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Regional Planning

Future-oriented studies and action programs undertaken by groups of sub-state local governments, and/or sub-national state governments. This article provides an overview of the regional planning experience in rural America. The first section discusses historic trends and their effects on planning. The second section summarizes the current status of various approaches to regional planning. The third and final section speculates on the future of regional planning in light of a broader set of social and technological trends.

Historical Experiences

There are really two rural Americas in the U.S. There is the rural America that is declining and the rural America that is growing. The former tends to be distant; that is, it lies beyond and between metropolitan influences. The latter is typically located on either the fringes of the cities or is distant but has amenities, often recreational, that attract urban residents to it. Each of these types of rural regions has its own sets of planning problems and challenges. Distant areas need regional planning, but engage in little of it because of disincentives to cooperate. The regional planning in growing areas seeks to centralize authority for land use and environmental management in order to promote efficiency, conservation and social equity. But the future of regional planning of all types is uncertain. It is derivative of the larger political dialogue, and influenced by social forces such as renewed citizen activism and heightened conflict over private property.

The relationship of urban America to its rural regions might be characterized best as ambiguous. On the one hand, there is the doctrine, traceable to neoclassical economic theory, that little, if anything, can or should be done to try to alleviate rural decline. Such decline is viewed as a product of powerful, rational economic and demographic forces that are beyond policy influence. Where public effort is expended, it is targeted to the development of selected growth centers where manufacturing opportunities can congregate and to which rural residents can migrate. On the other hand, there is the view that rural regions are declining as a function of market failure. This view suggests that it is necessary and appropriate to intervene via regional planning and directed policy assistance. From this perspective, rural regions serve a social, economic and cultural role for the nation, and their impoverishment is dysfunctional from the perspective of a larger, long-term economic calculus.

The U.S. first ventured into widespread experiments in regional planning during the 1930s. The rapidly changing conditions of rural America, as a function of the economic Depression and widespread natural resource depletion (such as the "Dust Bowl" conditions of the Plains states), called forth creative responses by the national government. It was during this period that large-scale regional planning projects were implemented, the most well known being the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). While ultimately the TVA became a power generation agency for the region, its original concept was to provide rural-based modernization throughout the Southeast. Also during the 1930s the only national planning agency the U.S. has ever had, the National Resources Planning Board (NRPB), undertook several pioneering studies on the regional character of America and possible structures for regional planning. But little actually came of all this. The NRPB was disbanded, and the TVA and its cousins became agencies for the generation of inexpensive power on the theory that this would attract economic enterprises to growth centers in distressed rural regions.

Regional planning for rural areas re-emerged in the 1960s in two guises. As part of the social planning of the period, programs were developed to address the social and economic disadvantages of rural places relative to urban areas. These programs were regional in nature because it appeared administratively easier and more cost-efficient to provide services on this basis. Few of these programs endured.

Contemporary Programs

The regional planning efforts that endured grew out of the need to manage rapid growth in urban fringe rural areas and in those distant areas with recreational amenities. The tradition in these areas was one of frag-

mented, decentralized local control over growth and natural resources. In a selected set of states, such as Vermont, New York, Florida, Wisconsin, California and Oregon, legislation was passed reasserting the state's authority over growth and natural resource management. This was reinforced by efforts at the federal level for selected natural resources such as those along the coastal zones. The rationale in all of these cases was that the existing system of local control in rural regions was characteristically and inherently parochial, discriminatory, destructive of ecosystems, and socially irresponsible. Also, the tradition of local control, dating back to the turn of the twentieth century, was perceived as inefficient as local administrators had neither the technical knowledge nor the administrative capacity to respond to the complex problems of growth. In order to achieve greater rationality in land use and natural resource management and meet a greater public good, it was proposed that more centralized administrative structures were necessary.

This approach to more centralized regional planning has expanded into the present. There are now about 12 states that have one or more programs for their rural areas oriented to control and contain urbanization or preserve land uses that are considered to have social significance, such as farmland and environmentally sensitive areas. These programs all share the characteristic of reducing the autonomy and authority of local government. For example, in Oregon a set of state goals exist that must be met in all local planning efforts. Local plans are reviewed at the state level for consistency with these goals. In Florida, environmentally sensitive areas must be identified in local plans, and local zoning is required to protect the integrity of such areas. Plans in one locality must be coordinated with the plans of adjoining localities, and efforts to provide public services must be organized consonant with the plans. As in Oregon, there is also a state-level review of local plans for consistency with these requirements. New Jersey's approach emphasizes local areas developing plans and then meeting with each other to develop a consistent approach to land use and natural resource management. In all cases, local efforts to act autonomously have been preempted, and plans for rural locales have to be coordinated with those of related rural places, and the region, and often state, as a whole.

While these comprehensive-style approaches at more centralized planning are generally lauded by planning professionals, environmental protection advocates, and good government reformers, they have been adopted by only about a dozen states, and the majority of these states are on the East and West Coasts where most of the rural growth areas can be found. While that has recently begun to change somewhat, with high-growth rural areas emerging in some interior states such as Colorado, Texas and Minnesota, in general, the middle part of the U.S. either has not experienced the same types of growth pressures that prompted the centralized efforts, or has experienced actual population decline and severe economic restructuring.

As a result, regional planning between the coasts has taken one of two forms. Some states have examined a form of rural triage. Prompted by concerns for the continued viability of all rural places, triage-style rural regional planning entails identifying those places with enough comparative advantage to survive successfully in the twenty-first century and then targeting centralized infrastructure and social investments toward these places. This is a continuation of what became of the TVA-style approach to regional planning.

The second approach is related, though more radical in concept. Known as the "Buffalo Commons" concept, it is regional planning writ large. The Buffalo Commons is a proposal for the future of the Great Plains, an area covering parts of 10 states. It argues that the original settlement of this region was a historical error. Ecologically, the region is ill adapted to extensive human settlement and intensive land use activities such as agriculture. Instead, the best use of the region is as prairie grazing ground and national recreation area. The advocates of the proposal do not suggest the literal evacuation of towns, villages and cities in the Great Plains region. Instead, they call for no extraordinary counter-measures to prevent what seems to be occurring as a result of economic, social and demographic transition, and conscious attention to reshaping the region as these transitions occur.

Because of the controversial nature of both of these approaches, neither has been adopted, and no alternative has emerged to fill the gap. As a result, little regional planning of substance occurs in rural areas between the coasts. In these places, the management of natural resources, such as farmland, forests and wetlands, and the future structure of the economy continue to be the domain of market forces and local planning, when such planning exists at all.

The Future of Regional Planning

The future of regional planning is murky. All efforts to undertake public planning in the U.S., regardless of

geographic level or specific place, often become caught in the larger political dialogue. To the extent market-oriented forces command the rhetoric of politics, then public planning of all types is viewed with disfavor. It is seen as interventionist, disruptive, inefficient and unproductive. To the extent markets are perceived to fail, and the public interest and public benefits are depicted as explicitly threatened, then public planning can be undertaken, and is often viewed as a possible solution.

The future of regional planning in those parts of rural America that are growing, or likely to grow, could continue along the route of centralization. But even this is uncertain given the renewed sense of localism across the country. While citizens can rationalize the basis for centralization, they are increasingly concerned about ceding control for land use and environmental management decisions to levels of government that can be difficult for them to access and influence. It appears that there are instances where they prefer the anarchy of fragmented local control to the bureaucratization of centralized control.

With respect to the distant rural areas, there is reason to expect that most will continue to decline. This will be especially true to the extent that their fate is left to market forces. In places where planning does exist, it will be local rather than regional in structure. In part this will be due to the predominant underlying political and fiscal structure that favors inter-jurisdictional competition rather than cooperation.

Planning of all types is likely to be shaped by several social trends and forces throughout the U.S. In addition to a renewed sense of localism, these include widespread citizen activism, the impact of new information technology, and heightened conflict over private property rights.

Citizen activism brings more people with more types of articulated interests into the policy and planning process. Increasingly, citizens are convinced that their perspective on the public interest is the correct one, and they seem less willing to compromise, especially in an era of tight fiscal resources. The new information technology decentralizes access to specialized information resources. This allows citizen activists to develop more sophisticated analyses to support their positions, and to challenge the official positions put forth by planning agencies. Together, widespread citizen activism and the new information technology make planning processes less and less dependent upon experts and more overtly political.

Heightened conflict over private property rights may be the most prominent social trend to impact regional planning into the future. Proposals for regional planning are increasingly portrayed as attempts to diminish the private property rights of individual landowners. In turn, this is characterized as a threat to liberty, the structure of American democracy, and what citizenship means in the U.S. To the extent that this representation of regional planning prevails, it will be difficult to undertake any planning of any substance anywhere in the country. Unless the concept of regional planning can be reinvented to position it as a defender of private property rights and a contributor to liberty and democracy, it may have little future in the U.S. in general, and rural America in particular.

— Harvey M. Jacobs and Edward J. Jepson, Jr.

See also

Community; Community Capitals; Development, Asset-based; Development, Community and Economic; Sustainable Development ; Future of Rural America; Government; Policy, Rural Development; Settlement Patterns; Urbanization

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Religion

"A unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" (Durkheim, 1947). Rural religion has been significantly altered by the general movement of American society to the city and the suburb. This change resulted in a precarious situation for the rural church. Nonetheless, rural religion survives in a somewhat unique form, perhaps to witness a revival as post-industrial society deconcentrates into nonmetropolitan areas.

The Uniqueness of Rural Religion

Religion takes many varied forms in the countryside from denominations to sects to cults. Rural religion and its varying forms have all been greatly impacted by the transition of American society from an agrarian to an industrial one in the nineteenth century, and now from an industrial to a global-oriented, post-industrial society. Rural religion must continuously adjust to these far-reaching changes. After reviewing the existing body of literature on rural religion, Goreham (1990) calls attention to the following themes into which this body of knowledge falls.

The economic, political and social dislocations brought about by the industrial and urban upheavals in the U.S. had a profound impact resulting in the decline of the rural church and its congregations. However, various denominational polities, theologies and congregational leaderships mediated this change from the broader society to the local country religious group.

The responses rural churches made to this massive social change varied along ideological fault lines present in these religious groups. Some groups advocated an activist position in the face of negative change, whereas others called for a renewed evangelistic fervor. The growth in consciousness that came about in reaction to these social changes led churches to define themselves in terms of their distinctiveness. Some have been content to see themselves simply as the "church in the country," but others noted their responsibility for stewardship of natural resources and the environment, responsibility to provide food to the hungry throughout the world, and responsibility to minister to a unique clientele.

Where this consciousness led to a unique role for the rural church, an accompanying development in a theology and philosophy of the rural church, the land, agriculture and rural life followed. These formulations ranged from seeing the land as a sacred trust to a need to protect and steward the land or to reduce world hunger and rural poverty.

Much of the writing on the rural church is devoted to the methods and techniques of ministering to people in a rural setting. As such, this body of thought and research has been concerned with how to conduct worship and liturgy, education, youth programs and the like.

A Short History of American Rural Religion

Religion was established in the U.S. basically as a small town and rural phenomenon. Although Europeans came to seek religious freedom, it was not long until they had established North American versions of the European theocratic states. The War of Independence and the creation of the American constitution set in motion forces that led to a struggle for souls largely fought on the emerging frontier. Thousands of open-country and small-town churches sprang up along the paths of exploration and settlement. After the home and family, religion and the church became the most influential components of the rural community.

While Protestants were establishing and re-establishing their denominations on the frontier, the Catholic Church was having a slow beginning in erecting its ecclesiastical structures in New England. However, Catholics following the Maryland model organized into house churches, stations and chapels. When priests could be secured, a central parish became established with an itinerant circuit-riding priest. As did Protestants, Catholics moved onto the frontier of Kentucky and beyond after independence from England. Here they came in contact with faith communities already established by the French and the Spanish.

With the Civil War, both Protestantism and Catholicism had to brace themselves for the onslaught of urbanization, massive immigration, and the depletion of the countryside of its population and resources. By the turn of the century, both were ripe for a rural church movement.

As the 1880s arrived, American denominations were becoming aware of the problems of doing church