly against the establishment of any and all factory operations, especially one disguising itself as a farm upstream from one of the best spawning areas on Lake Winnipeg."

Buckels said he's encountered huge swaths of fecal matter swirling around in Lake Winnipeg, negatively affecting the fish, his business and possibly his health.

"I have worked on my boat up to my knees in fecal material for weeks on end in recent years, and the problem is worsening," he said. "It doesn't

need any help by bringing in potential outside polluters."

As well, Buckels said he's concerned about what could likely become a "new town of up to 200 people" just five miles from the lake.

"I don't understand how land that is zoned for agricultural use can also be used for a large population of humans and human waste as well as for a factory, plus animal waste from what could be a 'starter flock' of 15,000 chickens in captivity," said Buckels. "Will they connect to Gimli's sewer system like the rest of us?"

PAP said by email after the meeting it's "extremely concerned" about the proposed commercial chicken operation that will straddle the two municipalities.

"Are the exceptionally limited tax dollars derived from this operation worth the health of our communities by possibly poisoning drinking water and further destroying the fishing and tourist industry?" said spokesperson Muriel Smith.

Chicken manure increases algal blooms in fresh water, she said, citing research. It contains four times the amount of phosphorous and nitrogen in hog manure.

An operation of 15,000 layers alone, as proposed, produces 1.89 tons of manure per day. That manure contains heavy metals such as arsenic, trace antibiotics and hormones, which contaminate soil and water — both runoff and groundwater, she said.

PAP also has concerns about odour from the chicken operation and emissions of ammonia, hydrogen sulphide and poultry dust, which contains toxins that can cause lung and eye irritations not only to farm workers, but also to residents.

"Why would anyone support the establishment of such an environmentally and commercially destructive enterprise?" said Smith.