



Urban Sprawl Shows Rural-Urban Interdependence New Governance Needed to Bridge Rural-Urban Divide

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Rose Olfert and Mark Partridge*
and the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation

Statistics Canada just released a report showing that expanding urban population and related development continue to convert farmland to non-farm uses. While the report indicates that Canada continues to have sufficient farmland, this transition does illustrate the high degree of mutual dependence between rural and urban Canada and the need for better cooperation and governance structures for the 21st Century. Indeed, ongoing urban sprawl presents unique challenges to both urban and rural Canada, but it also creates opportunities for better policy and for improved quality life for all Canadians.

We are members of a national team of scholars and practitioners developing a project on this issue in partnership with the Canadian Rural Revitalization foundation (see www.crrf.ca) and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.

Urban sprawl creates well-documented problems for cities including not fully realizing the impact-costs of development (e.g., costs of new infrastructure), environmental degradation, and greater congestion. In addition, rural land owners may hold-up urban developers, in which the unintended consequence is that development proceeds exactly where it should not. Better planning and cooperation with their rural counterparts can greatly ease the problems for urban communities, while at the same time adequately compensating affected rural stakeholders. Issues surrounding zoning, green spaces, transportation, and environmental protection can only be optimally addressed when both urban and rural stakeholders are at the table as equal partners. To be sure, urban sprawl is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of how rural and urban Canada are interdependent. Rural population serves as both a

*Both authors are affiliated with the Department of Agriculture Economics at the University of Saskatchewan and with the Canada Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF). Partridge is also the Canada Research Chair in the New Rural Economy. Olfert can be contacted at 306-966-4023 and at rose.olfert@usask.ca and Partridge can be reached at 306-966-4037 and mark.partridge@usask.ca.

source of labour supply and a market for urban-based products, while urban communities are the source of economic livelihood for rural commuters.

Metro-adjacent and exurban rural communities are asking “what’s in it for them?” What do they have to gain from broader-based governance structures and enhanced cooperation with their urban neighbours? Isn’t it the uncontrolled growth of cities that is causing the problem in the first place?

First, current *laissez faire* development approaches can ruin rural communities and their quality of life. Without better governance and consultation, the well-being of rural stakeholders will be at the mercy of random development. Second, urban economic vitality often represents the best opportunity to save *rural* communities. Most rural communities lack the critical mass to sustain and attract economic development without help from their nearby region and urban neighbours. Thus, development on the urban fringe—so-called “edge cities”—represents great opportunities for rural households to gain viable employment through commuting. These jobs will allow numerous rural families to remain in their communities, which then generates sufficient activity for nearby stores and businesses to remain viable. We all know that once a small community loses its bank, grocery store, or gas station, it is only a matter of time before the community goes with them. For a substantial part of the rural population, rural vitality is necessarily linked to urban vitality.

What then is required for rural and urban communities to realize their mutual gains? First, both must recognize their mutual dependence and the need to treat each other as partners, not adversaries. This requires a new governance structure that allows smaller communities to solve their unique issues at the community level, while allowing cooperation for issues that have broader regional implications. It will require that old suspicions and jealousies be put aside for the broader welfare of urban and rural constituencies. There must be a recognition that historic governance arrangements are inadequate and have increasingly contributed to growing economic disparities and unnecessary cultural divisions between rural and urban Canadians.

We are hopeful that the emerging federal community’s agenda will provide needed resources and the impetus for more rural/urban cooperation. Without cooperation, there is a greater risk that these new federal funds will do little to solve the long-run inter-related infrastructure deficit for rural and urban stakeholders. Recognition of these realities will generate more consultation and a better outcome for both rural and urban Canada. Therefore, while urban sprawl presents challenges for cities and rural communities, current circumstances also create opportunities for everyone’s benefit.