Cell Phones, Center Pivots, and Rural Repopulation: Planning Implications of the New Ponderosa

Charles O. Collins Department of Geography Monica Daniels-Mika, AICP
Director, DepartmentPlServic C54i.t0.002 Tw[48][8][856]

With each successive of wave technological innovation land use planners and resource managers confront new service demands which spin off a host of issues and problems. The automobile, the most prevalent example, has reshaped and contemporary distended cities compounded the need for comprehensive planning. More recently, the adoption of a series of communications technologies has triggered a new era of rural growth, commonly known as the "rural rebound." (Johnson, 1999) Fax machines, personal computers, satellite links, E-mail, and even the annoyingly ubiquitous cell phone afford citizens the opportunity for choice in location, making residence them footloose that agricultural communities marked by decades of sustained population drain are experiencing unprecedented growth rates.

The influence of communication and information innovations is widely apparent; less understood is the role of agricultural technologies in the re-peopling of rural America. This is counter-intuitive. For decades innovations in the agro-economy have sent surplus labor to the cities. However, mechanizan 3Bof a4nvl

acres), public roads crisscross at one-mile

expense. Also, these corner systems occasionally go awry owing to programming

preventing the piecemeal creation of de facto rural subdivisions.

Initially, small corner parcels were purely serendipitous from a realty point of view. Farmers and ranchers were often surprised when asked to "sell off a corner." The novel experience of being offered what seemed a significant sum of money for nonproductive land prompted some farmers and ranchers to listen. And even for those adamantly opposed to fragmenting their properties, the weak farm-and-ranch economy made such unsolicited offers tempting. Some who sold did so only in order to continue farming, to cover previous crop losses, or to pay for the "wife's cancer treatments." However, what began as a buyer's market rather quickly shifted to a seller's. Quite naturally it occurred to some that selling off a corner or two left by the center pivot was a logical means of defraying part of the cost of that investment. It is at this point that public policy becomes involved because many potential buyers and some landowners are not aware of state or local restrictions concerning subdividing agricultural land, or at least pretend not to be. Simultaneously, public policy and local planners are involved when a significant portion of the new rural residents, the ranchetters, discover they are uninformed or ill-prepared for the rural life, with its limited services, unfamiliar farm and ranch practices, and frequent demands on their pocketbooks and patience. Indeed, it is the planner who usually hears the first complaint whether it comes from the newcomer or the old-timer.



Figure 6

In the past five years conversion of sprinkler corners to residential use has entered a new chapter. It is now a standard strategy for some farmers and ranchers who wish to finance or expand their operations. Clearly, the marketing of sprinkler corners is standard operating procedure for speculators and the real estate community as they capitalize on national interest in living in places that are perceived as smaller, quieter, cleaner, and safer.

The conversion of sprinkler corners raises tough questions. Previously, most farm corners were productive and public policy usually dictated their protection. However, the language of land use regulations, as well as the content, typically leave some latitude for interpretation. One question that must be addressed is whether sprinkler corners are viewed in their inherent state, i.e., productive farmland, or as obsolete lands resulting from a higher and functionally improved irrigation technology. Where owners seek to sell a parcel that has never been irrigated or is incapable of being irrigated, or where cultivation is limited by rockiness, high water table, or other conditions, the planning decision is less complicated. But use conversion owing to technological change is less easily defined and defended. Compounding all decisions are short-term versus long-term perspectives entrenched attitudes ranging from antigrowth to anti-planning, and virtually every position between.

The question of community good in this context, or any land use debate, is often swayed by local sentiment and personal interest. Planners are lobbied by groups ranging from property rights advocates, to no growth constituents, to aspiring country dwellers. Planners also find themselves the target of criticism from one group for interfering with an individual's "right" to do what they wish with their personal property, and from another for denying anyone the "right" to live where they wish. It is also asserted that planners are frequently outsiders whose education, non-local heritage, and environmental agendas make them poor arbiters of what is good for a rural community. Finally, additional issues emerge when elected officials with authority over planning agencies do not share the same attitudes about planning for growth, the environment, or ultimately, the established land use ordinances in force.

Ranchettes

The recent proliferation of new home sites in rural America raises complex land use planning issues. Often termed "ranchettes," these small, dispersed tracts of land account for an increasing portion of the rural rebound. Participants and supporters of this rural-ward migration contend that this is an exercise of a fundamental right, that is, to live anywhere one can afford. They hasten to add that their entrance into rural communities increases the taxable base and injects money into local economies that have struggled or even been in decline. And, they add, the land actually taken up is essentially non-productive so there is minimal impact on agricultural production. A moot point, some contend, in light of large agricultural surpluses in many commodities.

While public opinion seems to generally favor a laissez faire policy regarding all real estate, there are exceptions. These include organizations like the American Farmland Trust and sundry environmental groups, as well as long-term rural and small town taxpayers suddenly facing bond issues for new schools, better roads, and professional fire protection. Opposition from the latter citizenry is not so much opposition to new population, but to the rate, distribution, and manner of the growth. But more than a decade into the rural rebound there appears little slackening even though the price of a five-acre sprinkler corner has risen from perhaps \$10,000 to \$50,000 or more. Comparatively, however, this is still acceptable since it is about the price one might expect to pay for an urban building site of one-third to one-half acre.

Owing to its specific location, the sprinkler corner ranchette is an inherently challenging new land use practice. First, the parcel is immediately adjacent to actively farmed fields. This means its occupants must be prepared for the realities of modern, large-scale, intensive farming. The ranchetters are likely dealing with a farm operator who is managing many acres, much equipment, and hired labor, primarily It is not Old equipment operators. McDonald just across the fence. The anticipated "quiet country living" often includes large, noisy, dust-raising equipment throughout the day, well into the night, and most of the year. Feedlots and dairies contribute their charm to country living with noise, dust, and smells that are both alien and offensive to those unaccustomed to modern agriculture. This development has prompted one rapidly growing Colorado county to produce and distribute The Code of the West, a pamphlet whose intent minimize is to misunderstandings between agricultural and ranchette interests. In fact, most impacted rural communities now issue warnings to prospective new county dwellers as a matter of course.

communications technologies provide a degree of residential freedom, the fact remains that most ranchetters are still city bound to a degree, some commuting every workday. But even when it is an occasional trip to the office or hauling kids to the orthodontist and soccer practice, roads take on a critical importance to newcomer and old-timer alike. Sharing a two lane county road, paved or not, with large feed, grain, and manure trucks (not to mention slow moving tractors towing massive implements) requires a willingness to adapt to pot holes, delays, and dust. If the new home site is a sprinkler corner, the issue is twofold. First is a quantum increase in the number of so-called "blind" corners caused by buildings, fences, and trees. When this is compounded by a significant increase in traffic volume occasioned by new growth, frustrations and fatalities both

rise. Speed, always a risk factor, has clearly increased with more long-distance commuters who tend to travel either early in the day or late in the evening. (Lucy, 2000) More governmental intervention seems the likely response to road and traffic woes but hardly anyone, farmer, truck driver, or ranchette commuter favors impeding the traffic flow, not to mention higher taxes for road improvements.

Beyond issues of traffic or the condition of roads, an ongoing debate exists concerning the compatibility of ranchettes with intensive irrigated agriculture. The discussion can be joined at the corner café or followed in the local daily; occasionally, it finds its way into national news sources. Distilled to its essence it concerns the methods of modern large-scale agriculture and the ranchetters' vision of country living, and whether these can co-exist in close proximity. At the core of contention is the unwillingness, or inability, of established farming and ranching operations to change

quiet" sought by ranchetters, stretches services and community resources. Road maintenance and improvement, domestic water supply, phone and electrical service, mail delivery, fire protection and law enforcement all experience increased levels of demand. Stated in another fashion, when rural rebounders speak of "getting away from it all," few have in mind paved roads, next-day delivery, or quick response to emergency calls as aspects they wanted to leave behind.

The conventional wisdom is that houses increase the tax base and you can make more money growing houses than corn or cattle. On a case-by-case basis and in the short run this is a difficult argument to refute, especially in communities with economies that are in trouble. However, planners must be able to project land use trends into the future and assess the longterm impacts upon not only the local economy, but also resources and the environment, and the quality of life for all Planners must also consider issues like the "tipping point," that future time when ranchettes could outnumber farms and ranches in a community with a resulting shift in the local political power base, and potentially, fundamental changes in attitudes and policies regarding farming (Smith and ranching practices. and Krannich, 2000)

What lies beyond such a tipping point? One scenario might be described as a low-density dispersed, suburb with significant farming surviving only in isolated Even in such enclaves of islands. agriculture, legislated restrictions for the common good would increase both the difficulty and the cost of farming and ranching. Meanwhile, public service demands could be expected to grow as the now majority ranchetters sought to bring something near urban-quality services to their New Ponderosa. (Nelson, 1992)

Unfortunately, the implications for retaining a sense of rural culture, for conserving open vistas, for wildlife protection, for soil and water quality, and

control of plant and animal pests, are not promising in the long term. And if the critics of suburbia are correct when they charge that a sense of community is unlikely within low density commuting neighborhoods, what are the prospects that socially viable neighborhoods will emerge from dispersed commuting ranchetters? (Kunstler, 1993)

Planning Implications

Planners are challenged daily by evolving land use practices and patterns. Nowhere is this truer than in the case of the rural rebound, which literally caught most of us off guard. With no prospect for an end to innovations in communications technology nor in agriculture, we should expect the demand for "Country Living" to continue and grow. Should the rural economy continue to falter, opportunity for the rural rebound will only expand.

Most local planning offices in the Colorado Front Range are in a chronic catch-up mode. Ironically, proposed legislation to help manage local land use often sparks a modern day land rush as aspiring rebounders, and those who wish to serve that market, converge upon the Planning Office to beat deadlines. But it is not merely the volume of work that may frustrate good planning, but the very nature of the rural rebound. Consider the two primary populations involved. Traditionally, farmers and ranchers have bridled at what they consider excessive restrictions upon "their" freedoms from government programs intended to benefit them. Consequently, when the planning office involves itself in land sales and use, it seems but another example of "too much government."

As for the rebounders, they have aspirations of a simpler, more self-sufficient lifestyle. Whether returning to the countryside, or merely following a dream, land use restrictions do not fit into their vision of this new rural lifestyle. In essence, then, the planner must deal with at least two potentially resistive parties that have very different experiences and frames of

reference. In this context, not only is the planner to function as interpreter and enforcer of existing regulations, but also may be expected by either party (or both) to interpret the "strange" behavior of the other.

What fundamental role can planners

References

American Farmland Trust. *Cost of Community Services*. Farmland Information Center. http://www.farmlandinfo.org

Code of the West is on-line

http://www.larimer.org/planning/planning/code_of_the_west/index.htm

Johnson, Kenneth M. 1999. "The Rural Rebound," *Reports on America*, The Population Reference Bureau, Washington, D.C.

Kunstler, James Howard. 1993. *The Geography of Nowhere*. Simon and Schuster.

Lucy, William H. 2000. "Watch Out: It's Dangerous in Exurbia," *Planning* 66 (11): 14-17.