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ALTERNATIVES FOR RURAL TOWNS IN THE 1970's\*\*

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Rural development is one of the current "hot" political topics. Nearly every speech of Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz includes references to the importance of rural development and the role that the small towns in rural America may have in obtaining a more balanced population distribution.

The rural development bills passed by the Senate and the House of Representatives attest to the political importance of this topic. Likewise, the flood of literature and conferences on the topic underline the concern of many groups (1,4,6). Lectures such as that presented at the Graduate School of the U. S. Department of Agriculture in November and December 1970 are additional demonstration of the importance of this topic as is this seminar (3,5,8).

Much of the literature deals with the concept of growth centers, growth poles, growth nodules or functional economic areas. Depending upon the authority selected this may be a town from 5,500 to as large as 250,000. Much concern and attention has and will be given to those towns designated as growth centers, regardless of the definition. However, these are not the only towns in

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rural America, in fact, more than 90 percent of the towns in the 25 counties of southern Illinois have a population of less than 5,500 and only 2.5 percent of the towns in the region have a population of more than 10,000. What is the future of the 181 towns of less than 5,500 population in southern Illinois--to say nothing of the thousands of such rural communities across the nation? What alternatives do they face?

Before looking into the future we may be well served to review the development and need for the small towns that dot the rural American countryside. The development of population centers in the United States has been largely a function of geography. The physical location of harbors, rivers and lakes has done much to determine the major population centers in our country. As these centers grew, overland transportation expanded to connect them and the intersections of the roads and railroads created a second set of communities. As agriculture moved West and the frontier was settled the need for rural communities to meet the demands of the farmers and ranchers of this nation grew and towns developed to serve the rural population within a half days ride by horse and buggy. Today, this last set of towns comprises a major portion of the small communities in rural America that are declining.

One must be careful regarding statements about the small rural towns of America, for like the family farm, apple pie and motherhood, they rate high in the values held by the American population, both urban and rural. Yet, if we are to realistically face the problems of many of the small rural communities we must recognize that the economic needs for their existence have largely disappeared. Modern technology including rapid transportation, telephone service, and radio and television communication have pushed the size of area a single town can serve far beyond the confines of "ol dobbin." Likewise, the political need for many of the countyseat towns has vanished. However, because of the inflexibility of the political structure in rural America, many of these towns remain solely because of the political infeasibility of moving their functions. I expect that in the years to come this life maintenance system may be removed from many of our small countyseat towns.

There are at least three strategies that the small rural community can adopt during the 1970's. These would include inaction, trying to grow, and planned aging.

Let's consider these alternatives in order:

Inaction will be the alternative of many rural towns. This lack of action will result in the town not adopting one of the positive strategies.

Because of the advances in transportation during the last fifty years the farm family that gets into the car to go to "town" will drive the extra five or ten minutes to go to a more progressive and larger community rather than stop at the local rural town. The larger community will provide many additional services which the modern rural family needs such as complete financial services, a large furniture store, and one or two machinery dealers and farm suppliers, to say nothing of health care services, entertainment and clothing stores that feature fashions other than blue denim.

Decline and deterioration will most likely face the small town merchant whose town by default has adopted the passive approach. I am reminded of a conversation a small town merchant had with an ag economist who was interested in the problems of the small rural community. Asked what he would do if his business started to decline he answered, "I would lay off some of my hired help." This attitude of self interest by small town merchants clearly indicates the future of such a small community. If a declining business reduces its hired help it can most likely expect further declines.

Rural development and growth is probably a more attractive alternative. However, a rural community must critically examine itself to see if this is a realistic

alternative. In my opinion too many regional development commissions view this as the only alternative for a community regardless of its situation. Too frequently these organizations measure success by the dollar value of the grants they are able to secure, regardless of their implications. As Under Secretary of Agriculture Campbell told a group in Colorado this spring, "First they (local people and planners) must realize that every crossroad and rural hamlet cannot be developed" (2).

Assuming that growth is the alternative a community wishes to adopt, what options do they have? Again it will depend upon the individual situation; however, I would suggest that several options are possible including:

(1) rural residence for commuters to growth centers and/or metropolitan areas, (2) individual development of a new economic base, (3) multicomunity cooperation in developing a new economic base.

Rural communities within commuting distance of growth centers and metropolitan areas may be wise to try to "sell themselves" as commuter towns. To do this, however, they must make themselves more attractive than other residence alternatives open to the man working in a metropolitan area or growth center. Large lots, plentiful parks, good utilities, zoning for protection of home and/or rental investment, good attitude, good schools and churches, shopping centers, minimal air and noise pollution, good streets,

golf courses, swimming pools, and other recreational alternatives, and perhaps public transportation to the growth center or metropolitan area would all be assets. Development and planning should then concentrate on these qualities and not be centered on attracting industry.

A second growth option is for the small rural town to "go it alone" in developing an industrial base. It is essential that such a community take an inventory of its resources and then try to match these with industries who demand these resources. This approach is to be preferred to the "shotgun" tactic of trying to get any industry. Water, raw materials, labor force, building sites or factory facilities, transportation, utilities, etc. will need to be considered. If an inventory of this type can be developed and an industry found which closely matches the supplies of resources, the probability of community growth is greatly enhanced. Retirement centers are one alternative being exploited by some communities as a new industrial base. It appears to me that the small rural community would certainly have some advantages for this type of facility, especially for citizens with rural backgrounds.

A third growth option is that of multicomunity cooperation in building a strong economic base. Four small communities each with their own industrial park and part-time public relations and development officer can make a

much better showing by combining their resources. Barriers to such cooperation are strong, this I will quickly admit, but for survival and growth of all, participation in this approach may be more effective in attracting new industry. It's hard to forget the football losses and pranks of the neighboring community people; but for the sake of growth, local pride must be subordinated for joint development. In addition to growth and development activities joint cooperation in utilities maintenance, servicing, billing, taxing, and other activities may net real savings to each of the cooperating communities. Likewise, other administrative functions could be undertaken jointly perhaps a single full-time manager of four small communities could do a better job than four part-time managers.

The third alternative open to a rural community is planned decline. This alternative will probably be rejected a priori by most rural communities; however, it is one that should be considered. If a small community does not have the opportunity to grow either through the "bedroom community" option or the development of an industrial base, this alternative may appear more attractive than that of inactivity. However, like the athlete who has been a champion it is very difficult to retire. It will take truly strong men who will accept this alternative. Under a planned decline or aging a community would need to plan



to provide minimal levels of services available for the citizens who will remain during this process. The combining of stores so that the "general store" concept is returned to this community may make it feasible to continue to provide most of the necessities required by the population. Perhaps a mobile mail order operation could spend a half day in a number of such communities during their declining years. Consolidation of housing and associated utility facilities would reduce the maintenance costs and perhaps these could be maintained by other larger population centers on a contract basis.

The residents of the community could plan their future and not build false hopes on the promise that some day an industry might locate in their community by taking this alternative. Much of the uncertainty that would exist under an inactivity situation would not be present. The federal government may want to consider a policy which would accelerate the aging of these small communities--subsidies to those who would move to communities either with a rural or urban setting. However, as Marion Clawson emphatically stated in his lecture at the U.S.D.A. Graduate School, no one should be moved against his or her will, but those people who can see their long run future as bleak, could be assisted in relocation.

One of my colleagues pointed out to me that planned aging may not be a feasible or acceptable strategy for a rural community, and I would agree that it will be the unusual community (if any) that adopts this position. However, planning and development groups at the regional, state and national level may want to adopt this strategy for communities who fail to adopt a growth strategy or for the community who, even though a growth strategy was adopted, finds it impossible to implement because of rejected grants and loans to improve water, sewer and other facilities or because of vigorous enforcement of certain environmental or other legislation.

In conclusion, the small rural towns of America have all but been forgotten in the rush to identify and work with the growth centers in rural areas. A number of alternatives do exist for these small rural communities. First, they can adopt the position of inactivity with no positive action. A second alternative is for the small town to try growing. This may be accomplished as a bedroom community for the growth centers or metropolitan areas, by making a concerted effort to attract a new industrial base or by combining resources with neighboring communities in an effort to develop an attractive situation for new industry. A final alternative is for them to seriously consider planned decline. Although this alternative may be rejected a priori by a community it does

offer some advantages in that the future is known relatively better and that plans for providing minimal levels of community services can be developed; however, no citizen should be required to relocate under any government decline acceleration program against his wishes.

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