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Title

Rural Character in the Hilltowns: Understanding Attitudes About Planning in the Context of Attachment to Place

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Abstract

This research examines the perceptions and attitudes of residents in five rural communities located in the Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts: Ashfield, Chesterfield, Conway, Goshen, and Williamsburg. The research aims to explore the divide between local residents' strongly held support for private property rights and a concomitant desire to maintain the qualities that contribute to the social, ecological, and aesthetic experience of a rural town, including a viable farm and forest economy. Previous research in the same project utilized mailed, written surveys. In this case, in-depth, in-person interviews were conducted with ten residents of the study area in order to complement the breadth of information gleaned from these earlier studies.

The research goal was to inform planning efforts that strive to balance the preservation of rural character with growth and change. Questions were asked to ascertain the individual's connection to the rural community, including length of residency, occupation, and other demographic variables. Further questions were posed to learn how participants felt that landowner rights to develop property and government intervention to preserve land could be effectively balanced.

Results showed that landowners' desire to retain their property rights remains in conflict with their wish to see their communities remain rural in the face of new development. Medium-term residents may be the most motivated group to get involved in ways to balance landscape change and development with a need to preserve town character. According to study participants, local governments should focus their efforts on voluntary, cooperative measures. Such measures should ideally minimize bureaucracy and maximize a multi-jurisdictional approach in considering a variety of techniques to resolve tough land-use conflicts. Local land trusts emerged as the best-positioned entity to forge cooperative ventures with farmers, landowners, and others in protecting the places of greatest value to those who live and work in the rural landscape. The need for education and communication was vitally expressed. This study sheds new light on the different nuanced and sometimes conflicting attitudes about preserving the rural landscape, but also offers hope for solutions based on collaborations between local governments, land trusts, and local residents.

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