PERCEPTIONS OF ENVIRONMENT AND LAND POLICIES BY URBAN FRINGE DWELLERS [1]

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ABSTRACT. Ten years after the imposition of province-wide controls on the conversion of agricultural land to other uses, more than 100 residents of Montreal's rural-urban fringe were interviewed. The sample was taken in an attractive region, bordering on Oka mountain, which has seen considerable development in recent years. It was hypothesized that farmers and urbanists would differ in rurality values and hence in perception of development and land use policies. Results indicate widespread support for current policies and few perceptual and attitudinal differences among the various groups of residents except where self-interests dominate. Problems of questionnaire design and nonattitudes are discussed.

A widespread concern has been the loss of significant amounts of the best agricultural land to urbanization within swaths of territory of unstable and sometimes antagonistic land ownership referred to as the rural-urban fringe. In Quebec, as in several other provinces of Canada, solutions have been sought through centralised mandatory control (Furuseth and Pierce 1982). Some ten years ago Quebec adopted a law which removed decisions on the conversion of agricultural land from the interplay of local interest groups within municipalities and placed control in the hands of an administrative tribunal (Glenn 1985).

The Act, which placed an immediate freeze on land conversions, was highly controversial at its inception (Gazette 1978a; 1978b; 1981; 1984). Perusse (1981) noted not only controversy over the right to sell land for residences, but also conflicting opinions on the impact of the regulations on land values and a possible shift in local tax burdens. A question arises as to how the people directly involved, that is to say living in the rural-urban fringe, view the law today. Presumably one's evaluation of the law is related to perceptions of the impact of development, which in turn are related to attitudes toward rural living. This paper proposes to explore these relationships by presenting results of a questionnaire survey of inhabitants in a segment of Montreal's rural-urban fringe. The plan of the study is to first discuss the relationship of a particular evaluation, of land use controls in this study, to more general attitudes, then to outline the structure and setting of the survey. In the later discussion of the survey results, particular attention will be given to the methodology of questionnaire surveys of attitudes.

Perceptions of Fringe Dwellers

Several writers have surveyed fringe dwellers and elicited their views on further development in the locality (Hyslop and Russwurm 1981; Joseph and Smit 1981; Seabrooke 1981; Smit and Flaherty 1981). The questionnaires have been designed to examine: 1) perceived advantages and disadvantages of the location, 2) rural values and problems of further development, and 3) degree of support for various policies controlling the pace and nature of development.

A particular focus of this research has been interest in the extent to which incompatiblity of land use is manifest in the social sphere. The hobby farmers and non-farm populations are viewed as urbanists bringing a different perspective to bear in the local social and political milieu. In fact, Bunce (1981), and rural dwellers (Observer

[1] Thanks are extended to all students who participated in the field camp of Geog. 369 in May 1988. It was their effort and enthusiasm which made this study possible.

1990) have suggested that the prevailing rural sentiment of actual and potential exurban dwellers gives rise to a rurality differing from that of the indigenous farming population. These urbanists may even promote further urban encroachment by making it increasing difficult for farming residents to carry on their traditional activies.

The empirical analyses do not, however, lend much support to these hypotheses. Seabrooke (1981) surveyed full-time, part-time, and hobby farmers in a township of Eastern Ontario and generally found no inter-group differences in evaluation of the locality, rural values, and development policies except for some obvious cases where particular self-interests impacted. Interestingly enough, the statistically significant stronger preference of hobby farmers for a "more varied landscape" appears to support Bunce's (1981) notion of the rurality concept of urbanists. Hyslop and Russwurm (1981) also found few significant inter-group differences in their survey of another Ontario township, though support for policies which would encourage more people to enter the area was somewhat higher among part-time and hobby farmers than it was among full-time farmers. Finally, Joseph and Smit (1981) surveyed preferences for municipal services among farmers, non-farmers and villagers. They found no differences except that non-farmers placed more emphasis on winter clearing of roads.

One of the main problems with these empirical perception studies, according to Smit and Flaherty (1981), is vagueness over the concept of attitude. They adopted the Fishbein model of decomposing attitude into belief and evaluation. In examining attitudes toward selected aspects of development they divided each question into belief about the likehood of the impact and evaluation of desirability of that change. Nevertheless, again there were no significant differences between groups of farmers, non-farmers and villagers; though there was considerable variability among individual respondents in beliefs and evaluations of development.

These analyses can be synthesized into an argument which relates perceptions toward three aspects of the rural-urban fringe. The following schematic summarizes the argument:

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  Attitude toward              Evaluation of          Evaluation
local environment ---- > recent development ---> of policies
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The more strongly a rural value is held, the more likely that that person will emphasize the negative aspects of development and favour restrictive policies. This model formed the structure around which a questionnaire exploring all three aspects was constructed, and administered to various classes of residents in the rural-urban fringe.

Empirical Analysis and Results

There was rapid urbanisation in the Montreal region during the 1960s and 1970s, leading to the loss of significant amounts of rich agricultural land. By 1981 only 48% of the rich land remained in agricultural use; 20% was urbanized and 32% was neither urbanised nor used for agriculture (Environment Canada 1989). It was that pressure, particularly the pressure of land speculation, that led the Quebec Government to impose the Agricultural Land Protection Act at the very end of 1978.

The Act established an administrative tribunal to designate and control conversions to non-agricultural uses of land in protected zones. The commission, where possible works in conjunction with local municipalities to designate these zones whilst still leaving the municipalities land for some 20 years of anticipated urban expansion. Owners of existing residential lots in the protected zone were permitted to construct single family residences. Today, most of the consultation and approval of conversions is between the commission and the regional planning units, the MRCs, which were created in 1979

(Glenn 1985). Though the contribution of the legislation remains controversial, the conversion of land from agriculture in the Montreal area did slow down in the 1980s. This was partly due to government support for agriculture, [2] but more can be attributed to a dampening of the speculative pressures. In Quebec conversion of agricultural land in 1981-86 was only 36% of that of 1976-81, whereas in Ontario it was 76%. Slow growth plus the legislation reduced these pressures. Despite dire warnings in the early years from developers (Gazette 1981), there is no definitive evidence of land price increases (Gazette 1985; Jauron and Stanek 1984). It is well to remember the argument of the commission chairman that there was already ample land for building in the unprotected zones when the legislation came into force, and consequently there was no reason for it to generate higher land prices (Gazette 1981).

The survey was conducted in two municipalities on the northwest of the Montreal urbanized area (Figure 1). St. Eustache is an urbanized municipality with a population of 32000 in 1986 whereas St. Joseph is more rural with a population of under 3000 persons. The northwestern part of these municipalities largely consists of dairy and horse farms, horticulture and apple orchards, and is designated as being in the protected zone. In response to Montreal's expansion both areas experienced accelerated growth in the 1970s, and the pace of development continued into the next decade in the case of St. Joseph.[3]

The plan called for an extensive interviewing design rather than a few intensive interviews. Interviews were to be done by a large group of inexperienced undergraduates and there was no time to train the teams. Consequently, the questionnaire had to be short and simple, though I did encourage the interviewers to probe and ask supplementary questions in some places. The questionnaire focused on: 1) seeking basic attributes of the respondent and the dwelling, 2) eliciting belief in the presence of environmental attributes in the local area and their degree of importance to the respondent, 3) exploring beliefs about manifestations of various aspects of recent development in the area, and 4) an evaluation of agricultural land protection policies. The sample was a doorstep interview of all households along selected rural roads with ribbon development and mixed land uses (Figure 1). In my judgement, the sampling practices did not result in any biases, though the interviewing of other adults when the working head of household was absent is a practice which is of some concern.

Out of the total sample, more than 30% were either full-time farmers or urbanists, defined as all who were not not engaged in farming. Hobby farmers and part-time farmers were too few for meaningful analysis. [4] Results point to widespread support for current policies of the commission. Only 10 respondents disagreed. Three of the latter elaborated on their reasons and cited a personal interest in buying or selling land for residential purposes. Admittedly, some supporters of the regulations only gave qualified approval, complaining that the law was either too rigid or too lax. [5] With further probing by expert interviewers that number would likely have been higher.

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[2] In the Agricultural Land Protection Act there was provision for lower taxes for farmers and for a land bank to enable farmers to acquire land at minimum prices.

[3] The actual numbers are small. Net gains in occupied private dwellings were 250 in 1971-1980 and 185 in 1981-1986.

[4] Part-time farmers were defined as having 89% of their income or less from farming, and having blue collar jobs outside of farming; hobby farmers as having 1 + acres of land, 10-50% of their income from farming, and holding white collar jobs.

[5] The commission appears to have trod a fine line between these opposing views. In recent years, out of 41 requests in St. Joseph and 45 in St. Eustache for land conversions, usually into residences, the commission has approved 20 and 22, respectively.

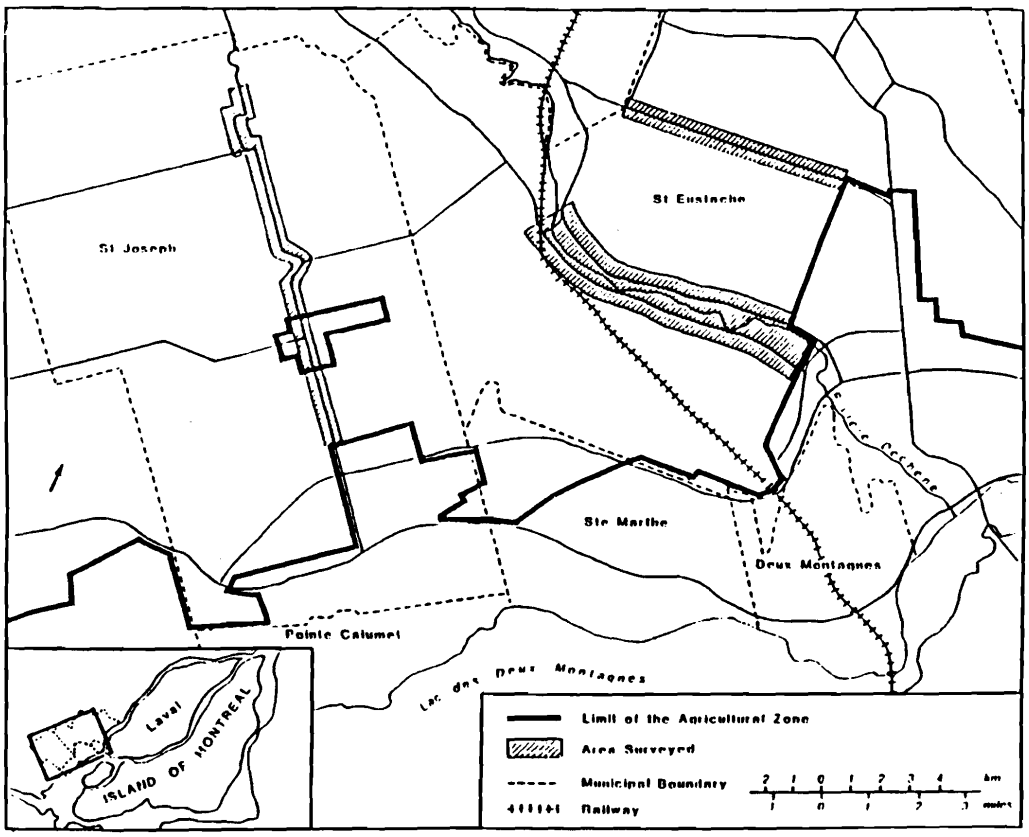

Fig.1 THE STUDY AREA

Table 1. Selected Responses to Environment Aspects: Percentage of Persons who Responded

Aspects of the Local Area	Advantage	Very Important
Good environment	95	92
Good for raising children	76	78
Promotes privacy	84	85
Good community atmosphere	55	53
Low property taxes	56	71
	Disadvantage	**Very Important**
Odours and noise of farming	18	14
Distance to services	26	52
Distance to work	17	76
Winter road clearance	3	80

This widespread consensus among the groups extended into perceptions of the environment. Most respondents regarded the 'good' environment aspects which were cited as being present in the area, and the cited 'bad' aspects as absent (Table 1). Furthermore these aspects of the environments were usually evaluated as being very important to the respondent. This high level of geneneral satisfaction with the local area is not unusual (Beesley 1988, 142). After all, most people are living in the area by choice. Interestingly, the lower support for tax advantages supports Beesley's finding that the satisfaction consensus is weakest for explicit, easily measureable, economic aspects. There are significant differences between urbanists and farmers on taxes and distance to work. As expected, these aspects are more important to urbanists and they are more prone to stress the advantage of taxes and the disadvantage of the journey to work.

A factor in the high degree of satisfaction with the local area could be the large number of respondents in the farming and urbanist groups who came from the local area. In fact the term urbanist for the non-farming group is a misnomer; many of them are more akin to the villagers in the study by Joseph and Smit (1981). This common background does not explain the consensus views on the local environment and the legislation. Cross-tabulations were run between groups of persons from urban areas and from rural areas. There are no significant differences.

Table 2. Responses to Impact of Development: Percentage of Persons who Responded

	Definitely Yes	Probably Yes	Probably No	Definitely No
Kept down taxes	20	24	33	23
Raised land prices	37	29	20	14
Complaints-odour/noise	3	4	46	47
Damage to farmers	7	6	38	50
Improved services				
- garbage	22	19	35	25
- snow removal	23	18	35	25
- schools	23	17	34	27
- local business (St . Joseph only)	21	21	38	19

Though there is a consensus on values of the local environment, there is disagreement on the impacts of recent development (Table 2). Whilst residents are agreed that the coexistence of residential devlopment and farming has not exasperated the incidence of complaints or of damage, they disagree on the extent to which development has had beneficial impacts on local taxes and services, and has affected land prices. The lack of consensus on these issues is partly due to significant differences in the perceptions of urbanists and farmers. The former are more likely to claim higher land prices whereas the latter are more adamant that development has done nothing for local schools. The key differentiating factor, however, is the municipality of residence, or rather degree of development.

From the responses, I formed a summation index which measures the extent to which respondents stressed the positive or the negative aspects of development. Respondents were then classed into two groups: positive and negative. A Chi-square test of urbanists

and farmers yielded a significant difference at the 5 percent level, with the former being more pro-development. Further analysis, however, revealed that this difference was only true of St. Eustache residents. I suspect that the greater development in that area may have reached a threshold above which farmers are very aware of the negative impacts of development on their operations.

Discussion and Conclusions

My results do not support the hypothesis that differing attitudes toward the local environment affect perceptions of development and of protective legislation. Instead, there appears to be widespread support for the legislation and satisfaction with the local environment as being a good place to live. Divergence of views is confined to the perceived impacts of recent development in the area.

Nonetheless, credence in these results depends on the extent to which they are indicators of meaningful attitudes and are not random or ephemeral responses. The latter could arise from either instrument error or from nonattitudes on the part of respondents. In addressing these concerns I propose to follow Smith's framework (Smith 1983, p. 217) and focus upon attributes of: 1) respondents, 2) the questions, and 3) the issues examined.

Persons of limited education and low partisan activity are less likely to hold consistent attitudes. Though I suspect that the large number in the sample who were middle-aged or older and who came from the local area fit this pattern, their long association with the area could promote a stable solid interest in local affairs, including the environment.

Questions designed to evoke firm attitudes should be close to everyday life, coherent, easily understood and not demand information beyond the knowledge of respondents (Smith 1983, p. 218). I consider that most questions fulfilled these criteria, but some, such as one concerning the presence of a 'good environment', were fuzzy. It must be admitted, nonetheless, that the questions on the local environment failed to elict views on "pretty rural landscapes" as opposed to a "working rural landscape". A simple question on odours and noise of farming was inadequate as a discriminator of rurality values.

A crucial question on attitude towards the law protecting agricultural land was deliberately non-specific as to context and instrument of the law. Though respondents may be unclear on these matters, it is highly unlikely that they knew nothing of government regulations restricting conversions of agricultural land. In fact, the MRC had just completed a land use plan for the region which had required public hearings before forwarding the plan to the provincial government for approval.

The main problem with the results lies in the issues addressed. Responses to issues which are not salient, important, and central to the respondent are likely to be inconsistent and lacking in meaning. Unlike the study by Smit and Flaherty (1981) there was no pretest to determine which issues were salient. Furthermore, doorstep interviewing does not allow for reflective, thoughtful responses.

Though the consensus on attributes of the local environment may be suspect, I do not consider that it indicates problems of instrument error or of nonattitudes. It is meaningful in that more encompassing attitudes toward life provide frameworks for particular areas of concern. Coherence and happiness demands satisfaction with choice of residence and continual satisfaction as long as relocation is not feasible. In this survey newcomers as well as longtime residents expressed satisfaction with their environment.

With regard to the perceived impacts of development and the protective legislation, responses may have less meaning and tend to reflect nonattitudes. The consensus on the law could arise from a positive response being interpreted as socially desirable. There was no such guideline for responses to impacts of development: hence the variabilty of the responses. Only the few motivated by self-interest or offering qualifying comments on their responses may have firm attitudes toward the legislation.

Nonattitudes toward the legislation and the impacts of development are, nevertheless, indicative of no perceived crisis in local development. Residents accept the limited changes in their environment and presumably get on with other areas of their life. After all, they are the winners in the sense that they reside in an attractive area. The losers are the potential residents, barred from entry by controls and monetary considerations. As long as the latter are unorganised there is no pressure to change the regulations except from the few with explicit interests such as developers and local officials desirous of expanding their tax base. The principle of centralized mandatory control does not appear to be in dispute. Yet, this passivity is fragile because rapid expansion combined with soaring land prices, such as occurred in Toronto in the 1980s, could generate pressure to expand rapidly the land designated for future urbanisation.

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