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AN EVALUATION OF OWNER'S EXPECTATIONS OF BUILDING WITHIN REMOTE RURAL SUBDIVISIONS: IMPACTS ON THE RURAL COMMUNITY*

by

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Introduction to the Problem Area

During the 1960's, the remote rural subdivision became a wide-spread type of land use in the foothill and mountain areas of California. Alternatively characterized as a "recreational", "second-home", "premature", "speculative" or "unanchored" subdivision (depending on the source of the characterization), the remote rural subdivision is typically a large sized development with land areas of several hundred acres upward to 20,000 acres and more.[1/] They are generally of suburban design, although they are remote from urban centers, and are marketed primarily in metropolitan areas as recreational or retirement retreats, or as speculative investments. Only lots are sold and construction of a residence is the responsibility of the buyer. However, some developments have home construction affiliates.

The extent of this form of land use conversion is significant in California. In the period 1960-1969, over 500,000 acres were committed to this use under State subdivision laws [2; p. 17]. In 1970, subdivision applications totalling about 200,000 acres were considered by the State Real Estate Commissioner [2; p.3]. A recent survey [4] has shown that over 124,225 rural remote subdivision lots, encompassing 215,524 acres, were created in 24 Northern California counties during the period 1963-1973. As of the lien

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1/ An excellent description of this recent phenomenon is given in [7].

date 1971, a total of 5,143 residences had been built for a gross buildout rate of 4.1 percent, an average of .9 percent per year. Another study [2] revealed that in 24 remote subdivisions, 107,000 lots were created with 3,240 homes built, for a yearly buildout rate of .3 percent.

In most of the affected counties, traditional economic bases (timber, mining, and cattle raising) and resident populations have diminished in recent decades. Yet demands for county services by residents rose, as have service costs; but sources of county property revenues remained relatively constant leading to rather bleak outlooks for fiscal managers. Given this situation, it is understandable why the remote subdivision has often been viewed with favor by local governmental agencies. The possibility of increasing their revenues by the conversion of lower valued grazing lands into higher-valued subdivision properties was appealing, particularly if, as was often alleged, costs of providing governmental services to properties would be small, as home building would be very limited and primarily in the distant future. The short-run effect (i.e., increased assessed values on tax rolls) has been usually viewed with considerable favor and concern about possible long run costs are largely not evaluated.

Regulation of Subdivision Lands in California

All subdivision lands offered for sale in California whether they are located in or out of the state are subject to the Subdivided Lands Act passed in 1943. A major provision of that legislation is the requirement that the Real Estate Commissioner issue a Final Subdivision Public Report before a developer can sell any subdivision lots. This report informs prospective first buyers about their rights and obligations and the provisions, if any, that have been made for public utilities. It also warns of hazards

and lists the responsibilities of the developer. As such, the public report is a "full disclosure" instrument, not a regulatory instrument.

In the early 1960's, a large number of remote subdivisions located in Arizona, Florida, New Mexico, and Hawaii were offered for sale to California residents. Due to alleged cases of fraud and misrepresentation, the California legislature passed an amendment to Section 10050 of the Business and Professions Code in 1962 requiring the Real Estate Commissioner to determine that the conditions of sale be "fair, just, and equitable" to prospective purchasers before he issues a public report.[2/] But while this provision attempts to protect California residents from questionable investments in non-California real estate, it has never been applied to subdivisions within the state.

No additional significant legislative attention was paid to in-state remote subdivisions until 1970, when the "land project" was made the object of special treatment by the State Real Estate Commissioner under the Subdivided Lands Act. The land project was defined as a development with 50 or more lots without residential or other building improvement, and located in an area with less than 1,500 registered voters. Thus, for all practical purposes, a land project is a remote rural subdivision. A further provision of this act was that no claims could be made about the investment potential of any property within a land project. This was aimed directly at investment pitches used extensively by developers and their agents in the 1960's. Initially, the purpose of the special treatment of land projects was prevention of consumer fraud. Later legislation, however, utilized the land project definition to aid in land use control.

2/ The legislation was based, in part, on information developed in [4].

The most profound legislation affecting subdivisions was that incorporated in Assembly Bills 1300, 1301, and 1302 passed in November, 1971 [1; Sections 11510 and 11511]. For the first time a direct connection was established among subdivision regulation, planning, and zoning. Some of the more salient features include:

1. Local government "shall deny approval of subdivision maps if they find:

   (a) that the site is not physically suitable for the proposed development,

   (b) that the design of the subdivision or the proposed improvements are likely to cause substantial environmental damage or substantial and avoidable damage to fish and their environment, and

   (c) that the design of the subdivision or the type of improvements is likely to cause serious public health problems.

2. The State Real Estate Commissioner shall prevent development of a land project by denying a public report unless he specifically finds that, among other things:

   (a) general design and specific measures are adequate to protect property from flooding, erosion and other predictable natural occurrences, and

   (b) . . . , the use or zoning, of adjacent properties is compatible with the proposed land project." [1; Section 11025]

By 1972, then, the State of California had legislated the end of the investment pitch in land projects while placing additional obligatory restrictions on the development of new subdivisions. The inability of local government to cope with extensive remote subdivision activity of the previous decade was only thinly masked in this legislation.

Introduction to this Study

One area of California heavily affected by remote subdivisions is the Northeastern Plateau region (Siskiyou, Modoc, Lassen Counties). The climate, topography, and even the economy of this region are more similar to those of

western Nevada and southern Oregon than to those of rest of California. The climate is generally arid, and junipers, buck brush, and timber dominate the vegetation of the region. Past volcanic activity in the region influences soil resources, topography, and vegetative cover. The region had a net population outmigration of 2,135 between 1960 and 1970 (total 1970 population was 57,490), with population loses in each of the three counties. In the last ten years (July 1963-June 1973), 128,474 acres were subdivided into 39,573 lots in the area [3]. Due to the magnitude of subdivision development in this area, it was chosen as an appropriate area for research for examining consumer demands and for assessing the potential impacts of subdivisions on localities.

Objectives of this Paper

This paper shall examine two specific questions. First, what are the expressed motivations of people buying property in remote subdivisions. Second, what is the intended timing of conversion from raw land to home units and what impacts might result if these expectations are realized? Since variations among non-homogeneous subdivisions exist, differences among selected subdivisions are included in the discussion of the questions above.

Data Base

The data base for this paper was a 10 percent sample, obtained in 1972, of then owners of property in seven remote subdivisions in Siskiyou County.[3/]

3/ Siskiyou County is the 4th largest county in California (6,325 sq. mi.) with a land area slightly larger than that of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. The 1970 population was 32,701. Sixty-two percent of the land is under federal ownership (U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, mainly). The number of private parcels on the assessment roll rose from 19,893 in 1964 to 29,481 in 1969 and 35,401 in 1972. Since the resident population decreased between the 1960 and 1970 censuses, the increase in the number of private parcels on the assessment rolls largely reflects the parcelization of subdivisions and land-splits for recreational uses.

The survey response rate of 60 percent yielded 406 usable questionnaires for our analysis. The selected subdivisions are diverse in lot size, natural setting, man-made amenities, and sales price (Table 1). Power and water are provided only in subdivision A, while owners of property in the remaining subdivisions are expected to put in their own wells (or pay for hook up to private water system in G) and pay for extension of power lines to their property. At present lot owners in all of the selected subdivisions are expected to put in septic tanks, although an attempt is being made to finance a central sewer system in subdivision A. The vegetative cover includes some pines and firs in subdivisions A, C, and G; while more arid vegetation (scrub and junipers) dominates the landscape in the other subdivisions.

We subjectively classified the properties into two groups. The subdivisions which comprise the first group (A and G), have a water-oriented recreation focus because of their location on lakes. Average prices per lot were $9,521 and $6,673, respectively, and lot sizes ranged from 1/3 acre to 1-1/2 acres. The second group (B, C, D, E, F), are not adjacent to any body of water. The extent of utilities is limited, often being available only in one part of the subdivision, and access to lots is by bladed dirt roads. The average prices in this group vary greatly, due in part, to the fact that subdivision C was sold in 220-acre parcels with the expectation that parcels could be split into 5-acre parcels and resold. Prices for conventional lots (up to 2-1/2 acres) ranged from $2,202 to $6,068.

Six types of information from the survey were used to support this paper. They were: 1) motivation for purchase; 2) whether purchaser was actively searching for subdivision property at time of purchase; 3) planned, ultimate use of the property by the purchaser; 4) year expecting to build

TABLE 1

Level of Amenities and Average Price Per Lot, Siskiyou County Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Subdivision	Lot size	Man-made amenities	Natural amenities	Average price per parcel
A	Small	High	Medium	$ 9,521
B	Small	Low	Low	6,086
C	Large	Low	Medium	12,010
D	Small	Low	Low	4,934
E	Medium	Low	Low	2,202
F	Medium	Low	Low	2,713
G	Small	Medium	Medium	6,673

home or to establish mobile home on the property; 5) age of respondent; and 6) normal annual family income before taxes, at time of purchase.

In order to assess motivation for purchase, the mail questionnaire asked people to estimate what percentage of their reason for buying fell into each of seven categories: 1) immediate recreational use; 2) future recreational use; 3) immediate retirement use; 4) future retirement use; 5) capital gains; 6) speculative gains; and 7) purchase for estate of heirs. For the purpose of this paper the above were grouped into the following classes: recreation (1 & 2), retirement (3 & 4), and investment (5, 6, & 7). A motivation for purchase was defined as dominant if 50 percent or more of the reason for purchase was in any of the above three classes. In all the analyses, only the dominant motivations expressed by purchasers in our survey were used. Owners were asked if they were actively searching for recreational subdivision property at the time of purchase, and if so, where? Planned, ultimate use of property was specified as: camping, mobile home site, permanent home site, no use, or other. Respondents were also asked to estimate in what year this use would first occur. A number of socio-economic characteristics were also surveyed, but only income and age information were used in this paper. Income classes were: under $6,000, $6,000 to $7,999, $8,000 to $9,999, $10,000 to $14,999, $15,000 to $24,999, $25,000 to $49,999, and $50,000 and over. Age classes were: 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, and over 60.

Results

Age. The average age of household head was fairly uniform in all subdivisions ranging from 40 to 43 years (Table 2). For all but two subdivisions the modal class was 41-50 years, although distributions were skewed toward the younger age classes. There is no statistical evidence of dependence between the age of purchasers and the subdivisions within which they

TABLE 2

Age of Present Owners at Time of Purchase, Siskiyou County Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Subdivision	Average age	Age group				
		21-30 years	31-40 years	41-50 years	51-60 years	Over 60 years
	(years)	(number)				
A	43.4	23	32	38	32	13
B	42.8	16	16	34	18	6
C	40.2	7	4	4	4	2
D	43.1	3	6	4	8	0
E	42.3	12	17	26	15	3
F	43.0	2	3	6	4	0
G	43.3	1	2	7	2	0
All subdivisions	--	64	80	119	83	24

purchased parcels (Chi-square of 15.1 with 18 df is not significant at 90 percent level of confidence).

Income. The data in Table 3, however, indicate dependence between specific subdivisions and the normal annual family incomes of purchasers (χ^2 = 55.29 with 30 df and is significant at .3 percent level). The range in average income was from $13,900 to $26,100. Subdivisions with lower amenity levels attracted buyers with lower annual family incomes.

Dominant motivation. In 331 of the 406 responses of owners, the purchaser assigned 50 percent or more of his reason for buying the parcel to one of the three classes of motivations. Thus, 81 percent identified a dominant motivation for their purchase decision. Over one-half of these were associated with investment-type motivations (176 of 331) and about one-quarter were associated with the recreation and with the retirement desires of purchasers (Table 4). The χ^2 statistic testing the null hypothesis that the dominant motivation for buying and the choice of subdivisions were independent lead to the rejection of that hypothesis at the .01 percent level (χ^2 = 39.9 with 12 df). Thus, it is clear that whether origins lie in owner evaluations or in sales representations, there is significant variation in dominant motivations of purchasers among subdivisions.

Further insight into the variation in dominant motivations of purchasers among subdivisions is given in Table 5. First, the ratio of dominately motivated purchases ranged from 69 percent for subdivision G to 91 percent for subdivision C. Thus, while purchasers may have had a mix of recreation retirement, and investment motivations for the purchase of their parcel, at least 7 of 10 purchasers in any particular subdivision had a dominant motivation for purchase, the average for all subdivisions was that 8 of 10 purchases were so motivated, and the ratio increased to 9 of 10 purchases in

TABLE 3

Normal Annual Family Incomes, Before Income Taxes,
Siskiyou County Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Subdivision	Average annual income	Income group							
		Under $6,000	$6,000 to $7,999	$8,000 to $9,999	$10,000 to $14,999	$15,000 to $19,999	$20,000 to $24,999	$25,000 to $49,999	$50,000 and over
A	$17,300	2	8	12	40	37	26	11	1
B	14,500	5	8	17	31	20	14	4	1
C	20,600	0	0	1	5	6	4	2	1
D	15,600	0	1	4	7	4	4	1	0
E	13,900	1	8	21	22	11	7	1	2
F	14,900	0	0	4	4	4	3	0	0
G	26,100	0	0	0	3	2	3	4	1
All subdivisions	--	8	25	59	112	84	61	23	6

TABLE 4

Dominant Motivation for Purchase, Siskiyou County Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Subdivision	Dominant motivation for purchase			Total
	Recreation	Retirement	Investment	
	(number)			
A	29	28	60	117
B	30	20	38	88
C	2	2	16	20
D	0	0	19	19
E	8	18	36	62
F	5	6	3	14
G	4	3	4	11
All subdivisions	78	77	176	331

TABLE 5

Relative Measures of Dominant Motivation for Purchase,
Siskiyou County Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Subdivision	Survey response	Ratio of dominantly motivated purchases	Distribution of dominant motivation for purchase		
			recreation	retirement	investment
	(number)	(percent)	(percent)		
A	144	81	25	24	51
B	105	82	34	23	43
C	22	91	10	10	80
D	23	83	0	0	100
E	80	78	13	29	58
F	16	88	36	43	21
G	16	69	36	27	36
All subdivisions	406	81	23	23	53

the highest ranked subdivision. Second, the nature of the mix of dominate motivation also varies among subdivisions. Inspection of the last three columns of Table 5, shows variations (from the total averages of about one-fourth recreational, one-fourth retirement, and one-half investment) with subdivisions F and G having had over one-third dominant recreation motivations, with subdivision F having had over two-fifths retirement motivations, and with all of the dominant motivations in subdivision D being for investment.

Motivation vs. active search. For all subdivisions in the sample, the χ^2 test for independence between dominant motivation and whether the respondent was actively searching for this type of property at time of purchase, was statistically significant at the 95 percent level of confidence. Out of the 329 people expressing motivation, 235 (71 percent) were not actively searching for property at the time of purchase.

Given the marginal probabilities ($p_{i.}$'s and $p_{.j}$'s) and observed cell percentages (p_{ij}'s) shown in Table 6, and expected cell percentages if search and motivation were independent ($\hat{p}_{ij}$'s), purchasers with recreation or retirement motivations were more active in their search and buyers with investment motivations, less active, than would be supposed if the two phenomena were in fact independent.

Motivation vs. planned, ultimate use. Table 7 presents data on dominant motivations and planned, ultimate uses of parcels purchased. The null hypothesis of independence was rejected at the .01 percent level. Major sources of deviation between observed (p_{ij}) cell values and the expected ($\hat{p}_{ij}$) cell values, assuming that the two phenomena were statistically independent, occur in the "home" column where deviations for the recreation, retirement, and investment cells are 5.2, 5.2, and -9.3, respectively. Another large deviation of

TABLE 6

Cross Tabulation of Active Search by Purchaser by Dominant Motivation for Purchase, Siskiyou County, Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Active search	Dominant motivation for purchase			Total
	Recreation	Retirement	Investment	
	(number)1/			
Yes	25 (7.6)	29 (8.8)	40 (12.2)	94 (28.6)
No	52 (15.8)	48 (14.5)	135 (41.0)	235 (71.4)
TOTAL	77 (23.4)	77 (23.4)	175 (53.2)	329 (100.0)

1/ Numbers in parentheses are percentages of total response in the body of the table and in the two margins.

TABLE 7

Cross Tabulation of Planned, Ultimate Use of Parcel
Purchased by Dominant Motivation for Purchase,
Siskiyou County Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Dominant motivation for purchase	Planned, ultimate use					Total
	Camping	Mobile home	Home	No use	Other[1]	
	(number)[2]					
Recreation	4 (1.4)	11 (3.7)	47 (15.6)	4 (1.4)	3 (1.0)	69 (22.9)
Retirement	3 (1.0)	8 (2.7)	51 (16.9)	8 (2.7)	1 (0.3)	71 (23.6)
Investment	13 (4.4)	12 (4.0)	53 (17.6)	27 (9.0)	56 (18.6)	161 (53.5)
TOTAL	20 (6.6)	31 (10.3)	151 (50.2)	39 (13.6)	60 (19.9)	301 (100.0)

1/ Includes 49 responses for "sale to realize profit" among the 56 purchasers with dominant investment motivation for the purchased parcel.

2/ Numbers in parentheses are percentages of total response in the body of the table and in the two margins.

8.0 occurs in the "investment-other" cell.

It is important that regardless of the dominant motivation, a substantial number of people planned to use their property for a home site, even those with dominant investment motivations. Another interesting observation from this table is the large number of people whose motive was investment, but whose planned use was "other". More careful analysis indicated that 49 of the 56 responses in this class were, "sale to realize profit". This use is, of course, consistent with an investment motivation for purchase.

Addition of homes or mobile homes. A total of 221 out of 406 respondents indicated that their ultimate use of the property was as a home site. Further, 175 indicated when this use would first occur (Table 8). The bulk of the conversion (88 percent) is expected before the end of this decade. If these survey results are reliable, it appears that there will be a number of new structures in these subdivisions by 1980. Expansion of the survey results to the general population leads to estimates upwards of 3,000 new structures by 1980. Even 1,000 new homes would be noticeable and significant, and would be in excess of past build-out rates noted in previous studies [2, 4].4/

Subdivisions A, B, and E, which are larger subdivisions, also have greatest percentages, as well as absolute numbers of people planning on

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4/ We are at a loss to explain why our survey results indicate such a large home site use conversion, and will attempt to re-survey members of the sample later this year who said that use conversion was planned for 1972 or 1973 in an attempt to assess the reliability of these data. Such an assessment is necessary before we can project the impact of subdivision growth with some accuracy on governmental costs and revenues in Siskiyou County.

TABLE 8

Percentage of Respondents Planning on Adding Homes or Mobile Homes and Expected Year of Home Use Conversion, Siskiyou County Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Subdivision	Percent of respondents planning to use property for home site	Expected year of home use conversion					Total
		1969-72	1973-75	1976-80	1981-85	1986 and later	
		(number)					
A	55	6	40	19	5	1	71
B	53	2	16	19	2	1	40
C	45	0	2	5	1	0	8
D	17	0	0	2	0	0	2
E	64	2	13	17	7	1	40
F	12	1	3	0	2	2	8
G	50	1	2	3	0	0	6
All subdivisions	--	12	77	65	17	4	175

homes (Table 8). Further, in subdivisions B and E, 25 percent and 40 percent, respectively, of the sites will be for mobile homes. The implications of this could be profound, since under California law, mobile homes are assessed for tax purposes as vehicles rather than as permanent structures. The result is that property tax revenue from these declines rapidly as the value of the mobile home is depreciated over its rather short economic life.

Income and home use conversion. Given the number of people planning on building, is there any relationship between income and the expected date of home use conversion? The χ^2 value of 20.55 with 15 df was not statistically significant. However, there are some interesting observations based on data in Table 9. About 82 percent of all families planning to build have an annual income over $10,000 and 55 percent have income over $15,000. However, the people in the lower income classes (<$10,000) who plan to build, plan to do so on the average later (50 percent after 1980) than do those in the higher income classes (79 percent before 1980). Obviously, the relationship between age and income serve to confound simple analyses of home construction with a single socio-economic characteristic. If, in fact, lower income families are also young in age with reasonable expectations of increased incomes, actuation of their future intentions to build may be realizable.

Potential Impacts on Surrounding Communities

This survey indicates that a substantial percentage of the respondents had investment as their dominant motivation for purchase. The implications of this for nearby communities are hard to assess conclusively. However, if experience in other locales is any guide, resale of subdivision properties

TABLE 9

Cross Tabulation of Normal Annual Family Income by Expected Year of Home Use Conversion, Siskiyou County Subdivisions, 1972 Survey

Income class	Expected year of home use conversion				Total
	Before 72	73-74	75-79	80 and above	
< $8,000	1	0	4	3	8
$ 8,000 to $9,999	3	2	3	9	17
$10,000 to $14,999	2	6	17	13	38
$15,000 to $19,999	1	7	17	15	40
$20,000 to $24,999	1	8	12	5	26
> $25,000	2	4	5	1	12
TOTAL	10	27	58	46	141

is difficult, especially in the face of expanding supplies. Consequently, there could be a large number of defaults in ownership. In fact, it was already evident to some extent in our study area, as indicated by the redeeding of parcels from private owners to developers. It is conceivable that, with economic recession, a large number of these properties could end up as liabilities on the county tax rolls rather than as revenue-producing assets.

The apparent high likelihood of some substantial building in various subdivisions raises some hard questions. There are approximately 6,700 lots in the seven subdivisions included in this study. If, in fact, 1,000 or more structures are completed by 1980, the demand for public services may be significant. Perhaps the biggest concern would be the few families with school age children who would demand bus service. Another big problem would be the increased demand for fire and police protection, and for road and sewer services. These problems would be especially acute with construction in lower cost subdivisions without adequate roads or water. The prospect of numerous isolated, "unlived-in" residences is tempting for the would-be criminal, but a nightmare for police and fire officials. Further, a recent study [6] in another rural California county where building has taken place in remote subdivisions indicates that the cost of services needed for these homes more than offset the revenue they generated.

Conclusions

The dominant motivation for buying property in the seven subdivisions was investment, with retirement and recreation as lesser motives. If the

investment expectations of current owners prove to be unrealizable because of changes in economic conditions (i.e., lesser discretionary incomes or higher holding and development costs)[5/] or because of continuing expansion of supplies of subdivision lots for the first-sale, owners faced with no viable resale markets may allow their properties to become delinquent and possible adverse effects on local government become real.

We have some question about the accuracy of the expressed intentions of the respondents which yields home use conversion rates across all subdivisions far in excess of buildout rates obtained in previous studies in California [2, 4]. While age and income statistics of those planning to build support their intentions, we feel that aggregate buildout will not be as near-term as expressed by those surveyed, nor is it likely to be realistic in absolute numbers. This may be to the benefit of local government, but the impact on future county revenues and costs is certainly not clear at this time.

From a rural community's standpoint, the quiet existence of hundreds of acres of land cut up into urban parcels, but with no houses, is appealing from a financial point of view to some. Property on which cattle once grazed can now yield dollars of extra tax revenue to meet increased demands and costs of government services--an income transfer from those in the urbanized areas to those in rural counties.[6/] If, however, development of

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5/ For example, "It has been calculated that a $10,000 lot at Lake Don Pedro would have to bring $25,000 ten years later simply for the owner to break even--after taxes, assessments, landowner fees, interest charges, and inflation." [7; p. 6].

6/ In our 10 percent sample, 372, or 97 percent, of the 385 respondents who resided in California, lived in SMSA Counties. Ninety-two percent lived more than 300 miles distant from Yreka, the county seat of Siskiyou County, and 46 percent lived over 600 miles away.

housing occurs, and people start to take up residence and demand services, all may be lost; and the rural community may find itself worse off financially than before for the quantity and quality of services demanded by urban residents differ markedly from those presently characteristic in the rural counties of California. They are more expensive. And while recent legislation has dampened subdivision development activity, the ramifications of past developments are just now becoming of concern to the general citizenry of the State and to the residents of our rural counties.

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