Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Summary: “Perfectly Positioned: The Blurring of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Boundaries in a Southern Community”

By CED Program Interns & Students


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This post provides a summary of the findings and conclusions of “Perfectly Positioned: The Blurring of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Boundaries in a Southern Community” by Betsie Garner. She wrote this article as a PhD candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. The article was published in The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science in July 2017.

The author centers the article around a study of Rockdale, Georgia on the outskirts of Atlanta. Change and growth in Rockdale have led to a lack of consensus on the community’s identification as rural, urban, or suburban. Located less than a 30 minutes’ drive from the center of Atlanta, many in Rockdale view the town strictly as a suburb of Atlanta. While others who chose Rockdale for its historic, walkable downtown see it as a small urban center. Still others that live on large pieces of land within Rockdale limits view the community as distinctly rural and rarely venture into Atlanta.

The article provides several relevant points that apply to communities across the South, including many North Carolina cities and towns, that can be synthesized to one primary takeaway: “people’s place-based identities are socially constructed through interactions in their own communities, not inherited from demographers and statisticians.” The rural-urban boundary is continually shifting, being crossed, and blurred. While these ideas may seem obvious, they are worth considering when determining the trajectory of a community and what goals for growth can be attained.

The first key conclusion is to use social and organic definitions of place when planning future opportunities. Peoples’ perceptions drive the success of communities, not lines on a map. The “feel” of an area is critical to attracting people to live, work, shop, and play there. Relying on legal or artificial boundaries is not enough. A more nuanced approach is necessary to holistically evaluate the target community in the larger regional ecosystem. What values does the target community possess and how can they be leveraged to facilitate success in that community? By evaluating a community within a larger market area, opportunities can be identified which otherwise may have gone unnoticed.

Continuing in this line of reasoning, analyzing the inherent advantages in a community relative to neighboring geographies and canvassing the local population for what they value about the community can build the basis for future plans. Leverage those value advantages, evaluate what your community currently offers, what the needs of a desired population segment area (good schools, low cost housing, low cost commercial rent, authentic cuisine, walkability, proximity to major highways, shopping options), and build a plan to incentivize the appropriate types of development.

Communities can simultaneously cater to multiple population segments. Cities and towns can have both urban and rural attributes and position themselves to reap the benefits of both. It may be beneficial for communities to maintain a vibrant
downtown, suburban commuter communities, and rural spaces. In doing so, the community can satisfy many residents’ needs while thriving. Some residents may feel that they are living in a continuation of a larger city while others identify specifically with their town. Both perspectives are admirable, and both can be attainable with proper planning and growth strategies.

As many southern cities see continued success, they tend to grow and sprawl, which can drive economic growth in outlying communities but also lead to changes in those communities that incumbent residents object to. It is possible to maintain the “feel” of a certain area while changing adjacent areas to accommodate the needs/wants of new residents. Rockdale was able to maintain a thriving historic downtown while growing elsewhere within town limits. By having options and a variety of “districts/neighborhoods” communities are able to give people choices and variety without having to travel long distances.

These concepts can easily apply to communities across North Carolina, specifically towns surrounding larger cities and communities situated along major transportation corridors that separate the truly urban from the countryside. Ultimately, cities and towns must take an objective approach to identifying their assets, how they are viewed, and how to best position themselves to achieve community goals. The rural-urban boundary is in flux more now than ever before and that can be leveraged to provide a community that offers both to its residents.

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