



COEXISTING AT THE EDGES, MEET THE NEW EXURBAN

By Randall Reid and Evangeline Linkous

How politics, economics, and land use are changing at the urban/rural interface

Driving today from San Francisco to Sacramento, California, or from Washington, D.C., to Charlottesville, Virginia, motorists can observe urban sprawl drastically altering the expanding edges of our urban metropolitan areas where cities and counties interface.

Although subdivisions and other suburban big-box commercial developments

are widespread, the landscapes at the farthest fringes of metropolitan regions are home to equestrian centers, vineyards, and family-friendly agritourism attractions like corn mazes and pony rides.

Just as coffee shops and micro-breweries are the telltale signs of downtown renewal, these consumer-oriented rural amenities are indicators of economic, land use, and sociodemo-

graphic change in areas once dominated by farms and forests.

Local governments, particularly county governments, have long faced challenges related to managing or exercising sustainable stewardship over the urban and rural fringe. These regional challenges include curbing sprawl, protecting open space and farmland, and finding common ground between political interests in a city and its hinterlands.

While these issues remain critical, emerging research points to new land use dynamics and development pat-

terns at the far reaches of metropolitan areas, which will further drive growth into distant suburbs and beyond into “exurbia”—the nearly rural areas at the far edge of cities.

According to the Brookings Institution, “exurban” areas are growing at twice the rate of metropolitan areas overall (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/finding-exurbia-americas-fast-growing-communities-at-the-metropolitan-fringe>). This article explores the trends driving change at the fringe and reviews the strategies that can enhance and preserve the community values and human and natural ecosystems in these unique edge areas.

Seeking the Good Life: Urbanization and “Agrihoods”

A confluence of trends points to new roles for the metropolitan fringe. These changes are one manifestation of global economic restructuring, as developed nations shift from an industrial manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy.

Globalization is also prompting major shifts in the ways industries are organized—economically and spatially—as firms locate different job functions in different locations depending on worker skills and wages. These global shifts lead to localized impacts, many of which play out in the exurbs and rural areas, which were traditionally home to production economies such as forestry, mining, and agriculture.

In many places, these production economy employers are downsizing or shuttering, as land prices rise due to urban sprawl, jobs are relocated internationally, or technology transforms agricultural and business practices. Over the past several decades, for example, food production has largely shifted from small and midsize family farms to large acreage agribusiness, with dramatic resultant changes in the rural landscape.

Similarly, vertical integration and corporate consolidation in the forestry and mining sectors mean a decline in small-scale rural landholdings in favor

of ownership by real estate investment trusts and corporate management organizations (<https://www.fs.fed.us/openspace/fote/index.html>). Under pressure to deliver returns to shareholders and improve corporate fiscal performance, forestry and mining operations are increasingly turning to development.

Although traditional industries are divesting from exurbia, affluent homebuyers are flocking to it in search of rural amenities—forging a shift in exurbia from a landscape of production to a landscape of consumption. These “amenity migrants” are the mobile elite of the service economy, some of whom are electing to locate in culturally rich downtowns, while others choose to live in exurbia, close to nature (<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=93709452>).

Developers are targeting these amenity buyers with new forms of subdivisions featuring recreational trails, natural areas, and other opportunities to enjoy aspects of a rural lifestyle. These “rural by design” prototype communities—to invoke landscape planner and author Randall Arendt—promote healthy lifestyles, environmental conservation, and a connection to agriculture and community-oriented values—together with smart technology and urban design.

Legacy Ranch in Lubbock, Texas, for example, is a horse-friendly community offering one- to five-acre tracts where large animals are permitted (<http://www.legacyranchliving.com/index.html>).

“Agrihoods” are now attracting young professionals, young families, and active retirees. These developments are built around a community-based farm and often offer food- and wellness-based events.

In Palm Springs, California, developers are converting an abandoned golf course into a master-planned community built around an olive tree grove with interspersed hiking trails and community gardens (<http://www.businessinsider.com/agrihoods-golf-communities-millennial-homebuyers-2017-10>).

The decision to live in exurbia may

not always reflect preference. In many areas, homebuyers are “driving till they qualify” for affordable housing at the fringe. Increasingly, commuting times are characterized by race and income disparities.

Although cities have worked to make their urban cores attractive to young adults, new evidence indicates that this demographic is settling in the perimeter of sprawling metropolitan areas. Whether this means they are priced out of urban housing markets or simply want the same natural and recreational amenities attracting homebuyers in general is an open question (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/15/sunday-review/future-suburb-millennials.html?mcubz=1&r=0>; <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joelkotkin/2014/08/04/millennial-boomtowns-where-the-generation-is-clustering-its-not-downtown/#5f61d76258f1>).

The exurbs are attracting more than just new residents. New business technologies and opportunities make them an attractive location for emerging business models.

Business trend analysts indicate that new technologies in driverless cars, 3-D printing, robotics, and logistics are creating a declining cost of distance, freeing individuals from the need to live and work near cities and enabling greater availability of goods and services in the exurbs (<http://www.bain.com/publications/articles/spatial-economics->



the-declining-cost-of-distance.aspx).

The job opportunities fostered by distribution centers and the like are changing the ways communities pursue economic development. Even traditional rural businesses are changing.

Although farms aimed at wholesale markets are on the decline in many areas, small farms with such local and value-added offerings as community-supported agriculture or agritourism are on the rise and thriving. These farms are likely to locate at the fringe, where they can be close to the urban households, farmers markets, and restaurants that represent their customer base.

The shifting economy in rural exurbia can create challenging cultural dynamics. The decline of the traditional rural sector and its impacts on the white working class are reflected in *Hillbilly Elegy*, *The New York Times* best-seller described as one of six books to understand President Trump's election (<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/books/6-books-to-help-understand-trumps-win.html>).

Although the old and new economy may be in conflict in exurbia, there may also be powerful new political alliances. Rural amenity migrants may join with forestry operations or farmers to conserve rural landscapes; urban chefs and farmers markets reach out to rural garden farms for fresh produce enhancing local economies.

Strategies for Urban/Rural Coexistence

County or regional officials have a suite of policy prescriptions to grapple with the processes of change at the metropolitan fringe. One planning solution is to draw a hard line between urban and rural uses; for example, with an urban growth boundary, urban service area provisions, or a greenbelt.

Portland, Oregon, is the poster child for this approach. As mandated under Oregon state law, Portland established a boundary beyond which urban growth may not occur, to protect the area's valued farm and forest lands from sprawl. Every six years, it reviews growth projec-

tions and future land use designations to ensure an appropriate land supply.

Proponents say this approach directs growth to localities, which can yield enhanced urban amenities and efficient

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use of public facilities and services. At the same time, the growth boundary can support a stable farm economy and protected open space in rural areas, especially when complemented by other rural planning provisions such as large-acreage agricultural zoning.

Portland residents and visitors have access to an abundance of fresh, local foods and can travel from the thriving urban core to pastoral farm country or natural recreational areas with relative ease. Some argue, however, that the growth boundary increases housing prices, pushes sprawl into neighboring communities, fails to provide effective planning solutions for small towns and rural communities, and is too restrictive for agricultural landowners.

A more flexible option is the managed-growth strategy, which supports a mix of land conservation and smart development in fringe areas. In this approach, relatively dense development is often located adjacent to protected natural areas or farmland.

Managed growth supports consumer demand for rural amenities, maximizes the economic potential of land adjacent to open space, and allows for innovative new forms of development. Managed-growth tools include clustering, zoning for agricultural preserves, transferring development rights, supporting transit-oriented development nodes, and providing financial incentives to support or protect farm operations.

Compared to a strict urban-rural divide, managed-growth solutions can more readily accommodate environmental amenity subdivisions and small farms that directly serve urban consumers.

Managed-growth plans, however, can also generate land use conflicts, inefficient infrastructure investments, and fragmented open space that is vulnerable to development pressure.

Communities crafting managed-growth solutions might borrow from two landmark metro area plans that foster a degree of permeability between urban development and open space at the fringe. Copenhagen, Denmark's "Finger Plan" dates to 1947 and allows for urban "fingers" of transit-served development interspersed with rural uses and ecological services.

Montgomery County, Maryland's "Wedges and Corridors" plan has stood the test of time. Continuously updated since its 1964 adoption, the plan accommodates protected farmland alongside urban development directed to transportation corridors (<http://journals.sagepub.com.ezproxy.lib.usf.edu/doi/full/10.1177/0885412217726772>).

Perhaps one of the most important things local governments can do to foster a sustainable and thriving urban-rural fringe is to proactively plan for social and economic strength of communities and businesses outside of the urban core.

Although smart-growth policies offer an array of strategies for urban areas, the prescriptions for rural and exurban areas have been limited, for the most part, to land preservation and protection of the natural environment. While these are important, these policies also impose

regulations, property rights restrictions, and other burdens on rural landowners and businesses.

Often, too little attention is paid to such issues related to the community as education, health, and social services or to the economic base, including broadband, workforce development, and appropriate land use regulations that preserve rural integrity.

Would local farmers, for example, benefit from policies that encourage on-site sales? Would improved transit in rural areas support the health and safety of farmworkers while serving the workforce needs of area farms?

Collaborative planning between cities and counties is essential to address the ways rural areas shoulder the burden of providing rural amenities and new housing for the region without reciprocal interest in the challenges these areas face.

Fringe Politics and Urban Perceptions

Strengthening the communities on the exurban fringe cannot be done without consideration of local politics, which are often fueled by the economic development pressures that accompany and influence exurban land use decisions.

These pressures increase in areas, hungry for economic stimulus, that did not benefit from the recent economic recovery. Public administrators with oversight of exurban areas who enforce restrictive land use regulations that disrupt market forces or advocate increased resident engagement related to land use decisions can produce resistance from the vested economic interests seeking to develop exurban lands.

State legislators have also preempted local zoning restrictions with Right-to-Farm legislation in all 50 states to ensure rural residents have protection from nuisance lawsuits and a voice in urban land use impacts on traditional livelihoods (<http://www.wsh-law.com/files/pdf/florida-right-to-farm-act-pp.pdf>).

There is often a subtle or implicit bias that exists among managers and elected officials who perceive exurban

development within their region only through the lens of their own municipal jurisdictional perspectives that are driven by tax-based enhancement.

City managers can mistakenly view adjacent farmland as vacant land that has little value. County administrators may have a broader perspective on exurban issues because they politically represent areas where families have long-standing connections to land or where agriculture and other natural industries are an important part of the economic base.

This dichotomy of perspectives within our own profession leads to city and county conflicts over infrastructure, annexation, and development approvals.

Recognizing the Intrinsic Value of Exurbia

As former local government and county extension officials, we wish to foster awareness of the inherent value of the fringe. Just as estuaries are a critical environmental transition zone, exurbia is often home to fragile natural systems, unique cultural resources, and critical economic systems that are key to preserving the local heritage and authenticity of flourishing metropolitan area. What would Lexington, Kentucky, be without horse farms or Fredericksburg, Texas, without the Hill Country landscape?

There is a rich variety to the resource base that may be present in exurbia. Around the world and in the United States, UNESCO World Heritage sites and the sacred lands of indigenous people are under threat from development (<http://sacredland.org/mississippi-mounds-united-states>).

According to the NatureServe database, of the more than 4,000 imperiled biological species in the continental U.S., 60 percent live within metropolitan areas and half of those in the 35 fastest growing metropolitan areas with more than one million people (http://www.nbcnews.com/id/6814251/ns/us_news-environment/t/groups-urban-sprawl-threatens-species/#.WkuhITdG2M8).

The Civil War Trust lists 25 battlefields that are threatened in the U.S., including

hallowed grounds in such exurban places as Gettysburg in Pennsylvania, Chancellorsville in Virginia, and Spring Hill in Tennessee (<http://shfwire.com/civil-war-battlefields-threatened-sprawl>).

Public administrators would do well to ensure that there is an inventory of assets in rural fringe areas that may be threatened and should be preserved or enhanced. A critical next step is to understand the changing dynamics in rural and exurban areas.

What types of businesses are growing or declining? Where is land being potentially subdivided or sold and can conservation or scenic easements forestall sprawl? Does a managed-growth solution make sense, or are there places where a hard line preventing growth in rural areas must be implemented?

Nilofer Merchant once wrote in *Harvard Business Review*, “Culture trumps strategy every time.” We believe this is true as well for the management of exurban spaces.

It will not be planning tools alone but a culture that values the transitional fringe that will create more sustainable development patterns worldwide. Increased interest in transformative movements like local foods hold promise for a more thoughtful relationship to the unique landscape at the metropolitan edge.

The “city limits” are a political boundary and increasingly less a cultural demarcation. The fringe can be seen not as a dividing line but a key transitional zone to integrate the region—building linkages between the people, businesses, and places that collectively create vital, diverse, and sustainable metro areas. **PM**



RANDALL REID is ICMA Southeast Regional Director, Gainesville, Florida (rreid@icma.org). He

has served six jurisdictions as city or county manager in Ohio, Wyoming, and Florida and is an assistant at the Bob Graham Center for Public Service, University of Florida. **EVANGELINE LINKOUS**, Ph.D., is assistant professor, Urban and Regional Planning, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida (elinkous@usf.edu). She previously served as director, University of Florida Extension, Sarasota County, Florida.