

ROLE OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL FEATURES IN RESIDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF RURAL CHARACTER

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Abstract

Rural landscapes are rapidly changing as more families migrate in from cities and suburbs, yet there have been few systematic attempts to have residents describe exactly what rural character means to them. As part of a USDA Forest Service research program examining landscape change (Potts et al. 2004), this study focused on the landscape and residents of six townships in south central Michigan. Six groups of four to five residents each were transported throughout the townships to discuss landscape features that represent rural character. Several thematic preferences surfaced. Land use for residential development was a major concern among all of the residents. Depending on the type and location, subdivisions in agricultural areas were viewed either neutrally or negatively. Most residents found cleared lots with new houses built close to the road to be objectionable and preferred housing with vegetative screening. Woodlots, wetlands, and farmland also showed up in all six discussions as a positive attributes. Implications for land use planning are discussed.

1.0 Introduction

As more families migrate from cities and suburbs to rural areas, problems associated with land use surface. The following entry appeared on the top of a list of websites after an internet search of the phrase, "defining rural character":

"Everyone agrees - we love our "Rural Character". But what exactly does rural character look like? It might look different to everyone, but I would guess there would be some basic similarities. So I am proposing a contest. Put your thinking caps on, get your creative juices flowing, and send in your interpretation. You could take a photo, write a poem or an essay, draw or paint a picture, create a sculpture. Anything that expresses your concept of what rural character is.

The Open Space Citizen's Committee is hosting a workshop on March 17, 2004 at the Wittenbach Center across from the High School. We will display the entries there, and ask attendees to vote for their favorites. I'm not sure what the prize will be at this point, but we'll come up with something. It will be fun just to see what everyone comes up with." (source: <http://www.vergennestwp.org/definingrural.htm>, accessed 02/10/04).

The fact that this website is in Michigan underscores the point that not only is defining rural character a need, it is also meaningful to the study population for the proposed research. Residents in rural areas are asking planning officials in local units of government to preserve rural character and various policy alternatives (zoning, purchase and transfer of development rights, open space overlays) are being pursued. A critical problem, however, is that there is a poor understanding of how local residents perceive and define "rural character."

1.1 Literature Review

Studies conducted during the past 10 years have linked perceptions of rural character to specific land use criteria that can be used by policy makers to guide design and zoning policies at the local level. For example, Sullivan (1994) studied individual preferences for physical characteristics at the rural-urban fringe, where farms and forests were being overcome by urban sprawl at a fairly rapid pace. Sullivan used a photo-questionnaire,

consisting of 32 black-and-white photographs to assess preferences. Respondents were instructed to indicate their level of preference by circling a number from one to five located beneath each photo. Scenes in the photos depicted a range of housing types, including older farm houses, multiple family cluster developments and single family housing on large and small lots. Photos also included varying amounts of farmland and woods as these features were in jeopardy of being lost due to development. Sullivan sent questionnaires to farmers, township planning commissioners, and other residents of a county in southeastern Michigan. He found that rural-urban fringe residents preferred landscapes that contained both farms and forested land. They also preferred subdivisions and clusters of homes with mature trees instead of few trees and single family housing over multiple family housing. These findings suggest that, where rural character preservation is a goal, new developments should be built near or in forest settings and either maintain existing trees or plant new ones to take their place. By far, the most preferred photos contained no built elements. The highest ratings were given to forested areas and farmland scenes containing open fields that were bordered on two or more sides by woods in the background. Photos of multiple family housing, nearly devoid of plant materials received the lowest ratings. Sullivan concluded that preserving rural character means protecting agricultural land, open space, hedgerows and woodlots. Furthermore, housing and other developments perceived as possessing rural character should be built in close proximity to these features.

Ryan (2002) also used a photo-questionnaire in his survey of residents of the rural-urban fringe in western Massachusetts (near Amherst). His study purpose was to identify the elements of the rural landscape that local residents value. In particular, he was interested in residents' reactions to various types of new cluster subdivision designs that attempt to address urban sprawl. He learned that, for subdivisions, the visibility of protected open space along roads and other public viewpoints was an element that was perceived to be compatible with the rural landscape. Conversely, those subdivisions with no visible open space from public viewpoints were considered incompatible with rural

character. Ryan also found that while cultural features such as old homes and stone walls were deemed important to rural character, natural features, including farm fields, were perceived to be more important. The lack of new development was perceived to be almost equal to cultural elements in defining rural character. Rural New England residents wanted privacy, but did not equate privacy with the inability to see neighbors' homes. They rated nature and nature-related activities to be the most positive features of rural living. Having nearby places to walk or hike, room to garden, being able to see the stars at night and feeling safe in one's neighborhood were the most highly regarded features. As opposed to residents of larger rural lots, residents who lived on small lots were more likely to say that subdivision scenes were compatible with rural character. Higher density new developments tended to be more acceptable to those already living in these types of subdivisions. While farms and natural qualities were rated as highly important to rural character, these features were appreciated more so by newer residents (residing there less than 12 years) and farmers than long-time residents who were not farmers. Ryan concluded that new rural subdivisions should be screened from public view. The impacts of development were not spread evenly among rural residents in the study. Negative impacts were felt more strongly by those living on small parcels along country roads than by cluster or conservation subdivision residents. This is likely because the homes of cluster subdivision residents typically face interior roads and are buffered from surrounding impacts by vegetation and permanently protected open space.

Vogt and Marans (2004) compared individuals who purchased a single-family home within the last 7 years with less recent homebuyers in terms of how home, lot, neighborhood and community features affected their purchase decisions. These investigators learned that naturalness and open space were not consistently the most important features for homeowners in rapidly growing urban fringe areas that still have a large proportion of land area in open space (the southeastern Michigan, Detroit metropolitan area). Instead, neighborhood and housing design, schools and access were rated more highly. In rapidly growing urban fringe areas, they concluded that land use policies that attempt

to preserve naturalness and other rural features may not yet have sufficient support from consumers, planners and legislators to be pervasive.

1.2 Implications and Study Purpose

Both the studies of Ryan (2002) and Vogt and Marans (2004) were conducted in rapidly growing areas at the urban-rural fringe. Policies that attempt to curb the negative impacts of such development are often reactive, late in the planning process, and may not be influencing home buying behavior (Vogt and Marans 2004). Little research has focused on areas where urban development might some day be a concern but where the opportunity still exists to implement policies that are proactive in terms of managing the growth that may occur. This is an important gap because there is some evidence that multiple housing family dwellers exhibit somewhat more tolerance for higher density types of developments than do single family dwellers (Sullivan 1994; Ryan 2002) and that consumer support for cluster or conservation subdivisions is somewhat limited in rapidly growing fringe areas (Vogt and Marans 2004).

Professional land use planning guidelines exist; however, these guidelines recommend that agreement on the meaning of rural character be reached at the community level (Yaro et al. 1988; Heyer 1990; Corser 1994; Balash 1999). Since research has demonstrated that perceptions of rural character vary between different groups in the same community (Sullivan 1994; Ryan 1998, 2002; Jones et al. 2003), achieving consensus will likely involve accepting a range of definitions. Planners disagree among themselves concerning the benefits of such rural preservation techniques as cluster developments and conservation subdivisions (Arendt 1996; Corser 1994). Planners and local residents display divergent preferences for landscape design standards (Clare Cooper Marcus 1990; Hester 1984; Hubbard 1997). Clearly, the patterns of similarities and differences among these groups need to be studied systematically as the results from such studies can inform decisionmakers who are interested in protecting rural character.

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of how local residents perceive and define rural character so that policy-relevant criteria can be developed to protect the qualities of rural landscapes

that are important to people. This study focused on the landscape and residents of six townships in south central Michigan in September of 2004. The townships ranged in size from 1,500-4,000 residents. These areas have experienced some population growth in the last decade; however, much of the private land is still undeveloped. Some residents work locally, including farming, while many more commute to work in nearby cities.

2.0 Methods

A roving focus group methodology was employed. Six groups of four to five residents (n=26) were transported in a van along a pre-determined route through the townships. During the focus group discussion, residents were asked to point out features of the landscape they felt represented various levels (low to high) of rural character. Residents were also asked to point out features that detracted from the concept of rural character.

Sullivan (1994) found that three elements contributed to perceptions of the urban-rural fringe: (1) farmland that is associated with wooded areas; (2) housing type; and (3) amount and density of trees. Focus group participants were given the opportunity to observe these types of scenes, with one exception. Sullivan's reference to "housing types" included both multiple and single family housing. The rural landscapes that focus group participants experienced did not include multiple family housing. Sullivan also recommended exploring the extent to which the proximity of new housing to existing farming operations brings dissatisfaction from the perspectives of both new residents and farmers. Thus, the study route included locations where focus group participants had the opportunity to comment on homes that were adjacent to farming operations. In addition, focus group participants viewed a broader range of natural resource features not included in previous studies, such as riparian areas, wetlands and ponds.

Residents were chosen using a snowball approach that began with short interviews with key informants (e.g., the township supervisor. The focus group discussions lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and were recorded and transcribed to capture personal definitions of rural character and identify policy-relevant landscape- and development-related variables.

Discussions were recorded with a Sony (ICD-MS515) audio digital recorder which was attached to the ceiling of the van. After the recordings were transcribed, Atlas.ti 5.0 was used to categorize the focus group discussions into distinct thematic areas. Each transcript received two researcher reviews in order to ensure agreement. Landscape views that were the subject of discussion were photographed for future objectives of the research. Residents also filled out a short questionnaire on their demographic history.

3.0 Results

The average age of the 27 focus group participants was 55 years. The majority owned land in the townships and had lived there for 28 years on average. Most had lived in a rural area in southern Michigan for most if not all of their lives.

When examining the transcribed files, three code categories were used to separate the content: “Rural,” meant anything that definitely represented rural character; “Detract,” meant anything that took away from the landscape; and “Conditional,” meant something that the residents could accept as not detracting from the rural landscape if certain conditions were met. The subjects commented on many different natural and cultural features. The features that were discussed most frequently among the six groups included housing, animals, buildings, farms, vegetation, water, community, and sensory features.

Of all the features discussed, housing surfaced most frequently. The residents were sensitive to the development issues they are facing. Depending on the type and location, subdivisions in agricultural areas were viewed either neutrally or negatively. Most residents found cleared lots with new houses built close to the road to be a threat to rural character and preferred housing with vegetative screening. Subjects were disappointed about houses being built in the middle of fields with no surrounding vegetation, especially if that land had previously served for agricultural purposes.

“Chopping up farmland for residential use is not rural...”

New housing hidden by vegetation or topography was more acceptable. The term “cookie-cutter homes” was reoccurring, and referred to identical housing. The subjects did not like “cookie-cutter” homes. Building houses in a row, or close together, was considered a major detraction from the rural landscape. Subdivisions were mentioned frequently and were considered a detractive feature. Modern style housing, groomed yards, and housing on small acreage all were considered to detract from the rural landscape.

“Subdivisions are not rural...”

The rural residents that participated in the focus groups were not overly romantic or naïve about the rural condition. They recognized that some growth was inevitable but were relatively clear about the nature of developments that would and would not detract from rural character. For example, while they felt that subdivisions per se would detract from rural character, a well-designed subdivision with some open space and ample vegetative screening from the road would be acceptable. Subdivisions were considered acceptable as an alternative to having several houses built along the road. Building on larger lots, set back from the road was more acceptable than houses built close to the road.

“Although, I prefer them putting the houses all in a wad like that than stringing them out along the road frontage...”

Manufactured and modular homes were frequently discussed. Most often they were labeled as a detractive feature, but some residents felt that if they were newer and less “trailer-like,” and set on a larger lot, they may fit in to the rural landscape.

Vegetation surrounding single family homes seemed to make the newer housing fit in to the rural landscape. Vegetation was a popular theme in terms of landscaping. Trees were depicted to be important in landscaping and screening of development. Subjects stressed their preference for leaving the natural vegetation and wild growth both in landscaping and along the roadside.

Animals were often discussed in terms of both livestock and wildlife. Seeing and smelling livestock such as chickens, cows, hogs, working horses, and other farm animals seemed imperative to the concept of “rural character.”

“There is some livestock that looks delightfully rural...”

Deer, waterfowl, wild turkeys, woodchucks, buzzards roosting in the trees, and many other forms of wildlife and birds were pointed out as well. Subjects commented that with the coming of development they have noticed less wildlife in these areas. This was considered a major detractor from the rural character. Another interesting point was the amount of car-deer accidents in recent years, maybe due to increased traffic and less deer habitat.

A plethora of buildings were discussed, the most popular being big, red barns. Farmhouses, schoolhouses, and churches were often discussed as positive features. Also, cemeteries were pointed out as symbolic of rural areas.

“...we’ve got a beautiful old church coming up on the left, and a beautiful old red barn on the right...”

Brand new “modern” buildings strip and commercial development, and closed schools and buildings were all features that subjects felt detracted from the rural landscape.

Southern Michigan has many rich riparian areas. Water features, including marshes, wetlands, swamps, ponds, and rivers were consistently indicated as significant features in the rural landscape. Not only were these features mentioned for aesthetic purposes, but they were also deemed ecologically important for specific vegetation that provide wildlife and bird habitat. Subjects expressed disapproval for the filling in or draining of these wetland areas.

“...our wetlands are unique, and really set us apart from other areas...”

In southern Michigan, farms are a big part of the rural landscape. Agricultural activities shined through in each

of the focus group discussions. Several farm features were mentioned including farmland and fields, animal pastures, farm equipment, silos, and bales of hay lying out in the field.

“...alright, tractors, silos, cows...this is the epitome of rural...”

The residents revealed many features that weren’t necessarily a physical part of the landscape. There were many discussions about “non-rural” people moving into the area and then complaining about the very things that make that area rural. Half of the groups mentioned something about new residents protesting the rural odors that go hand in hand with farming. To local residents, the rural odors are a “rural” feature...something that is part of rural character.

“seeing and smelling the animals is something that is country...”

Residents also found temporary rural living to be contradictory to the rural atmosphere. For example, focus group participants reacted negatively to people who build a “starter” home on the edge of a corn field, and then sell it and move on a few years later.

Sensory rural features discussed include hearing, seeing, and smelling the animals, both livestock and wildlife; the lack of sounds, the sounds of nature, being able to see the stars, the vivid colors, open space, natural views, rolling hills, and the pattern and order of the farm fields.

“It’s so quiet out here....and the stars....you can always see the stars at night. It’s much different than living in the city.”

Though many different forms of vegetation were mentioned including wildflowers, wetland plants, and vines, trees were the main focus. Trees were extremely important to all of the residents in this study, and in a variety of ways! Building among the trees, instead of cutting them out, was favorable. There was a strong preference for housing built among the natural features. Forests and woodlots were depicted as significant to the rural landscape. Trees growing alongside of the

road, in yards, and in fields arching over crops, or with wildflowers and grasses, were also discussed.

“But, ah, they kept the woods...”

4.0 Discussion

Local residents demonstrated enthusiasm about their local rural setting. The subjects were quite comfortable with the roving focus group methodology and provided meaningful insights and realistic data. Content from the focus group discussions resonates with earlier studies in that the same or similar cultural and natural landscape features were discussed in a qualitative research setting. The subjects went beyond mentioning only physical and cultural characteristics and discussed additional features that accompany life in a rural area involving auditory and olfactory senses.

These data are specific enough to provide guidance at the local level in revising master plans or zoning ordinances to protect rural character. In fact, this study addresses a highly pragmatic planning need (specific and legally-defensible definitions of rural character based on residents' perspectives). For example, this research suggests that, where protection of rural character is a goal, land use plans should stress the importance of old buildings, natural vegetation, open space, wetland areas, and farmland. Conversely, housing in close proximity to the road, identical housing units adjacent to one another, unscreened subdivisions, and commercial development should be minimized. In addition, based on community input, zoning ordinances might be modified to resonate with the interests of the local residents regarding desired setback requirements, lot sizes, and cluster subdivisions with vegetative screening. By understanding common perceptions of rural character, planners and policy makers can plan for and maintain rural landscapes more objectively than in the past.

The results of this study should be interpreted with some caution. These data can only be extrapolated to townships with the same demographic, historical, and landscape criteria as this region is unique both in placement, inhabitants and landscape. The subject sample may not be completely representative of all of the

area residents. As previously stated, most subjects had lived in the study areas for most of their lives. The sample included mostly home- and landowners, and middle- and senior-aged persons. Younger persons and those who had recently moved into the six townships were underrepresented.

4.1 Future Research

Six more focus groups using the same procedures will be completed in 2005. Landscape views that were discussed by previous focus group participants are being photographed. These photos will become part of a survey instrument, which will be mailed to a random sample of township residents in the fall of 2005. The survey data will be used to validate the results of the focus groups and provide further guidance for planning officials. Furthermore, demographic information collected with the photosurvey will be used to stratify the participant sample and test the significance of separate regression models using a policy-capturing or other data clustering approach (Propst and Buhyoff 1980; Kaplan and Kaplan 1989).

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