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Nate Engle

*Grand Valley State University*

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## **UNDERSTANDING RURAL SPRAWL: A LOOK AT OSCEOLA COUNTY, MI**

**NATE ENGLE**

*Grand Valley State University*

*The term “sprawl” has been a part of the land use lexicon since the mid-1940s. While it has traditionally been prefixed by the word “urban,” rural sprawl has entered land use vocabulary since the 1970s. Rural sprawl can be understood as a demographic manifestation of conservative America’s rejection of the social and economic movements of the 1960s. Much of this rejection involved chastising urban centers and solidifying political bases in the suburbs. However, like the movement to escape core cities during the 1950s and 60s, the last three decades have seen a shift by many of conservative America’s members to remove themselves further from core cities and even abandoned suburbs that once seemed to them like the ultimate place of freedom, away from liberal ideas and people. Today, sprawl is a notable characteristic of politically conservative northern Michigan. Land division continues in the region at a much more rapid rate in areas outside of cities and villages than it has in previous decades. In Osceola County, MI, rural land parcels have gotten smaller, and this reflects a concerted assault on the remaining open spaces and farm lands in that location by politically conservative elected officials who have neglected to engage in meaningful growth management. In the last three decades much of the county’s open space and farm and forestry lands have been lost to the chopping up of many farms and large parcels to lots that range in size from one to five acres, which are known in the land use field as rural “large lots”. This has adversely impacted natural habitats and productive lands. As the State of Michigan decreases revenue sharing to its counties as a result of the current recession and decline of the auto industry, Osceola County government has had to reduce the level of service provision to its citizens. This is particularly true of the Osceola County Road Commission, which must service more rural residents who have sprawled into areas once primarily inhabited only by large landowners whose housing and building infrastructure was generally far apart.*

### **THE CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT AND THE MYSTIQUE OF RURAL AMERICA**

Thomas Jefferson envisioned a United States where smaller farmers and larger planters would sparsely populate the countryside, engaging in a lifestyle of agrarian self-sufficiency. While modern day conservatives claim Jefferson as one of their own, many have distorted his view of individualism to the extent that living his American dream means owning a lot between roughly one and five acres in location not defined in the limits of a city or suburb and that doesn’t produce anything economical. While Jefferson understood rural living to be one where a producer could stand on his porch and look over vast acreage at the crops and animals he was growing and raising, today’s rural conservative often stands on his porch and gazes over his two or five acre yard, and then gets in his car to commute to the nearest city or suburb to earn a living. The myth of equating a one to five acre lot size with freedom and individualism has resulted in a scenario whereby core cities are decaying, suburbs are either decaying or expanding, and, most notably, rural areas are becoming less *rural*. This last point is precisely what has occurred in Osceola County over the past 30 years.

Since the 1960s, political conservatives have manipulated significant principles of American identity such as individualism and economic self-sufficiency to suggest that these traits can primarily be achieved by people physically moving farther away from urban centers and dispersing into open spaces, forests or near lands in agricultural production, and away from communities and other social networks. Measurements of this movement can be seen by tracking data since the 1970s that demonstrates the century-plus trend toward population growth in cities has reversed in the United States. The conservative political movement gained traction in the 1980s and 90s; it swept into power and implemented policies reducing taxes, regulations, and oversight in many facets of government, including in the land use and environmental protection arenas. The movement was embraced by landowners and developers who seized on the view that government had no authority to interfere in decisions about private property. This “Property rights” mantra has become an organizing principle for many suburban, development, and business interests around the country and around Michigan who view government as an unwelcome influence in their lives. This approach to land use and the actions that have been spawned out of the movement have been detrimental to much of northern Michigan ([www.haverford.edu/publications/spring03/save.htm](http://www.haverford.edu/publications/spring03/save.htm)), evidenced by Michigan’s position as one of the fastest sprawling states in the nation and by its unenviable lead in farmland loss (<http://www.loe.org/shows/shows.htm?programID=97-P13-00013#feature1> ).

### **RURAL SPRAWL AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS**

“Urban” and “suburban” sprawl are terms that have been used and accepted by the land-use community for over half a century. The term “rural” has been syntactically converted to sprawl only in the past few decades. While the term “rural sprawl” doesn’t have a fixed definition, its physical details can generally be agreed upon as low density developments that destroy open space, farmland, or forests, with characteristics such as single housing units and out buildings on large lot sizes (usually between one and five acres) (Lopez & Hynes). This lower density level is much less so than suburbia or urban centers. Rural living usually has limited impact on natural places or involves utilizing the landscape to produce food or to extract natural resources. In any fashion, rural places lack large numbers of people.

Often, rural sprawl manifests itself in one to five acre parcels. Planning and zoning experts agree that five-acre lots quickly chew up valuable agricultural and forest land. While certain landowners benefit from selling their land in small chunks, it drives up all residents’ costs.

“It’s the absolute most expensive development pattern you can build, and it is as bad as it gets from an economic point of view,” says Jeffrey Dorfman, a professor at the University of Georgia’s Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics. “[Five acre rural lot size] is considered the epitome of rural sprawl, and most people consider it the worst thing you can do. It’s not big enough to be rural, and it’s not small enough to be economical.” This type of development increases costs to taxpayers. “You need more roads and a lot more infrastructure. The sheriff’s deputies are driving farther, the school bus....everything costs you more,” he states (Glen Puit. Great Lakes Bulletin News Service, March 3, 2008).

### **THE COSTS OF RURAL SPRAWL**

By its very nature, *rural* sprawl profoundly changes the natural environment more so than *suburban* sprawl because it occurs in areas that are less disturbed by people. Rural sprawl contributes to some extremely problematic conditions such as core city abandonment, destruction of open space, loss of productive farmland, environmental problems, and excess energy use, to name a few (Lopez & Hynes).

As Dorfman points out, rural sprawl exhibits highly diffused development patterns that require significantly more road and utility structure infrastructure per capita than higher density developments located near established centers. The increased amount of infrastructure raises the cost of serving rural residents with road and electricity services. Osceola County Road Commission Manager Cliff Youngs might agree. As a result of attempting to service the ever increasing cost of road maintenance in the County, the Osceola County Road Commission has been forced to take drastic action in recent years. Osceola County's rural sprawl has put greater pressure on the organization to maintain the level service on existing roads, while increasing the number of paved roads. This has been an extreme challenge in the face of declining State of Michigan revenue sharing. The Osceola County Road Commission has been faced with a situation for years trying to reconcile a budget that doesn't grow as fast as the demand for services (Fornoff, Cadillac News, 2007).

The demand for 2-to-10 acre house lots has driven up land prices in rural areas beyond what a farmer or forester can afford to pay. As a result, land prices rise, and farmers and foresters are more likely to sell their land for house lots. This in turn, causes greater fragmenting of the land base, making it more difficult for *remaining* farms and foresters to assemble land to rent or own, and this commonly drives these people out of the business. Newcomers to the countryside that are live in the sprawling lots often have little understanding of the *business* of farming or forestry. The conflicts between producers and these "sprawlers" are well known. Farmers point to crop theft, vandalism, trash dumping, and dogs and children trespassing and harassing livestock as some of the problems they've confronted as land is fragmented. In forested areas, the increase in residents brings those same problems as well as a higher likelihood of fire (Tom Daniels, What to do About Rural Sprawl?). Rural sprawl creates large zones of disturbance, which encompass the land developed for housing, driveways, lawns and gardens. These zones interfere with ecosystem function along a range of trophic levels by interrupting soil and water nutrient levels. Additionally, septic systems are poorly sited and prone to failure. Many poorly sited and functioning septic in a confined area (often a result of rural sprawl) can cause pollution (Bourhill, p.1,19,20).

In economies like those of northern Michigan, tourism and agriculture are large sectors that are vital to livelihoods of area residents. The decision by local governments to allow and promote sprawl by neglecting to manage growth directly contradicts their own efforts to promote and develop outdoor related tourism, agricultural and forestry lands production, and it diminishes the "rural" aspect of living in a *rural* place by steadily increasing the number of houses. As mentioned above, the Midwest is one of the most sprawling regions in the nation, and Michigan is high on the list. In fact, a study conducted by Volker Radeloff shows that the number of housing units in the Midwest (defined as Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, and Iowa) grew by 146% between 1940 and 2000. About one-third of the growth occurred in non-metropolitan counties. Michigan (and Indiana) experienced the highest overall growth with much of it focused in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula (Radeloff). Radeloff makes a point of highlighting that: developing homes directly disturbs habitat and negatively impacts biodiversity through the amount of construction involved, that spread-out rural residents

are completely auto-dependent and are often long-range commuters, and finally, that this puts greater demands on existing roads and increases the demand for *more* and *better* roads. The greater volume of traffic also results in the burning of more fossil fuels (Tom Daniels, 1999).

### OSCEOLA COUNTY-A CASE STUDY

Located in Michigan's northern Lower Peninsula, Osceola County incoherently attempts to promote its agricultural and tourism opportunities, while at the same time taking a politically conservative laissez faire approach to land use regulation. While known for producing milk and Christmas trees, the county is now becoming ground zero for the type of sprawl that land use experts say is so detrimental to rural quality of life, and the agricultural and ecotourism industries.

In greater Osceola County, large-lot (one to five acre) residential development is steadily marching into agricultural areas and undeveloped lands. This process is facilitated by little zoning (the county itself and many of the townships have no zoning to regulate rural lot size), and no zoning (in the case of some of the townships). Dan Massy, the economic development coordinator for Osceola County, spearheads efforts on land use, in addition to his many other duties. The County's lack of commitment to serious land use management and enforcement is evident by the many responsibilities he is charged with. In addition to primary duties as an economic developer, Massy led the effort in the early part of the decade to produce the Osceola County Land Use Plan (OCLUP) by coordinating the county's planning commission with the West Michigan Regional Planning Commission (WMRPC), based in Grand Rapids.

Developing the OCLUP, WMRPC conducted interviews with 36 "key" individuals (plus the Hersey village board) to gather input as a part of a discussion about the county's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. A survey conducted of these individuals found that of 24 people responding to the question, "*What do you feel are the weaknesses of Osceola County,*" 14 (the highest number of any response) stated "*inadequate planning and zoning.*" An additional three responded that ordinances are not enforced. The survey also found that many people are concerned with establishments that recycle mobile homes. These sites are reported to be in very conspicuous locations and they present a very negative visual image to residents, tourists, businesses and others. In addition to the mobile home recycling sites, people are also concerned with poorly maintained mobile homes. Discussing county opportunities, respondents saw township and county planning efforts as the number one opportunity available, followed by the need for realistic regulations/ordinances. WMRPC's analysis concluded that county residents were pleased that the county is undertaking a plan, and that some townships are looking to the future by implementing land use control measures as well.

The need for "balance" was emphasized with respondents recognizing that many residents purposely choose to live in an area where there are fewer regulations. It is clear that respondents to this survey did not unanimously agree on how planning and zoning in Osceola County should be approached, with some viewing regulation as a hindrance to economic growth. It can be implied by the survey that those falling in this column wish to utilize remaining open space in the county for development. Building on the weaknesses and opportunities responses, 25 of 29 respondents to "*What threats do you see in Osceola County's future,*" stated that threats included, "*(1) lack of planning and zoning, (2) uncontrolled growth, (3) conflicts between agricultural and residential, (4) running out of buildable lots with road frontage/starting to feel*

*crowded, and (5) houses built in the middle of fields.*” The WMRPC’s analysis was that respondents recognized that the lack of planning and zoning does not promote community goals (or the creation of goals) and promotes undesirable development that can adversely influence Osceola County’s future. Uncontrolled growth, conflicts between land uses and other related issues were frequently mentioned. Correlating with these threats, the survey also asked participants to identify environmental threats. Responses to this included (1) *potential for pollution of air, lakes and streams by industry, people and livestock*, (2) *fragmentation/loss of agricultural/forest land*, (3) *groundwater concerns*, (4) *depletion of natural resources*, and (5) *zero tolerance for environmental regulations*. WMRPC’s analysis stated that these threats were directly tied to the lack of planning and zoning and that it was clear that the respondents feared losing many of the area’s strengths through misuse of land (Osceola County Land Use Plan, 2002).

WMRPC also conducted “issue identification workshops” with an additional 17 people. After identifying issues, a wider community survey was created with the option for respondents to answer 1) “agree,” 2) “disagree,” and, 3) “neutral” on statements such as 1) “*rural large lot single family housing should be developed*,” 2) “*subdivision style housing should be developed*,” 3) “*multiple family housing should be developed*,” 4) “*mobile home parks should be developed*,” 5) “*commercial uses should be developed outside of cities and villages*,” 6) “*industrial parks should be developed outside of cities and villages*,” 7) “*agriculture should be preserved*,” and 8) “*open space and forested areas should be preserved*.” See Table 1 for responses to the survey.

Looking at the WMRPC analysis and the participant responses, there is clearly an incoherency in how Osceola County residents think about land use. Responding that *rural large-lot single family housing development* is a “neutral” in the eyes of most respondents, and that borderline neutral/disagree statements such as 1) “*subdivision style housing should be developed*,” 2) “*multiple family housing (apartments) should be developed*,” 3) “*mobile home parks should be developed*,” 4) “*commercial uses should be developed outside of cities and villages*,” simply cannot go along with such overwhelmingly “agree” statements such as 1) “*agriculture should be preserved*” and 2) “*open space and forested areas should be preserved*.” The first and second set of responses just listed clearly conflict with each other. Suggesting that development occur outside of cities and villages should be overwhelming “negative” if agriculture and open space is so treasured. Increasing density by developing mobile home parks and subdivision style housing should be highly desired if preserving open space and farmland is valued by respondents. Dense developments—clusters—take up less land. Yet by remaining “neutral” on rural large lot single family housing development and other statements mentioned above, the pattern of losing open space in Osceola County will likely continue at the current or at an increased rate.

Of the multiple WMRPC workshops held in Osceola County, many produced goals such as, 1) *use countywide planning to assist in expanding the employment base with suitable employees*, 2) *use planning and related efforts to identify and preserve the valuable characteristics of Osceola County, such as the aesthetic and agriculture*, 3) *preserve Osceola County’s environment including its watershed and groundwater*, 4) *create a balance between the area’s rural nature and the need for residents to have adequate shopping opportunities*. Evident by the residents’ concerns, the statistical data on the county’s land parcel break-up, and the lack of comprehensive land use plans and enforcement in most of the townships, the actions of certain individuals and

Table 1:

Statements	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
a. Rural “large lot” single family housing should be developed (2.1)	77	72	58
b. Subdivision style housing should be developed (1.8)	51	69	87
c. Multiple family housing (apartments) should be developed (1.8)	54	64	88
d. Second homes (cottages) should be developed (1.9)	29	121	55
e. Mobile home parks should be developed (1.6)	39	45	122
f. Commercial uses should be developed in cities and villages (2.5)	130	54	20
g. Commercial uses should be developed outside of cities and villages (1.9)	64	63	79
h. Industrial parks should be developed in cities and villages (2.3)	117	42	46
i. Industrial parks should be developed outside of cities and villages (2.1)	84	46	73
j. Agriculture should be preserved (2.9)	186	21	5
k. Open space and forested areas should be preserved (2.8)	183	21	8
l. Additional parks should be developed (2.2)	82	80	43
m. Land uses should be guided to reduce conflicts (2.5)	127	53	25

Analysis: In order to interpret the results of this question, a score of three was assigned to each “agree” response, a score of two was assigned to each “neutral” response, and a score of one was assigned to each “disagree” response. These scores were used to calculate a standard score (shown in parentheses) with a perfect “agree” being a score of three, an evenly divided score being a score of two, and a perfect “disagree” score being a score of one.

Osceola County Land Use Plan 2002.

governments in Osceola County are contradicting the very goals spelled out in the Osceola County Land Use Plan.

Perhaps no example better demonstrates this than by the length to which the Osceola County Commission and other locally elected bodies have gone to so that water bottling company Perrier (through its subsidiary Ice Mountain), may drain one of the largest groundwater reservoirs in the county. Allowing ground water that sits under numerous private and public properties to be bottled up so that it may be sold off as a private commodity with profits going to private industry smacks of contempt to towards Osceola County residents and is *exactly* 180 degrees from “*preserving Osceola County’s environment, including its watershed and groundwater.*” County, City of Eart, and neighboring township officials point to job creation as the trade off for this giveaway. A few low wage jobs and a few token donations to parks and schools have been the primary benefits that local communities have seen as their conservative Republican-dominated commissions and boards hand over a resource that is both public and private to private industry in direct contradiction with the goals spelled out in the Osceola County Land Use Plan. This case is notable because it is another example of how the movement approaches land and natural resource management. These elected boards engage in a mindset of any kind of economic growth by any means necessary, including through the promotion of land division. This example, and the examples of weak or no land division regulations in the townships or at the county level begs the question of what purpose Osceola County Land Use Plan really has, other than to satisfy the West Michigan Regional Planning Commission and put Osceola County in a position so that it *may* be eligible from time to time to apply for certain federal funds.

The County's Burdell Township has a lengthy zoning ordinance which addresses many issues associated with growth. It does not, however, detail lot size regulations for rural residential development. In the countywide survey discussed in the above table, 77 respondents "agree" and 72 people responded "neutral" that rural "large lot" single family housing should be developed. Only 58 respondents disagreed with the statement (Burdell Township Zoning Ordinance, 1997). Land use experts like Professor Dorman insist that this is the absolute worst type of development pattern a rural area can engage. Yet Osceola County residents who responded to the survey seem not to be concerned about it, and their elected officials have by and large taken no measures at the township and county levels to curb it. This observation strongly correlates with facts showing the steady division of land and spread of rural sprawl in nearly all Osceola County communities.

Referencing Table 2, from 1980 to 2007, all but one Osceola County township saw its percent change in land parcel numbers increase by double digits. Lincoln Township was the fastest sprawling township during this three decade period, seeing a land parcel number growth rate of 26.46%. In this township, like many of the others, merely walking or driving the streets can easily provide visual evidence to support rural sprawl literature claims that the phenomenon contributes to the destruction of open space, environmental problems, an increased dependence on automobiles, loss of productive farmland, and tensions between residential and rural business (i.e. farming and forestry) uses as human and residential animal populations increase.

One notable way that some Osceola County residents may have inadvertently (or possibly purposely) slowed sprawl in a portion of the county was by refusing to allow an elected Reed City Public Schools Board of Education (packed with conservative Republican activists) build a new high school outside of city limits, in the middle of an open field.

### **A DEFEAT FOR RURAL SPAWL AT THE OSCEOLA COUNTY VOTING BOOTHS**

Schools are often a major part of life in rural communities. Beyond serving solely as a place for academics, community schools often serve to host games, town meetings, festivals and social events. They act as centers that bring small town residents together, and rural residents from outlying townships. Unbelievably, national school construction guidelines undermine efforts to retain local schools by paying homage to the "bigger is better" mentality, which often means that community school districts choose to build *outside* of the very communities that they service and are a part of! The federal government calls for at least 30 acres of land for new schools, plus an additional acre for every 100 students.

For much of the 1990s, the Reed City Public Schools Board of Education submitted proposals to the voters for the construction of a new high school. Each and every time, the proposal involved constructing a new school in a location outside of the current city limits in a vacant field. Board members consistently claimed that taxpayers would be getting a good deal because the land could be acquired cheaply. Finally, after beating their heads against a proverbial wall time and time again, the Board proposed an expansion and remodeling of the existing facility, located *within* the city limits. This proposal *passed* and the Reed City High School remained in a centrally located place relative to most of the rural locations in the district, situated in the heart of the town. Rather than a poster child for "big box" sprawl like neighboring Pine River (in Osceola County) and Big Rapids (in Mecosta County) public school districts, the community school improved upon its existing facilities, which are accessible by foot and bicycle from nearby neighborhoods.

Table 2:

<u>Township/City/Village</u> <u>in Osceola County</u>	1980	1990	2000	2007	<u>% Change in</u> <u>land parcels</u> <u>from 1980-2007</u>	<u>% Change in</u> <u>land parcels</u> <u>from 1980-1990</u>	<u>% Change in</u> <u>land parcels</u> <u>from 1990-2000</u>	<u>% Change in</u> <u>land parcels</u> <u>from 2000-2007</u>
Burdell	1012	1076	1185	1142	12.85%	6.32%	10.13%	-3.63%
Cedar	880	659	1061	1090	23.86%	-25.11%	61.00%	2.73%
Evert	2205	2350	2074	2093	-5.07%	6.58%	-11.74%	0.92%
Highland	773	813	900	968	25.22%	5.17%	10.70%	7.56%
Hartwick	737	765	797	807	9.50%	3.80%	4.18%	1.25%
Hersey	1704	1803	1922	1946	14.20%	5.81%	6.60%	1.25%
Village of Hersey	221	230	246	254	14.93%	4.07%	6.96%	3.25%
LeRoy Township	732	828	946	1026	40.16%	13.11%	14.25%	8.46%
Village of LeRoy	199	198	214	214	7.54%	-0.50%	8.08%	0.00%
Lincoln	1100	*	1334	1391	26.46%	*	*	4.27%
Marion Township	1146	1167	1284	1369	19.46%	1.83%	10.03%	6.62%
Village of Marion	539	528	580	*	7.60% 1980-2000	-2.04%	9.85%	*
Osceola	745	795	874	901	20.94%	6.71%	9.94%	3.09%
Middle Branch	827	865	909	953	15.24%	4.59%	5.09%	4.84%
Richmond	884	933	1074	1102	24.66%	5.54%	15.11%	2.61%
Sherman	709	*	842	867	22.29%	*	*	2.97%
Rose Lake	2057	2159	2281	2281	10.89%	4.96%	5.65%	0.00%
Sylvan	1178	1219	1268	1321	12.14%	3.48%	4.02%	4.18%
Orient	844	905	994	1019	20.74%	7.23%	9.83%	2.52%
City of Evert	878	895	1021	1143	30.18%	1.94%	14.08%	11.95%
Reed City	1091	1166	1337	*	22.59% 1980-2000	6.87%	14.67%	*
Village of Tustin	152	148	156	159	4.60%	-2.63%	5.41%	1.92%

Engle original research

As a result of this improvement, taxpayers saved themselves 1) busing transportation costs for all students that would be otherwise attending high school in the middle of a hay field, 2) costly roads and sewer developments to the green field site (that would have otherwise been necessary), and 3) an array of other hidden costs that come with that type of development. Voters should be applauded for holding off in the face of strong pressure from Board members, vocal politically conservative community members, and those that stood to make money from a rurally located high school until an acceptable proposal was submitted. Much of Reed City's identity and community activity is based around the high school, and this decision provides a continued community-wide anchor for residents in the small town. As Reed City struggles to survive in an era of globalization and in the face of the current economic recession, relocating the school out of town might very well have gutted a community that already faces immense challenges by drawing the population base outside of the city limits.

### COMPARATIVE APPROACHES TO MANAGING SPRAWL

In Lincoln Township and in other parts of northern Michigan, developers, land-use decision makers and other stakeholders still have the opportunity to explore more sustainable residential development models before the remaining open space vanishes forever. Other areas of the country outside of Michigan seem to be far ahead of communities in the Great Lakes State when it comes to understanding the unsustainability and negative externalities of rural sprawl. One way that people are moving forward to conserve rural areas across the nation is by having their governments buy open space. In Minnesota's Washington County, voters have recently passed an additional \$20million in taxes to preserve open space. In Montana, open space bonds were adopted in Ravalli and Missoula counties in the amount of \$10million each. In the autumn of

2006, voters approved 104 of the 130 land conservation initiatives that were proposed on city, county, and state ballots throughout the nation. The total amount authorized during this single election was over \$5.7 billion nationwide (Fedgazette. Douglas Clement. Wide Open Spaces).

Development rights schemes are a technique used by local planning authorities to facilitate the purchase of development potential from land owners in “sending areas” to property owners in “receiving areas” who wish to increase the allowable development potential of their property. Development rights purchases can involve local government buying the right from a land owner to develop a piece of property. Once purchased, the government body can retire the development rights and down-zone selected properties. Unlike development rights *transfers*, development rights *purchases* result in a net decrease of the total development potential in a region.

A “conservation suburb” is another approach to mitigating rural sprawl. Conservation suburbs are relatively dense clustering of new residences on a small portion of a lot, and the conservation of the majority of surrounding natural features through the use of open space covenants or park dedications. This approach is being used in Washtenaw County’s Hamburg Township. A study conducted at the development where this occurred showed that residents there were generally very satisfied with the natural view, easy access to nature and the neighborhood interaction that the trails through the nearby preserved open space facilitated. The conservation suburbs allow for the preservation of larger areas of undeveloped land than what is typically preserved in traditional subdivision developments. In rural areas with small villages or towns, clustering high density development around town centers may provide benefits such as the stimulation of depressed rural economies and the creation of residences located to accessible, highly-valued rural settings (Bourhill, p.25-28). The University of Georgia’s Land Use Studies Initiative found that conservation design (another term for conservation suburbs, but more encompassing) had both economical and lifestyle benefits. Publishing *The Economics of Growth, Sprawl, and Land Use Decisions*, the Land Use Studies Initiative found that: (1) in rural areas, the [sprawl] approach increased property values of land within a quarter mile of it, (2) it increased perceived quality of life, (3) sprawling development is expensive for local governments, and (4) the same growth (when channeled into smaller areas) saved farmland, the environment, and money (Great Lakes Bulletin News Service, March 3, 2008).

Some locales have preferential tax assessment measures on agricultural land in order to preserve it. These measures usually assess farm acreage at its value when used for production rather than at its potential market value if converted to commercial or a category used for subdividing it for residential units. In this way, farms have lower tax bills and have less pressure to sell if there is nearby sprawl. Unfortunately, few programs like this, if any, exist solely for open space. Not every rural parcel that is *not* developed is used for agricultural production. Part of mitigating rural sprawl also involves preserving land that isn’t used for anything.

Looking to the American west, land-use scholars and citizens alike regularly point to Oregon as a model state for successfully managing economic growth and preservation. Political leadership in Oregon at the state level in the 1970s produced a statewide body called the Land Conservation and Development Commission to oversee planning and growth efforts. This body eventually produced 14 statewide planning goals, and allowed voters in areas like Portland to create metropolitan governments that approached development and conservation in a regional way. Established in 1963, Oregon voters amended land use regulations in the 1980s so that land in the “Exclusive Farm Use” zoning category was restricted from being broken up into new parcels smaller than 80 acres and prohibited new dwellings to be built if they weren’t able to be tied to proven farm income. Portland’s urban growth boundary was conceived primarily to

protect farmlands from speculation and development, and for the most part it has done so. By concentrating infill development in places already “built” or urbanized, density, high quality public transportation, walkable communities, and other quality of life factors have increased. Such a rigid boundary may or may not be feasible in Osceola County or Lincoln Township, but creating more targeted growth boundaries through legislation at the local government level may very well be manageable and effective as state leadership has in recent decades and currently lacks any real interest in providing a framework for land management (Harvey & Works, p.386, and <http://www.oregon.gov/LCD/history.shtml>).

Internationally, France has land use policies that preserve agricultural land in order to maintain the visual character of the working rural landscapes in the Ile-de-France near Paris. Scholar Nan-Fairbrother provides insight into English thought about the rural countryside, citing studies showing the English are developing a growing awareness that rural working landscapes form a type of visual and common property worthy of protection and preservation. This has been reflected in their planning frameworks (Harvey & Works, p.384).

### **RURAL RESIDENT PREFERENCES**

Researchers have found that those who live in large-lot semi-rural or rural areas generally share a strong environmental ethic and a desire to preserve open space. A visual preference survey of urban fringe development in Michigan in 1994 showed that respondents, regardless of the residential settings in which they lived, favored “farm” and “forest” landscapes, then “farmhouses,” followed by large-lot residential developments and multi-family complexes. A survey of landowners administered by Michigan State University’s Institute for Public Policy and Social Research in the Huron River Watershed (an area not totally unlike Osceola County or other parts of northern Michigan), provided a snapshot of that location’s landowners’ understanding of land use. At the time, in the year 2000, the watershed was considered to be a rural area experiencing development pressure. Of the 50% of landowners responding to the survey, 83% rated “quality of life” as being “very important,” followed by 69% rating “environmental protection” and 66% rating “protection of animals and plants” as being very important. Nearly half (48%) of the respondents said that they “definitely” believed “that rural land should be protected from urban development” while an additional 39% “somewhat” believed that this should be the case. Younger landowners, those with smaller parcels of land, and female landowners responded that they were more likely to be supportive of protecting rural land than older landowners, landowners with larger parcels, and male landowners. Forty-two percent of the landowners “strongly agreed” and an additional 25% “mildly agreed” that “there is too much emphasis on short-term economic goals in land-use planning in Michigan.” To the statement, “People who wish to develop rural land should be free to do so,” 12% “strongly agreed,” 20% “mildly agreed,” 12% were “unsure,” 28% “mildly disagreed” and 29% “strongly disagreed” with the statement. Fifty percent of the landowners responded that they either strongly or mildly agreed that “local government regulations promote development of rural land.” Such a telling survey provides valuable insight into the interests and desires of landowners in rural Michigan. A survey similar to this might prove useful for Lincoln Township and/or Osceola County officials so that they might effectively gauge the desire for certain (or any) planning or land use management measures that taxpayers may have (Angela Mertig, p.1-2).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Idealized in American culture, particularly by the modern conservative movement, the choice to live in rural places has accelerated due to changes in the economy (primarily the shift from manufacturing to service-based industries), technological advances, the decline of the forestry and agricultural industries as percentages of the economy, and because of relatively cheap land prices. All of these factors have driven the phenomenon in northern Michigan. Adding to these, seasonal and retirement homes have accounted for significant housing development in that region of the state as well (Radeloff, p. 795).

To be sure, while those forces have tended to push sprawl, rural sprawl doesn't just happen. Individual decisions that have fed the event of land division are results of local, state and federal policies—or lack thereof. At the federal level, the trend in recent decades to push homeownership and continue incentives for sprawl such as federal mortgage income deduction policies has helped lay the groundwork for it in locations that haven't otherwise been prepared to manage it. The state of Michigan has been one of these places. As a “Home Rule” state, Michigan grants planning and land use management authority primarily to its local governments, rather than provide clear and concise strategies at the state level for focusing growth and balancing it with conservation. Michigan also has weak subdivision controls acts. Local governments in Osceola County have the responsibility to manage growth within their boundaries. They have been slow to react and haven't created any strong or enforceable planning and zoning frameworks to stop rural sprawl. While making some headway in the form of ordinance developments, ordinances regulating lot size in Osceola County townships either simply do not exist or allow *exactly* the kind of sprawling building that land use experts point to as costly, environmentally damaging, and destructive to rural quality of life.

A “hands-off” approach to growth management, such as what is found in much of northern Michigan and certainly in Osceola County townships, is flawed because large-lot rural-residential development causes increased per capita environmental damage and higher infrastructure costs (Bourhill). Once developed, natural landscapes are difficult or impossible to recover. In order for places to be rural, and for the characteristics of real rural places to be enjoyed, healthy urban centers must compliment rural spaces by providing attractive, safe, and livable locations where people want to be. Strong cities—especially small cities and villages—will draw people and help keep rural places rural and less populated, thus allowing those locations to function as such. In addition to healthy cities, another important way that rural places can remain so is by electing strong political leadership that embraces comprehensive planning and growth management methods. Strong political leaders can assist in guiding rural communities through periods of development pressure so that the quality of life that rural places offer can be enjoyed by the populations that already inhabit them, and those populations from urban centers that wish to recreate there.

In addition to gathering resident preferential information in a survey similar to the data gathered in Huron River Watershed case, more fully understanding why people are migrating to Lincoln Township and to Osceola County would be useful for that county and its local governments if they ever decide to get serious and attempt to determine how to most effectively provide a balance between growth for the township and a high quality of life for its residents and landowners. Such a survey could also assist in determining how the availability of specifically desired community services affected migrants' decisions, and how their socioeconomic characteristics affected their parcel purchase size for those who have bought pieces of land. Collecting this information would also be useful for Lincoln Township officials in calculating

how to best reach and best educate its population on planning and land management affairs, should they ever decide to pursue any serious growth management initiatives (Goodwin, Jr. Doeksen, Oehrtman).

One of the most common ways rural communities have traditionally reconciled the perceived need to facilitate development and the desire to retain some rural landscape characteristics is by the use of zoning bylaws that mandate relatively large minimum lot sizes. As a planning tool, large-lot minimum zoning is flawed (as are “no zoning” policies) because it does not provide a long-term solution to balancing the opposing forces of those who want more development and those who seek the preservation of the countryside. Viable alternatives to large minimum lot size regulations *do* exist for rural communities that wish to protect rural community characteristics. Community or master plans that would be appropriate for Lincoln Township or Osceola County might have sections that cover: An overall community vision; a regional context statement; a floodplain development permit area; secondary housing; road network planning; development permit areas; development approval information areas; “house-keeping” amendments; amenity zoning; light industrial and commercial areas; senior housing (if appropriate); youth facilities; parks and green space; agricultural land reserve issues; and land alteration issues (for example, soil removing, tree-cutting, etc...) (Bourhill, p.3, 5, 24). Osceola County’s land use plan has some of these features, but negates any serious effort to deal with lot size or the rural sprawl that the county is experiencing in any meaningful way. If certain County residents and elected leaders have the intentions to increase their tax base, populations, and housing stock numbers without regulation so that they become suburbs of surrounding communities, they are certainly making a strong go of it. According to respondent concerns outlined in the OCLUP survey, businesses located in the residential areas of townships are also a growing concern. In addition to the tensions brought about by residential and farm/forestry stakeholders in the area, many residential areas are now supporting light manufacturing industries, such as machine shops, that detract from an area’s residential (and/or rural) nature. Without zoning restrictions, this type of development breeds further development near it, and again pushes more people further out into even more rural areas, increasing the built environment’s footprint. Neither the County nor many of the local townships have addressed this issue in the way that they are legally empowered to do so—through zoning and ordinance development (OCLUP, pg. 71).

The primary way to slow the remaining farmland and open space in Osceola County is for residents to vote out the political conservative leadership of their elected boards and to utilize the existing future land use plans at both the county level and in the townships, to regulate lot size in a fashion that will cluster future development, and encourage continued agricultural production and open space conservation.

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## Student Profile: Nate Engle



Nate Engle graduated cum laude from SPNA in 2009. He earned a BS in Urban and Regional Planning from Michigan State University in 2003. During his time at MSU, Engle worked in Michigan Democratic politics and for state government in the office of Governor Jennifer Granholm. After four years abroad working in land-based industries in Madagascar, Engle chose to pursue his Master's degree at GVSU's School of Public, Nonprofit, and Health Administration because of the unique position the university finds itself in as a (traditionally) "local" institution that is quickly emerging as a world-class center of scholarship. Strong and accessible faculty also contributed to Engle's decision to study at SPNA. Engle enjoyed all of his coursework at GVSU, but several courses stood out as necessary to the process of developing critical thinking skills and because of their importance in the field of public administration. Those included the Public Management Seminar (taught by Professor Greg Cline), Metropolitan Politics and Administration (taught by Professor Rich Jelier) and Organizational Theory (taught by Al Lyons). After completing the MPA, Engle joined the West Michigan-based not-for-profit Christian Reformed World Relief Committee to open up and manage the organization's international development and disaster relief operations in Southern Sudan. Within the field of public administration, Engle's academic interests include comparative public administration and land-use issues in Michigan.