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PLANNING FOR A NEW DISTRIBUTION OF RURAL PEOPLE

with a postscript on why zoning
cannot preserve agriculture

by

Howard E. Conklin

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Planning for a New Distribution of Rural People

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We have a new distribution of people upon the land — one that has never existed before in the history of the human race. It is a pattern in which large numbers of nonfarm people live in the country, far outnumbering farmers in most rural communities.

This pattern started to develop in the Northeast about 40 years ago. It is now spreading across the nation, changing rural landscapes and upsetting the long-standing theories of demographers.

Life in the country was made more attractive by better cars and roads, rural electrification, centralized schools, rural fire protection, and other improvements. Work on the technologies for these improvements started in the 1930s and was completed shortly after the close of World War II.

At first, rural population growth resulted mostly from a decline in the migration of rural children to cities. Now, however, there is movement of city people to the country. Two new factors appear to be important contributors to this. Many people are retiring earlier than in the past, but urban costs of living are too high for their retirement incomes. And some urban people have become afraid to live in the city; so afraid, that some who are poorly trained for rural life are nevertheless trading a place in the city for one in the country.

Growth in the rural population solved the abandoned land problem that plagued many states like New York in the 1930s and early 1940s, but it has brought its own problems: speculative pressures, high taxes,

more regulations, more trespass and vandalism, and similar problems for farmers; a very messy looking countryside that disturbs urban people, especially suburbanites who seek recreation in rural areas; and a draining of people from the central cities that aggravates urban financial difficulties.

Many proposals are being made for solving these problems. Most such proposals are based on urban land use planning experience.

Urban planners have relied

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principally on zoning, subdivision controls, building permits, and building codes to solve land use problems. Through these devices they have been able to maintain attractive residential areas, especially in the suburbs, even though the city as a whole contains much that is unattractive.

Application of the urban planning model to rural situations produces the suggestion that it be made legally difficult for nonfarm people to live scattered about in rural areas. The

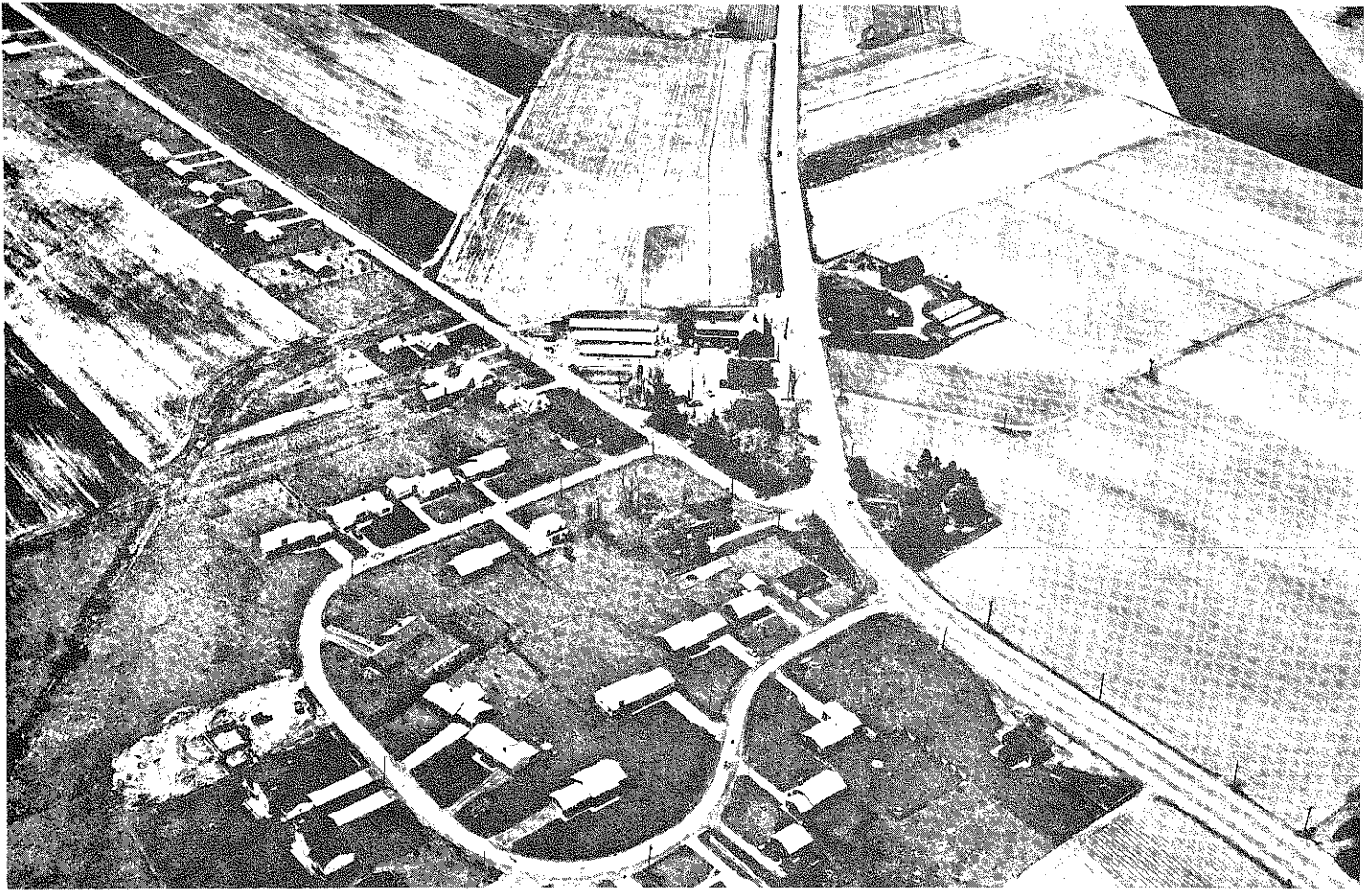
urban model suggests that, ideally, nonfarm people should be required to live in cities where they would not bother processes of food production. In cities, these people could be supplied public services more economically, could be prevented from being messy (or could be confined to messy sections of the city), and would help pay some of the otherwise very burdensome city taxes and debts.

Nonfarm people, however, would fight bitterly against being fenced out of rural areas. Moreover, most farmers do not think this is necessary and are not inclined to feel friendly toward such discriminatory action by bureaucrats. Both farmers and nonfarmers tend to suspect that actions to separate and segregate, thereby creating ghettos, may be one source of the modern city's troubles.

Urban-oriented planners have attempted to make their proposals appealing by focusing on the preservation of farm land, but their emphasis on land rather than on farming and farm people has left most farmers unconvinced of their altruism.

Still, farmers are worried, sometimes even to the point of wondering about the security of their future, by some of the things that are happening as a consequence of the steady and substantial growth in the numbers of their nonfarm neighbors. Not only are their taxes rising sharply, but a variety of other troublesome things have developed.

A farmer's concerns become critical when it's time for major farm improvements — a new barn or an



Suburban expansion continues to encroach on farmland.

orchard replanted for example. If nonfarm pressure is high enough the farmer may decide to bet on a nonfarm sale of the farm even though it is a gamble. In that case he or she makes no further investments. In this kind of situation, agriculture can become seriously debilitated long before the land is needed for city uses. Poorly maintained farms often pass to speculators when the farmers retire. Speculators almost never improve them for farming. They often rent to farmers at low rental rates but not on terms that encourage intensive farming. In such areas, farm machinery dealers often convert to garden equipment, feed stores cater increasingly to the horse trade, and veterinarians substitute cats and dogs for farm animals. When farmers lose the services necessary for their business, they no longer find it attractive to stay. There are areas in New York where good land can be rented at no cost, but there are no takers.

The New York Agricultural District

Law of 1971 was passed to help correct some of the problems of farmers under nonfarm pressure. It contains provisions for farm-value assessments, freedom from new levies for sewer and water systems, discouragements to government financing of nonfarm public services, and some limitations on the exercise of eminent domain. It also instructs administrative agencies to interpret all laws in ways that encourage farming to the full extent compatible with health and safety.

The agricultural district program is an experiment. Nothing like it has been tried before. Although it seems to be helping, it is not a cure-all. Some features of the law have not been used yet and some problems have arisen in the administration of other features. New features surely need to be added.

The philosophy of the agricultural district law contrasts so sharply with the traditional urban planning model that many professional planners see no value in it. The idea of forcibly

separating uses (classes of people, really) has become so dominant, particularly in suburban thinking, that action to encourage a use (farming) without exercise of coercive power is dismissed as an interim measure at best. A recent publication on rural land use reflects the suburbanite point of view: "Effective land use controls must bite someone. . . ."

The agricultural district law does not intend to "bite" anyone. It intends to facilitate the pleasant and productive coexistence of farm and nonfarm people. It recognizes the legitimacy of intimately intermingled diversity — making no effort to separate or segregate.

Those who support the agricultural district law argue that if farmers are given a chance they will keep good land in farming unless it is very badly needed for nonfarm uses. This approach also can avoid the social tensions that have made cities such hate-filled places in recent years.

Postscript

The above article has been reproduced as it originally appeared in Food and Life Sciences even though I did not select the picture that accompanies it and consider this picture an inappropriate illustration for the article. Reproduction of the picture with the article provides the occasion for me to reemphasize the main ideas in the article -- ideas that apparently I was not able to convey fully to the editor who selected the picture.

The picture shows a suburban housing development encroaching on farm land. It probably dates from the 1960s or early 70s when suburbanization was moving rapidly forward in New York. These houses probably were joined by others before the wave of suburbanization subsided. Certainly the houses shown are arranged as though further additions were expected, and at least one house was in process of construction when the photo was taken.

The article on the other hand, speaks of "rural people" in its title and refers explicitly throughout to "rural populations", "rural areas", and "rural situations". It excludes encroaching suburbanites by referring to "people...scattered about in rural areas".

The picture portrays the conversion of a rural situation to a suburban one and records expansion at the suburban fringe. The growth of a suburb is very different from the multiplication of nonfarm people scattered in rural areas, where, even with population increases, population densities will remain low for decades to come. The houses on the accompanying photo are on lots so small they indicate the developer expected all the land soon to be in high demand for housing. Also, these lots are too small for the pursuit of activities often engaged in by rural nonfarm people such as part-time farming, wood production and the more extensive forms of land-based home recreation like horseback riding, snowmobiling and hunting. In all respects, the new houses in this picture suggest a suburban lifestyle.

There is a very large concern currently with preserving farmland. Much of this concern focuses on suburban margins of the kind shown in the photo. I am much more concerned with the preservation of farming in areas where increasing numbers of nonfarm people are intermingled with farmers.

I think it is much more useful to focus on preserving efficient farming in our large rural areas than on attempts to prevent the outward movement of suburbia. For one thing, suburban fringes are not moving very much in the Northeast at the present time. In New York, for example, the populations of most urban counties, not just the cities within them, are declining, overall employment opportunities are less now than a few years ago, and incomes have not kept pace with inflation. Beyond this, mortgage interest rates and costs of house construction have risen rapidly. Few people, recently, have joined those who can afford homes in suburbia.

And when suburban margins are moving outward, they seem to be pushed by forces too strong to be held in check by normal legislative action. A study bill was prepared by the New York State Office of Planning Coordination in 1970 that would have placed enough power in the hands of a small board in Albany to enable it, among its powers, to preserve farm land at the suburban margin. The bill not only never came to a vote, but the budget of the Office of Planning Coordination was severely reduced and its name changed in the session when the bill was expected to be introduced for passage. Both rural and suburban people oppose state land use controls. The people who live in the kinds of houses shown in the accompanying photo are more affluent, articulate, and politically influential than the average citizen. Rarely can legal fences be constructed that will prevent them from expanding suburbia if they so choose.

My concern is much more with maintaining an opportunity for farmers to use efficiently the land in the upper right half of the accompanying picture until new suburbanite arrivals decide they want it. As of 1980, it may be decades before this land is taken for suburbia. And, of course, beyond the land shown here, there are millions of acres where there are no suburban developments within many miles. This is the land of special concern to me in this article.

But if suburbia is not growing and most farms are far from suburbia anyway, why worry? The accompanying article explains how large numbers of people have come to live in the country beyond the suburban margin. In most of New York, the majority of these people were born in rural areas and have elected to stay there, though many commute to cities to work. A few former urban and suburban residents have moved to rural locations but these are mostly modest income people seeking pleasant surroundings at low cost, often retirees and inner city "escapees".

It is easy to believe that the presence of the people in the suburban houses shown in the accompanying photo could modify the chances for efficiently farming the remainder of the land pictured. Airplane application of pesticides would certainly be a major point of friction. The drawdown of the water table by irrigation and the noise of irrigation pumps would be another. If these barns were still being used for livestock, odors could be a problem. The newcomers also place heavy demands on schools, police and fire protection, roads and other public services for which the farmers must bear a disproportionate burden since their capital is in land, the basis of taxes for these services, rather than in a law practice or other intangible property. The coming of suburban houses also raises everyone's hopes and fears about the price for which the rest of the land may be sold. A few high-priced sales, even in remote communities, have a tendency to impress speculators, assessment revaluation appraisers and valuation specialists from the State Board of Equalization and Assessment. Since some land is sold for nonfarm purposes in every community of the state, this tendency to be impressed by a few high-priced sales often results in the overassessment of farms.

In the more remote areas, demands by nonfarmers to regulate farmers are less likely. Increases in nonfarm public service demands, and in speculative activities are less, too. But these are differences in magnitude, not in kind. Farmers everywhere are being affected to some extent.

And it simply is not practical to think in terms of chasing the nonfarmers out of farming areas any more than it is worthwhile to try putting legal fences around the suburbs. Nonfarmers control local governments in all rural areas or can take control whenever they wish. They will not be chased out, nor will they be made "nonconforming users" under exclusive agricultural zoning ordinances. Rural areas have an intermingled pattern of heterogeneous land uses. The best we can do is work on means for facilitating the pleasant and productive coexistence of the elements in this intermingled pattern.

This necessity may bring rural people unexpected dividends by enabling them to avoid some of the mistakes that have been made in urban planning. Urban use controls and building codes have tended more and more to concentrate people of different races, beliefs, and stations in life in separate geographic areas of our metro centers; in suburbs, older single-family areas, apartment zones, ghettos, and "bombed out" areas. This progressive stratification has been carried out in the name of preventing land-use conflicts and preserving property values, but clearly it has been associated with increases in crime and civil strife. The idea that mixed land use may be a socially desirable arrangement is beginning to enter urban planning philosophy.

In rural areas children of all kinds ride the school buses together and their parents know one another by their first names. For them, mixed land use is a way of life. It is an arrangement that cities may one day emulate.

Howard E. Conklin