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How Do We Keep Rural America Rural?

by Neal Peirce

BRIDGEWATER, N.H. — With a classic glacial lake, steep mountainsides and grand vistas, the area around my family’s summer home draws visitors and would-be new residents like a magnet. The visioning statements that surrounding towns have adopted place high value on land stewardship and retaining a rural lifestyle.

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But what do the towns’ actual zoning statutes call for? Overwhelmingly, they focus on suburban-style one- and two-acre lots, highly popular in recent years. And 68 percent of the watershed is technically buildable.

So what’s to be done? A new Watershed Master Plan by the Newfound Lake Region Association, backed up by scientific analysis and polling of residents by nearby Plymouth State University, is designed to open a clear public dialogue and help towns resolve the tough development choices they face.

The Newfound area’s growth dilemma isn’t mentioned in “Putting Smart Growth to Work in Rural Communities” — a report released last month by the International City/County Management Association under an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. But it’s typical of the challenge so many rural American communities feel today: How to keep a rural quality of life, preserve our landscapes, sustain our small towns and cities, even while positioning ourselves for better jobs and family futures?

Rural America varies greatly, with towns and farms, mining communities, prairies, forests, rangelands covering thousands of square miles nationwide. But it’s also the outer suburban edge communities, plus second home and retirement concentrations, not to mention the “gateway” communities near our coastlines and national parks.

But from all sorts of rural communities, states Matthew Dalbey, a chief author of the new report, questions have rolled in — “We’re different from big cities and suburbs; how can we put ‘smart

growth’ to work to stay rural, to preserve our quality of life, but still develop?”

First, the report advises, support your legacy — the rural landscape you have today — by keeping working lands (farms, forests, mines) viable and by conserving natural lands.

Second, help existing communities by preserving and investing in such historic mainstays as small-town Main Streets.

Third, create “great new places” — neighborhoods and communities so attractive that young people won’t want to leave.

The sad truth is that much rural development steers straight away from those directions. Instead of conserving working lands, it lets many be chopped up for exurban sprawl housing. Rather than undergirding Main Streets, towns and counties have welcomed — under pressure from national chains and tax-hungry local officials — collections of WalMarts and auto parks, hamburger and fried chicken joints, usually spread along sign-glutted roadways through once-placid farm and forestland.

Concurrently, the decades-long decline of small family farms and the rise of corporate farms have cost jobs and threatened the very existence of many small towns. Yet as the stores and services once focused on Main Streets spread out across the landscape, the costs for roads and utilities escalate, town treasuries get pinched, and resources for long-term planning run thin.

So what’s the “smart growth” alternative? Focus first, the new report urges, on a community’s “heart” — a vibrant, walkable Main Street and compact, “neighborly” residential neighborhoods around it. Encourage local businesses and rebuild on underutilized close-in lots. And if there’s pressure for residential development outside of town, try to cluster it rather than allow large-lot single family subdivisions.

How about the familiar argument — “It’s my property and I can do with it as I please”? Even on land that seemingly has no controls, Dalbey notes, there’s influence — public investment, state tax laws, or county-level rules on subdivisions. The report suggests a raft of balancing tools, including “right to farm” policies, conservation easements, purchase of development rights, and valuing land for taxation at its current use (for farming or forestry, for example) rather than at its purported “highest market

value.”

The key to making all this happen seems to be found in shared community vision exercises that present clear alternative future growth paths for citizens and elected officials to debate and choose.

But how to popularize a land conserving rural future? The new answer is food. In 1970, there were 340 farmers’ markets in the U.S.; by 2006, there were over 4,300. “Buy local” campaigns help to market locally grown products and reinforce the message of rural land conservation. Now “agritourism” is flourishing, with visitors drawn to stay in farm bed-and-breakfasts and lend a hand in the farm work. Agritourism revenues have risen above \$550 million nationwide, the Agriculture Department reports.

Back at Newfound Lake, there’s growing community pride in Walker’s Farm, our prime supplier of a bevy of seasonal vegetables, fruits and flowers. Walker’s business is booming. But just as important, the farm, set in a stunningly picturesque New England valley, reminds us, native and visitor, of our roots — and hopes.

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