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Why People Are Moving to Suburbia (and Beyond): Examining the Pull Factor in the Fox Valley

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Abstract

Communities across the United States are growing and changing at an unprecedented pace. The Fox Valley of Wisconsin is no exception to the rapid population growth and development that often occurs in an unplanned manner and evokes terms like "sprawl" and "leapfrog construction." The rapid suburban, exurban, and rural evolution is fueled not only by broad economic factors but also localized characteristics that push residents from the city and pull residents to suburbia. This article describes research that investigated the pull factors in six suburban Fox Valley, Wisconsin communities and discusses resulting implications for Extension programming.

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Background

Overview

"Urban sprawl," "low-density construction," "leapfrog development," and related terms that describe the often haphazard pattern of suburban, exurban, and rural development are no longer voiced by a handful of planning and community development professionals. Increasingly, citizens, elected officials, and communities across the United States are vocalizing their unhappiness with the maze of unmanaged development and the resulting negative externalities. From a broad perspective, our overall booming economy and concurrent low interest rates, some of the lowest real farm incomes in recent times, and agriculture demographics are at the root of the development binge. On a more localized level, additional factors that attract newcomers to the fringe and nudge homeowners from the city are at play.

These characteristics, commonly referred to as "push" and "pull" factors, can have significant localized impacts. Often the *right* side of the tracks will flourish, while the *wrong* side will falter. Poor schools, high crime rates, and declining services push those that can afford to escape the city to the fringes. Lower taxes, cheaper land, bigger homes, subsidized transportation systems, and less restrictive land use regulations have all been proposed as factors that pull homeowners out of the city. In the Fox Valley of Wisconsin, the exodus to suburbia has begun, thus prompting the question: "Why are people moving to the suburbs and beyond?"

Fox Valley Trends

The Fox Valley is located in northeastern Wisconsin, along the banks of the Fox River and Lake Winnebago. It encompasses four counties, Brown, Outagamie, Winnebago, and Fond du Lac, and is

home to the well established, medium-size cities (ranging in population from 42,000 to 103,000) of Fond du Lac, Oshkosh, Appleton, and Green Bay. These cities have witnessed modest population growth of 12% or less throughout the decade of the nineties. (The 12% growth rate does not include the prison population housed at the Oshkosh Corrections facility or the mentally disadvantaged housed in the Winnebago Mental Health facility.)

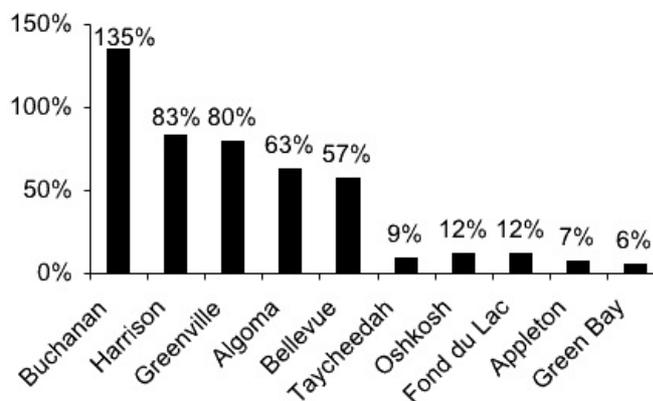
The population of the outlying suburbs and exurbs has expanded much more rapidly during the same time period, growing as much as 135% (U.S. Census, 2000). A suburb is an area with an established population and community services that is immediately adjacent to a traditional urban center with a central city. An exurb is similar to a suburb except that it is not adjacent to the urban center and is a relatively new phenomenon resulting from the continued movement of people from the central city. Table 1 shows population growth in the six suburbs included in the study (Greenville, Harrison, Buchanan, Algoma, Taycheedah, and Bellevue). Figure 1 illustrates growth differences between the communities studied and the adjacent urban areas.

Table 1.
Study Area Population Change: 1990-2000

	1990	2000	Numeric Change	Percent Change
Town of Buchanan	2,484	5,827	3,343	135%
Town of Harrison	3,195	5,756	2,561	83%
Town of Greenville	3,806	6,844	3,038	80%
Town of Algoma	3,492	5,702	2,210	63%
Town of Bellevue	7,541	11,828	4,287	57%
Town of Taycheedah	3,061	3,666	283	9%
Source: U.S. Census, 2000				

Figure 1.

Percent Population Change Comparison between Suburbs Studied and Adjacent Urban Areas
(Source: U.S. Census, 2000)



Until recently, these communities did little or no planning, and growth management was not a strong consideration. This created the potential for negative transportation, environmental, social, and fiscal impacts. One example of such impact is the loss of productive farmland. From 1990-1997, over 36,000 acres of farmland were converted out of agricultural use in the four-county Fox Valley area (UW-Extension/Madison, 1999). Almost 15,000 homes, hundreds of commercial and industrial buildings, and miles of highway have replaced the tractor.

A second example is the income shift being witnessed. From 1993-2000, nominal median family incomes grew 39% in urban areas, 45% in suburban areas, and 52% in rural areas (Table 2). For the purposes of this research, urban areas were defined as the central cities, suburban areas were defined as adjacent unincorporated towns, and the remaining unincorporated towns were treated

as rural areas. In 2000, the average suburban income in the Fox Valley was \$55,909, while the state average was \$40,570 (Wisconsin Department of Revenue, 2000).

Ironically, the highest percentage increase during the 7-year period was in the rural area, which is home to a struggling farm economy. It can be deduced that this trend is a result of the booming rural housing market and the relatively high-income non-farm residents inhabiting the new homes. The income shift and anecdotal concentration of wealthy and low-income residents raise questions regarding social impact.

Table 2.
Fox Valley Median Family Income Change: 1993-1999
(nominal dollars)

	1993	1999	Percent Change
Urban	29,161	40,401	39%
Suburban	38,492	55,909	45%
Rural	28,204	42,937	52%
State Average	29,078	40,570	40%
Source: Wisconsin Department of Revenue			

Program Development

The University of Wisconsin-Extension currently funds a 5-year project called the Fox Valley Urban Initiative that targets improving understanding of urban issues, raising awareness of Extension programming, and reaching out to new audiences in the four-county region. The fact that clientele were concerned with the obviously apparent movement of a major portion of the populous from the urban areas prompted University of Wisconsin-Extension to fund this research in order to:

1. Provide information that educators could use as part of current land use, comprehensive planning, and related programming and
2. Help determine impacts, if any, on future Extension programming direction.

The primary purpose of the former objective was to identify the aforementioned pull factors. A secondary research question addressed the civic involvement level of new residents.

A mixture of mail and telephone survey methodology using the Dillman Method was used to obtain the opinions of residents in the spring of 2000 (Dillman, 1978). A total of 3,200 surveys were sent to households in the towns of Bellevue, Harrison, Buchanan, Algoma, and Greenville. One thousand eight hundred ninety-six surveys were returned, producing a 59% mail survey response rate. Households receiving mail surveys were randomly selected from a municipal tax and household list provided by the Town Clerks. Previous experience with mail surveys in the town of Taycheedah led researchers to survey 200 households by telephone. Survey respondents were randomly chosen from the phone directory. The more than 2,000 responses garnered a confidence interval of 95% and a 5% sampling error.

The suburbs studied were chosen using multiple criteria. From a broad perspective, Fox Valley Urban Initiative project funding influenced researchers to choose at least one community from each of the four counties and focus any remaining research efforts in the Oshkosh or Appleton areas. Specifically, suburbs were eligible to be chosen if they were unincorporated and had a population under 10,000. Researchers felt that unincorporated suburbs over 10,000 and incorporated city or village suburbs boast too many characteristics of the adjacent urban central city. From the suburbs meeting these criteria, the fastest growing communities were chosen based on Wisconsin Department of Administration population projections (Wisconsin Department of Administration, 1993).

Results & Discussion

Survey results are placed into three categories: home tenure, pull factors, and civic involvement level.

Home Tenure

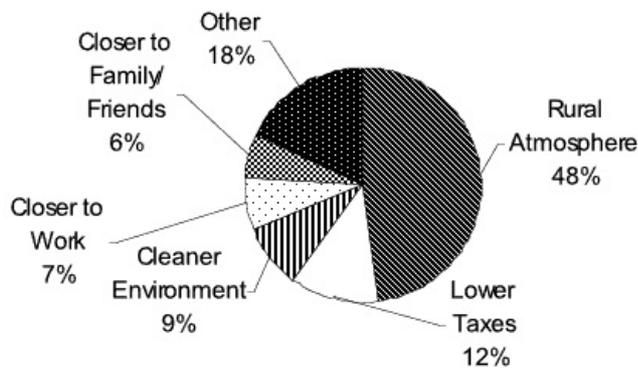
The research reveals three important findings. First, two-thirds (68%) of respondents lived in their current residence less than 10 years. This corroborates the commonly held real estate notion that people move quite often, owning each home approximately only 7 years. Yet despite the disposition to relocate, almost one-fifth (16%) had lived in their previous community over 21 years. This suggests that some extraordinary factors, be they push or pull, influenced relatively relocation-averse people to move.

The study reveals 64% of respondents moved from a neighboring urban community. This suggests that the "relocation-shed" is rather small and dispels any argument that the increase in new suburban residents is due entirely to an influx of out-of-region newcomers. In fact, a majority of the new suburban residents appear to be partaking in an "escape the city" exodus, similar to the out-migration that major U.S. cities experienced in the 1960s.

Pull Factors

In the survey, respondents were asked to rate the importance of a set of possible pull factors in their decision to move to the suburban community. The data suggests five primary reasons for moving (Figure 2). Almost half (48%) of respondents identified a more rural atmosphere as being the most important reason. Lower taxes (12%) and a cleaner environment (9%) ranked second and third, respectively. Closer to family and friends, ranking fifth, was the most important reason for 6% of respondents. The only primary reason not related to an urban exodus was to be closer to work (7%), which ranked fourth, suggesting some out-of-region newcomers did relocate to the suburbs being researched. Surprisingly, less government and better schools did not rank as primary pull factors, suggesting local urban schools and governments of the Fox Valley are fairing well in the eyes of the public.

Figure 2.
Pull Factors by Percent of Respondents Ranking Most Important



Additionally, two open-ended questions that relate to pull factors were asked. The first inquired, "what most affects sense of community?" in the respondent's new community. Five hundred seventy-five responses were subjectively categorized (an important caveat). Almost half of the respondents (45%) mentioned friendliness. Eight percent noted rural atmosphere, and 7% stated community activities, which might indicate an increased need for rural neighborhood and community development initiatives. Isolation from others unlike themselves was also an important factor (6%). Representative isolation comments received include "neighbors of similar backgrounds, values, and ages," "no minorities," and "everyone in neighborhood owns home-not renters as in our previous area."

For those respondents answering that the new community was a good place to raise children, a second question inquired why they thought this was the case. Six hundred responses were subjectively categorized. Safety, rural atmosphere, and schools were top reasons, mentioned by 21%, 16%, and 14% of respondents, respectively. Isolation-based comments were again frequently mentioned (by 12%).

Community Participation

Community participation was analyzed on both a passive and active level. From a passive level, respondents were asked:

1. To compare personal relationships between their old and new community, and
2. Whether or not they knew at least eight neighbors. Regarding the latter question, the respondents answering yes ranged from 53% in Buchanan and Harrison to 87% in Taycheedah.

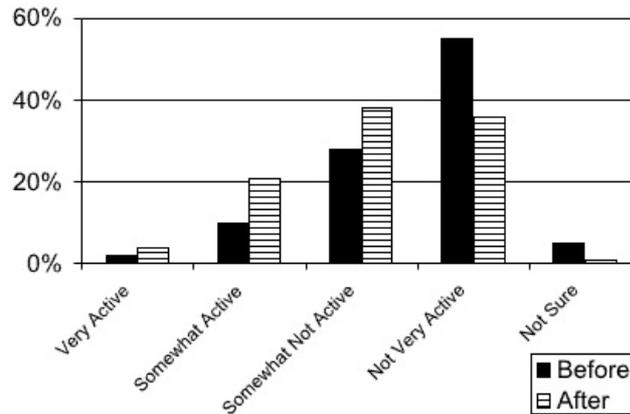
Interestingly, in reacting to the research during Extension programs, community officials feel the percentage of respondents answering yes is inversely related to lot size and income. Investigating this proposal was, however, beyond the scope of this research.

As for relationship comparison, 34% of respondents feel closer to their neighbors in their new community versus their old community, 31% feel about the same, and 26% do not feel as close. The high percentage of respondents feeling closer or about the same is surprising when the

relatively low population density, automobile-dependent nature, and large lot size of suburban and exurban areas are considered. That is, one would expect less opportunity for interaction. On the other hand, if the suburbs and exurbs are becoming isolated pockets of affluence, as alluded to by some respondents, and people are moving to be closer to family and friends (#5 pull factor), more commonalities might exist, thereby explaining the result.

From an active level, respondents were asked to rate their civic involvement before and after relocation. Several interesting results can be observed. First, in five of the six communities surveyed, the percentage of respondents stating that they were not very active in their community decreased from 55% before relocation to 36% after. Second, the percentage rating themselves as very active or somewhat active more than doubled after the move, from 11% to 23%. These results are not consistent with the common proposal that new suburbanites are apathetic and too busy to be actively engaged in their community. In fact, respondents appear to desire to become citizens and not just residents.

Figure 3.
Comparison of Civic Involvement Before and After Relocation



In Bellevue, however, respondents reported a decreased level of involvement. Almost 55% said they were very active before their move, while only 37% stated this after moving to the suburbs. Additionally, the percentage of respondents reporting they were somewhat not active or not very active increased 5%. Bellevue's results are more consistent with the common suburban stereotype. Supporting this stereotype is the fact that Bellevue was the only individual community that identified lower taxes as the top pull factor. The increase in civic involvement in all but one of the communities might again be explained by the fact that a pool of people with common interests, similar incomes, and children of like ages are living in the suburbs.

Community Implications

The Fox Valley, much like the rest of the United States, is growing and changing, more so in suburban, exurban, and rural areas. The population growth and development evolution are rarely planned and often unmanaged. The resulting maze of sprawl can potentially be responsible for many externalities that have serious implications for many community-based professionals, especially Extension faculty and staff.

Sprawling development has been linked to increased traffic congestion, which can have serious social and environmental impacts (Dunphy, 1996). Natural resources are also potentially degraded by the low-density housing that decreases contiguous tracts of wildlife habitat, negatively affects stormwater runoff and groundwater recharge, and paves over fertile soils. The rural atmosphere and country aesthetics are slowly eroded away as new homes grow instead of corn and soybeans.

And, contrary to the popular belief of many policy makers, all tax base is not beneficial. In fact, numerous research studies show that on average residential development is not a boon to fiscal health but is responsible for a net loss due to a higher demand for services than is paid for in taxes (American Farmland Trust, 2000; Minnesota Department of Agriculture, 1999; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999).

The study reported here reveals that respondents are being pulled out of the urban area by several primary suburban characteristics, including a rural atmosphere, low taxes, and a clean environment. This presents a paradox for citizens, local governments, and Extension practitioners. The primary characteristics attracting newcomers are precisely the assets that are destroyed at the hands of the new residents.

In addition to the aforementioned paradox, Extension professionals in small to medium size urban areas will increasingly be asked to address educational needs pertaining to social concerns that have plagued larger urban areas in post-war America. The seeds of a "we and they" syndrome are apparent as suburban and rural incomes grow faster than urban, creating concerns of concentrated pockets of wealth and poverty. Associated issues like crime and poor or inequitable urban educational investment inevitably could surface. Moreover, our research reveals social isolation is disturbingly a reason for moving out of the city, albeit currently a small one. Sheltering

oneself and children from the perceived or actual ills of the city is, however, only a temporary fix that could feed a dysfunctional society and generation of youngsters.

The isolation factor and, more likely, resulting land use policies, could also increase the difficulty of the already complicated task of placing multi-family, elderly, and affordable housing in a community. The NIMBY (not in my backyard) syndrome, originally coined in reference to people's dislike of actual or perceived environmental hazards being placed near their homes, has spread to the housing field.

Finally, a new environmental injustice could become apparent in the new millennium. Whereas the term "environmental injustice" currently refers to placement of existing environmental hazards in poor or minority communities, the new environmental injustice involves regional pollution caused by sprawling residents that affects everyone. Suburbanites drive farther, require more pavement to be laid, and slowly cause the localized disappearance of rural landscapes. The negative externalities affect everyone, including the citizen who has chosen to live in the city. Moreover, the city dweller must pay (in taxes) the same for county or regional based services (e.g., police, fire, school bus) as the suburban resident, yet the suburban dweller costs the government more to service. Fiscal injustice may well become a commonplace 21st century community issue.

Extension Programming Implications

Our research identifies that a suburban paradox exists, which finds newcomers negatively affecting many of the community characteristics that initially attracted them to suburbia. Three of the top five reasons for moving to suburbia, rural atmosphere, lower taxes, and clean environment, can all be negatively affected by the typical suburban development. This provides a plethora of education opportunities for community development and natural resource Extension educators.

The priority need is to increase suburban policymakers' understanding that a paradox exists. Established findings in community development, economics, planning, and natural resource literature connect typical suburban development rates, patterns, etc., with the aforementioned negative externalities. Extension educators can use our research combined with those findings to help local elected and appointed officials understand the existing situation in and/or potential problems on the horizon for their communities.

Once an understanding is developed, the next step is to empower communities to address the situation. A number of community development tools ranging from limiting or managing development to designing growth to be more environmentally friendly and aesthetically pleasing are available to preserve the clean environment, low taxes, and rural atmosphere. Comprehensive planning, conservation subdivision design, stormwater management, and environmental corridor easements are just a few of these tools.

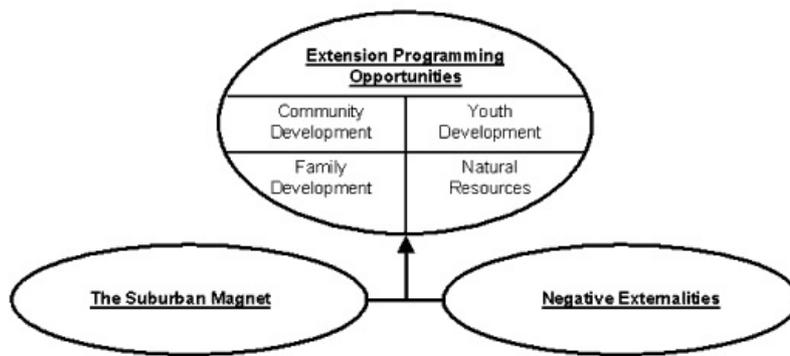
Beyond the community development and natural resource fields within Extension, our findings, particularly income distribution and the desire to isolate, indicate the need for youth and family development education initiatives. As parents move their children into suburbia, there is the potential for youth to become detached from urban amenities, culture, and peoples. Youth development educators might consider programs that attempt integration of rural, exurban, suburban, and urban youth. From the policy side, youth development educators might choose to have a role in helping school officials understand and address the potential for urban disinvestment in education that could result from a transfer of wealth to the urban and suburban areas.

The seeds of urban decay that have flowered in larger cities might also be sowed in small and medium size urban areas like the Fox Valley. If allowed to flourish, the loss of family role models and other mentors in the central city might create the demand for family-based leadership development programs and enhancement of the already effective financial and food and nutrition programs. On a more positive note, a number of families moving into a new suburban situation will be presented with a set of unknowns that family development educators are equipped to address.

We believe the most interesting implication for Extension is the opportunity that suburban migration provides for interdisciplinary programming. The strong connection among the community development, natural resource, youth, and family development fields is apparent when one considers the seemingly harmless movement of a large number of affluent people to the suburbs (Figure 4). We feel two of the most promising potential initiatives include suburban neighborhood development and youth based planning/environmental education.

Figure 4.

Relationship Between Extension Programming and Suburban Migration



An unexpected research finding revealed an increased desire to become involved in the community when people moved to the suburbs. Community, youth, and family development educators can take advantage of this energy to begin neighborhood based programs, potentially including formation of neighborhood associations, which can be used as a central tool to address current and future education needs.

For many community development educators who are programming in comprehensive planning or teaching any topic that involves land use, it is apparent that value shifts are needed before much learning takes place and, consequently, large strides are made. Altering values is a Herculean and maybe even impossible task. Rather than apply all of the land use education energy to adults, a potentially more effective strategy for long term outcomes is youth-based comprehensive planning education.

In conclusion, a broad array of push and pull factors combined with lack of community preparedness is resulting in growth and change that could negatively affect the characteristics that initially draw people to communities. The challenge for Extension is to educate communities about how to avoid unplanned, haphazard growth and address the youth and family development needs of the new demographic in medium and small urban areas. It appears that suburban residents are willing to become involved in the community, which creates an environment ripe for Extension initiatives.

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