

The Rural-Urban Fringe Problem

common characteristic of areas of rural-urban transitions is disorganization of economic, political, and social processes

Stephen C. Smith

Beginning a two-part report on a study of economic conflicts encountered in the extension of urban growth into rural areas.

Urban expansion—radiating from towns and cities—is plainly visible.

Existing evidence seems to indicate a continuation of this process of metropolitan expansion. The encroachment upon agricultural land will have relatively little importance from a national food production point of view. Agriculture seems to be capable of meeting its production tasks in view of the persistent increases in production due to technological advance and the possibility of land development. But this is not all of the picture. Local areas and a few specialized crops may feel the brunt of the transfer of land from agricultural to urban uses. If significance is to be found from the loss of farm land, it will be at this point of local impact.

Within the local areas, the process of urban development may take several forms—stringing along the highway, leap-frogging over the rural countryside, or infiltrating orchards and fields. Sometimes a shopping center will be an early development to serve as a nucleus for future growth—or investment in such facilities may wait until the potential service area is well developed. In any event, the main guiding forces are those expressed through the real estate market and a county planning commission, if such exists, with whatever controls are available for subdivision, zoning, city expansion, development of services, and other similar activities.

On the urban side, the servicing of low-density populations is generally more expensive per capita than for more compact settlement. Utilities, sewers, roads, public transportation, some forms of recreation, and similar services generally increase their costs per capita as the dispersal of settlement increases, provided land costs do not compensate. The demand for these services increases with a growing population density, and a strain may be placed upon the existing organizational structure to finance and manage the required expansion.

With extension adding to extension and even colliding with growth from other directions, existing political boundaries are overrun. Each locality attempts to meet its own problems, but

localities are frequently tackling problems which are not wholly their own.

On the agricultural side of the zone of urban expansion, some farmers sell their land to the subdividers while others continue to hold out for higher land prices and watch surrounding land uses change.

Farming is frequently more difficult to carry on with increases in population density. Traffic becomes heavier, making it more difficult to move farm machinery on the roads. Normal farming operations—the spraying of fruit, for instance—may not be appreciated by nearby householders, and the farmer objects to the increased tax load which accompanies the suburban's demand for greater public service. Not only does the tax rate increase, but the assessed value of farm property is raised due to nonfarm competition for land. As a result, the farmer may oppose incorporation into a city or the creation of special districts to provide services he feels he does not want. Farmer resistance may be organized to advocate the creation of agricultural zones to deflect the tide of nonagricultural land uses.

These are some of the elements at work in the rural-urban fringe with conflicting and overlapping patterns of interest.

The rural-urban fringe may be broken—for the present study—into three interest groups: 1. The agricultural group is composed of the farmers whose land is being purchased for urban development or whose land value is affected by the urban demand. 2. The suburban interest is represented by the people who are not using the land for agricultural purposes but who are not establishing their urban land use in the city proper nor in the predominantly agricultural area. 3. The city is the hub of diverse interests and serves as a center of communication, employment, business, and public services.

The potential of selling out to nonfarm interests is ever present to the farmer and, consequently, he has a positive interest in the character of the new development which is encroaching. This interest is very real because the new character will influence the potential value of his own property, even though no sale is negotiated. Nonfarm interests also may share the attitudes of the farmer

since they do not want to see the values of their properties deteriorated. To protect his economic position against the uncertainty of a vocal nonfarm group imposing restrictions upon his freedom of action and of nonfarm development which may tend to limit the potential nonfarm value of his property, the farmer may seek to take group action. Such action will seek to establish a common farmer interest although this may be difficult to achieve at times. In fact, conflicts of interest within agriculture at times may play to the advantage of those desiring to move in.

Still within the fringe and outside the city limits, the suburban interests also have a desire to protect their property values against the uncertainty of deterioration due to undesired neighborhood relations. The clash resulting from the desire for protection frequently flares into a contest within the fringe between economic groups attempting to segregate themselves from other economic groups. At times, these differences are straightforward with the issues plainly stated while at other times they are hidden—or thought to be hidden—behind the guise of standards of public health, welfare, or amenity values.

To be continued.

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