

Mar 27, 2026

Subject: Physician Concerns Regarding Proposed Zoning Bylaws Restricting Backyard Food Production

To Whom It May Concern at the Cowichan Valley Regional District Zoning Department,

I am writing to you as a new member of the CVRD. I am also a family physician and hospitalist. I would like to express my serious concerns regarding the proposed bylaws that would restrict residents' ability to keep chickens, maintain beehives, and pursue other forms of small-scale food production on their own property, from a health standpoint. I urge the CVRD to reconsider these restrictions and instead support residents in their efforts to achieve greater food sovereignty.

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF GROWING AND RAISING YOUR OWN FOOD:

The evidence supporting home food production as a health-promoting activity is substantial:

- Home gardeners and small-scale producers consume significantly more fruits and vegetables than non-gardeners. Published studies show that people with home gardens have a lower BMI, a health index that directly relates to many chronic medical conditions.
- Eggs from backyard hens have been shown to contain higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids, vitamin D, and vitamin E compared to commercially produced eggs — nutrients that are critically important for cardiovascular and neurological health.
- Raw local honey produced by backyard beekeepers retains enzymes, antioxidants, and immune-supporting properties that are largely absent in commercially processed honey.
- Growing and preparing food has well-documented mental health benefits, including reduced rates of depression and anxiety, improved stress regulation, and greater sense of community connectedness — all issues I see contributing to health daily in my practice.
- Children who participate in household food growing develop healthier eating habits, better nutritional literacy, and lower rates of diet-related illness into adulthood.

Restricting these activities is, in effect, a public health intervention in the wrong direction. In a time where we are facing primary care crisis, when our hospitals are operating nearly double their capacity and we have elders on stretchers in emergency

department hallways for days on end, every government decision that impedes preventative health adds burden to our health care system.

THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS AND NUTRITIONAL HEALTH:

As a physician serving patients across a wide socioeconomic spectrum, I am witnessing firsthand the health consequences of food unaffordability:

- Canada's Food Price Report has documented consistent year-over-year grocery price increases well above the rate of inflation. Food prices are 27% higher than they were five years ago, and a family of four in Canada now spends an estimated \$17,500+ annually on food.
- Food insecurity is directly linked to higher rates of type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and mental illness — conditions that place enormous strain on our already overburdened healthcare system.
- Patients are increasingly telling me they are choosing between bills, medications, and groceries, or defaulting to cheap, ultra-processed foods because whole foods are no longer within their budget.
- Backyard food production — whether eggs from a small flock of hens, honey from a beehive, or vegetables from a kitchen garden — meaningfully offsets grocery costs for low- and middle-income families, directly improving their nutritional security.

The ability to keep a few hens or a garden bed is not a hobby for many of my patients — it is a nutritional lifeline. Bylaws that restrict this capacity will deepen health inequities in our region.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND SYSTEMIC COST OF RESTRICTING LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION:

Beyond individual health, there are broader environmental consequences to discouraging local food production:

- The industrial food supply chain accounts for approximately 26% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Every household that produces even a portion of its own food reduces demand on this system.
- Grocery store supply chains rely on long-distance transportation, cold storage, and significant packaging — all of which contribute to carbon emissions and waste. Local food production eliminates these inputs.

- Backyard beekeeping directly supports local pollinator populations at a time when wild bee species face an alarming population decline. Healthy pollinator ecosystems are essential to agricultural biodiversity across the entire region.
- Backyard hens and composting food gardens reduce household organic waste and support soil health — contributing to the kind of regenerative local ecosystem that benefits everyone.
- Encouraging residents to grow food locally builds community resilience against supply chain disruptions — something the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated is far from hypothetical.

At a time when governments at every level are being called upon to reduce emissions and strengthen food system resilience, restricting small-scale local food production moves in precisely the wrong direction.

I respectfully request that the CVRD reconsider these proposed bylaw changes. Please consult with your community, and please hear their concerns. When we are facing more uncertainty in our world than ever before, we need policies that support, rather than undermine, residents' capacity for food self-sufficiency. The Cowichan Valley has a proud tradition of land stewardship and food culture. These bylaws risk eroding something that benefits our health, our environment, and our community.

I am happy to provide further information, references, or to meet with relevant staff or elected officials to discuss these concerns.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Dr. Jessica Wilder, MD, CCFP
Family Physician

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Wilder', with a small dot below the 'i'.