Participation and Capacity Building in Community Visioning:
NIMBYism and the Politics of the Rural-Urban Interface in Elk Grove, California

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Abstract

The Rural Visioning Project, a community-based research project in Elk Grove, California, emerged from collaboration between two local community groups and researchers from the University of California, Davis. It is presented as "an exercise in community development," which lends insight into community processes, the meaning of "community" and perceptions of community action by participants and observers. The project provides an example of how participatory research can generate desired community change as well as valid, relevant data. Moreover, the substantive community development issues which emerged from the project have far-reaching impacts and relevance, informing wider conversations around the concept of a "public good," public participation, and capacity building, including how local communities can empower themselves to enact change of their own design rather than follow the status quo and the preferences of vested interests. Related to these issues, we discuss the NIMBY (Not-In-My-Back-Yard) label and how it is mobilized by both sides in land use disputes to either bolster or demean public legitimacy. The Rural Visioning Project also offers valuable insight into some of the questions, implications, and complexities of the rural-urban interface, revealing divergent experiences of culture, identity and public decision-making.

Keywords: participatory action research, rural-urban interface, land use politics, community development practice, NIMBY, California

> We are not a typical homeowners association, worried about house color and such, because in our area there is so much room for development. We have to be vigilant. We are concerned with the loss of the look of the area and its legacy. The feel is very different from the urban side. We want people to understand and accept that it is different.

> Project participant and local leader in rural Elk Grove (interview, 2 July 2007).
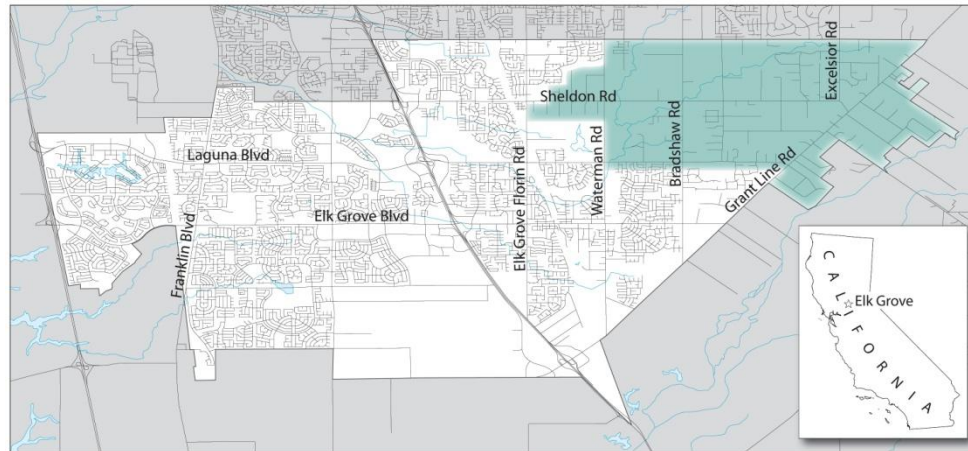
1.0 The Rural Visioning Project

In Elk Grove, a city 15 miles south of California's capital, Sacramento, a crisis has been brewing. As the suburban fringe rapidly expanded in the 2000s, residents in the remaining rural area of the suburban city have felt a threat to the rural identity of the area. This study examines this crisis and the resulting response. We tell a story about rural residents' advocacy efforts to protect rural landscapes and lifestyles. Two active community groups, with the explicit aim of rural preservation, mobilized to confront city planning decisions which they found threatening to their views of their rural area and how it should be managed.

The story began when the Sheldon Community Association (SCA) and the Greater Sheldon Road Estates Homeowners Association (GSREHA) sought to create a community vision for rural Elk Grove (see Figure 1). Their aim was to steer the policies and planning decisions of Elk Grove's city officials and its contracted planning staff. Recognizing that many of their activities were *reactive*, the groups sought to initiate a project which would instead be *proactive*. These desires created the Rural Visioning Project (RVP, or "the project" hereinafter), which was designed to facilitate community influence over the changes taking place in the remaining rural area of the city of Elk Grove.

As the opening quote indicates, the groups involved in the RVP were primarily interested in preserving the rural character of "rural Elk Grove," as the area is referred to by residents. Elk Grove is located in the Central Valley of California. Although the city incorporated on July 1, 2000, the town was first established in 1850 as a hotel and stage stop and long served as a suburb of Sacramento. The city encompasses 42 square miles and has a population of approximately 144,000 (Elk Grove, 2010). The population increased 90% in the first nine years since incorporation and during this time was dubbed "the fastest growing city in the United States" (Gledhill, 2006). By all accounts, the city has been rapidly growing for the past several decades and is committed to accommodating existent and projected growth (Elk Grove Planning, 2005).

Included within the city boundaries of Elk Grove is a rural residential area that is zoned for two to five acre parcels (Figure 1). Explicitly stated in the city's General Plan is the goal of preserving the rural character of this area of the municipality (Elk Grove Planning, 2005). Although city documents contain clear language promoting rural preservation, some rural residents feared that the city's policies and practices of accommodating growth were undercutting the possibility for this area to maintain any semblance of rural character. Out of these concerns grew the collaboration that would form the RVP, which lasted from January 2006 to July 2007.

Figure 1. Simplified zoning map of Elk Grove. The area in the northeast, in blue, demarks the area zoned mostly as 2- to 5-acre parcels, and is the rural residential area known as "Rural Elk Grove." The street patterns compared with surrounding neighborhoods show the differences in the municipal environments.

Source: simplified from City of Elk Grove, CA, 2004: http://www.elkgrovecity.org/documents/agendas/attachments/gis/elk-grove-zoning.pdf

For the RVP, the two groups, SCA and GSREHA, recruited project assistance from the University of California, Davis, through a group member's personal connections. From that initial contact, the RVP was structured in the following way: a university liaison (C. Hiner) worked closely with the local community to develop and implement a community vision focusing on the current lifestyles and development preferences of Elk Grove's rural residents. The purpose of the project was to engage the community by encouraging proactive behavior and the use of local skills and knowledge in order to facilitate preferred community change. This involved residents who identified themselves as activists and advocates for rural preservation. Project participants were homeowners, board members of two non-governmental organizations, relatively affluent, mostly white, equally male and female, all over the age of 55, and had been rural residents for at least twenty years.

The two groups teamed up to gather credible data concerning rural residents' lifestyle and development preferences in order to bolster their legitimacy and address the city government's expressed concerns about the groups' basis for advocacy (i.e., whether it spoke for residents generally or only for a small subset). By seeking assistance from UC Davis, the two groups gained research assistance for a visioning project in their area, guidance for organizational development, and increased capacity to negotiate the policies and planning activities influencing the rural-urban interface in Elk Grove, California. The first author's role in the project was a dual one: to operate as a community developer, assisting the community to perform a specific task, but also as a researcher gaining a broader understanding of community processes from a case study of a particular project. As such, the RVP was conceptualized simultaneously as an exercise in community development (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Pigg & Bradshaw, 2002) and a community-based, participatory research project (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Kindon, Pain, & Kesby 2007; McIntyre, 2008).

At its core, the RVP sought to foster an environment of proactive thought, reflection, and practice around community concerns, thus facilitating meaningful community engagement over issues of local importance. In other words, the goal

of the project was to empower local advocates with skills and knowledge of their own creation using a participatory, community-engaged research strategy. Thus, the research questions explored were: Can participatory, community-based research impact activities and realities on the ground in places facing pressure to change? And, how can we effectively revalue local community action to place authority and/or legitimacy in the hands of the people rather than in the vested interests generally in control of land use and other policy?

The case study provides an example of how participatory research can generate desired community change as well as valid, relevant data. It also reveals the dynamic between advocacy—activities that promote the interests of less popular, under-represented or less powerful groups[1]—and public involvement or participation in public policy debates and decisions, such as city planning. The results of the RVP suggest there must be a level of *readiness for change* or development in order for community efforts to be successful. In addition, this project serves as a window into an ongoing social and political conflict between so-called "rural" areas and so-called "urban" ones (Duane, 1999; Ilbery, 1998; Libby & Dicks, 2002; Woods, 2005).

2.0 Methodology

The research was explicitly community-based and emerged from community initiative. As such, we situate it within the field of participatory action research (PAR) because it fostered an open, dynamic and community-based research process. Greenwood et al. (1993) note key features of PAR: fostering collaboration, activating local knowledge, using eclectic or diverse methods and sources for data, having a case orientation, seeing it as an emergent process, and linking scientific understanding to social action. PAR functions to enhance participant, organizational, and/or community capacity and research validity (Elden & Chisholm, 1993), making it an appropriate approach given the project goals.

Participatory action research is an iterative process; thus, the actual *doing* of PAR is as significant as the research project outcomes (Greenwood et al., 1993; Dickens & Watkins, 1999, Kindon et al. 2007). Participatory action research is thus both a process and a goal (Greenwood et al., 1993; Kindon et al., 2007). Participation is emergent and evolving, always capable of being improved. Moreover, engaging a community in participatory research and action is inherently a capacity building exercise, because "one should never do for others what they can be empowered to do for themselves" (Heiman, 1997, p. 298). In this way, the methodology for the project became a mechanism for reaching important project goals—valid, credible knowledge generation—and produced another notable outcome: increased community capacity.

An ethnographic PAR methodology was used to collect data in two phases. The first phase consisted of the community-based development process that was the RVP itself. This phase was documented through ethnographic field notes from participant observation over eighteen months, January 2006 to July 2007. The second phase was the researcher-led data collection effort for which methods included a review of official city documents pertaining to planning and outreach in

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[1] The RVP is an interesting example because the participants were those who we would generally categorize as affluent and wealthy, yet who nevertheless feel marginalized. It demonstrates that subjective experience is a powerful motivator, no matter the "objective" situation.

the rural area, specifically the General Plan (Elk Grove Planning, 2005) and documentation resulting from the Rural Road Standards outreach meetings (Elk Grove Planning, 2009); an interactive, evaluative exercise with a group of eight participants to gather feedback on the process's strengths and areas for improvement (July 2007); a written questionnaire with eight respondents (July 2007); and hour-long, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five key informants active in the RVP (July 2007). The topics covered in the written surveys and interviews concerned the RVP's birth and development, evaluation of the project, participants' personal experiences with the project, and respondents' individual outcomes from participation in the project. The most knowledgeable respondents—the RVP participants themselves—were selected to discuss these topics. These two phases produced a great deal of rich, qualitative data, presented in the next section.

3.0 The Project Process and Outcomes: An Exercise in Community Development

Two community groups initiated the RVP because their leaders saw "the rural being drained out of the area"[2] and wanted to find out if other rural residents were similarly concerned. The groups sought to legitimate their rural advocacy efforts with the city, since local officials were referring to them as reactionary NIMBY, Not-In-My-Back-Yard, groups whose work was parochial and self-interested advocacy rather than speaking for a greater good or purpose (Dear, 1992; Gibson, 2005; Lake, 1993; Schively, 2007; Wolsink, 1994). In this context, the groups identified major goals for the RVP: rural preservation, building legitimacy as organizations to counteract city assumptions that they were advocating for narrow personal interests, improving their representation of the rural community, and building a greater sense of community in the area to address a presumed misunderstanding between newer rural residents and longer-standing ones. The board members of both groups hoped the RVP would offer "a snapshot of collective community thought and ideas."[3]

One member's connection to UC Davis helped move the groups forward. Outside technical assistance was provided by the first author to help with the visioning design and organizational support, and guidance continued as project implementation proceeded.[4] Despite the groups' drive to prove themselves legitimate to the city and their belief that they were doing something valuable for their community, the project unfolded slowly. After one failed attempt at stimulating a visioning process using a more technical, formal method—focus groups organized by project leaders and facilitated by UC Davis graduate students and in which participation was very limited—the groups revised their methodology to make data collection more informal. This is a noteworthy change because the groups had chosen the more technical option precisely to legitimate and formalize the groups' procedures in the eyes of city officials.

The revised RVP design utilized the participants' personal contacts and motivations to initiate a workable program for gathering the data they desired. It made clear that, despite their perceived need for "objectivity" based on what are generally accepted to be more "scientific," formal social methods, there is a *level*

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[2] Written survey, 2 July 2007.

[3] Interview, 5 July 2007.

[4] Interview, 2 July 2007; Interview, 5 July 2007.

of readiness needed in a community to launch a community-wide activity with any success. The new RVP design involved hosting informal discussion groups oriented toward building and sustaining community trust while providing a forum for discussion of the pertinent issues. The goal of the redesigned discussion groups was to build community cohesion and mutual understanding while collecting relevant rural visioning data. However, despite laying out a well-formulated research plan, only some of the proposed research came to fruition.

However, despite the seeming lack of success in obtaining all of the wanted data, the project participants still benefited from their involvement. The goal of the project was to enhance community advocacy efforts with credible and reliable data on rural identity and development preferences. The RVP, in this context, inspired participants to behave proactively instead of reactively to urban encroachment. Even without exceptionally broad public involvement, the circle of influence was widened. Moreover, simply having an institutional partner involved in their visioning process raised city officials' impressions of the groups and their intentions. Thus, the project itself and the data gathered, however limited, increased the groups' capacity to negotiate rural policy with the city government. In addition, the groups internally benefited from the process of designing and carrying out their project, a common result in the PAR literature (Dicken et al., 1999; Greenwood et al., 1993; Kindon et al., 2007).

The RVP demonstrates three main principles of community development: promoting self-help (also known as building capacity); being driven by the felt needs of those involved (as addressing felt, rather than imposed, needs encourages community "ownership" of a project and its outcomes); and encouraging active participation of the group or community being engaged (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Pigg et al., 2002). Personal and collective engagement in problem-solving lies at the heart of community development theory and practice since community development entails the creation of "a political infrastructure for participation that empowers citizens and gives them an authentic voice in decision-making about community direction and the means to achieve their goals" (Pigg et al., 2002, p. 390).

Community work can only be relevant and meaningful through the active involvement of those who have identified a situation to be improved. Participation also builds a sense of community and cooperation and increases individuals' political knowledge, self-awareness, and civic education (Scaff, 1975). Essentially, Scaff (1975) argues, it is through participation that we learn what it means to be a citizen; personal efficacy and private well-being are increased, and public virtues are upheld. Engaged participation builds capacity for action and capacity to effect change (Arnstein, 1969; Bhattacharyya, 2004; Honadle, 1981; Kindon et al., 2007; Pigg et al., 2002). Government officials, planning staff and local communities see participation in community design and decision-making as beneficial because the solutions found are often better suited to the communities involved than solutions arrived at through technocratic means (Arnstein, 1969; Hester, 1996; Owens, 2000). Yet, in real world settings, engaged participation remains relatively rare. As Arnstein (1969) describes, most "participation" in public processes is more accurately described as non-participation or, more generously, tokenism. The RVP was initiated in response to tokenistic consultation of local community groups regarding the future of their rural lifestyle and landscape. The RVP, while not an official planning project of the City of Elk Grove, sought to move higher on Arnstien's ladder of citizen participation (1969), encouraging increased community power through partnership.

Projects oriented toward capacity building seek to enhance local communities' capabilities to succeed at tasks they deem appropriate through technical assistance, organizational development or other means (Honadle, 1981). As long as assistance is provided only as part of a program to help the community learn to help themselves, then a community's future capacity for action is increased (Bhattacharyya, 2004; Honadle, 1981). In other words, personal and collective agency is increased, as agency is "the capacity of people to order their world, to create, reproduce, change, and live according to their own meaning systems, to have the powers to define themselves rather than be defined by others" (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 12).

The two groups experienced organizational development by being part of an organized, applied community effort through the RVP. They clarified their goals and strategies and learned about and developed their capacities by jointly identifying challenges before them and creating locally-based solutions. At the personal level, the participants did not express an appreciable change in their own propensity or ability to do work in the future based on this experience. Instead they indicated that they would continue the work despite the frustrations they have faced. We believe this is because the project participants had histories of community involvement and action that pre-dated the RVP. The results might have been different if it had been carried out by less civically active groups. For example, this kind of participatory and empowering community work might have had a greater impact in terms of personal/group/local transformation among a less politically active group.[5]

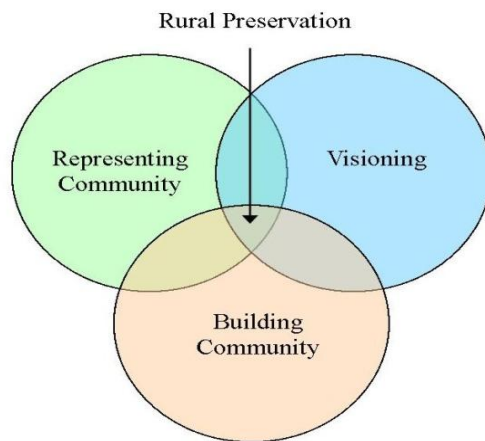*Figure 2.* Model of interactions, indicating interconnection of groups' various advocacy goals.

Diagram co-created by first author and community members.

In terms of more tangible products, the groups devised a visioning plan and elements of the rural character and lifestyle were identified. Although there is a process vs. product debate in community development (Botes & van Rensburg, 2000), it is clear that the process of creating these products facilitated organizational development. One key accomplishment was the co-creation of a diagram that visually represented the interconnection and interdependence of the four main goals for the group: rural

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[5] Alternatively, one can imagine that had less civically engaged community members been involved in the RVP, the levels of frustration experienced by participants could have instead induced further apathy from those who were only marginal joiners to begin with.

preservation, visioning, community building, and representation (see Figure 2). Although the diagram in itself may not seem particularly noteworthy, what was noteworthy is that community members created it through the participatory process, which makes it an important research outcome that fed back into the RVP. The visualization of this interconnectedness clarified the need for a multi-faceted approach to creating the vision, which increased participant understanding of the complexity of the process and the importance of seemingly secondary activities, such as building community trust and promoting inclusiveness. Recognition of the importance of community building is significant because while the two separate groups were interested in cooperating to create a vision, they brought potentially different ideas about why and how to do so. In sitting together and discussing the meaning of the project and how it could impact their other goals, project participants realized the value of their collective efforts as individuals and community associations.

A second key tangible product was the vision articulated by the end of the process. The data collected by participants revealed that the lifestyle to be preserved includes keeping animals and having open, farm-style fences, narrow roadways, and the *potential* for agricultural activities (see Figure 3). While some residents do not currently use their land for agricultural purposes, they value having the option to do so.[6] Also, participants characterized the rural-urban interface as involving wide open spaces bordered by large, mass-produced homes, and the vision noted that the wide open spaces needed to be preserved. Rural roads (see Figure 4) also proved to be a salient issue in the area because, as roads have been widened ("improved," in city parlance[7]), they have also begun to dominate the landscape due to the extensive amount of impervious cover, non-native plants, and highly evident urban services. Such "improvement" is of great concern to some rural residents because they feel their smaller roads, among other things such as old oak trees, are what create the rural character of the area.

Figure 3. Rural landscape in Elk Grove, California.

Photo by first author, taken 12/28/2006.

[6] Written survey, 7 March 2007.

[7] To accommodate increasing traffic flows through the rural area and the city more broadly, the city of Elk Grove slated many roads for "improvement" measures such as widening, installation of street lights, cross walks and traffic signals (Elk Grove General Plan, 2005).

The groups' credibility and influence was bolstered by their participation in the project. The RVP's useful, legitimate data influenced negotiations with the city over issues concerning the rural area, including rural road improvements. A significant accomplishment for the groups during the project was a successful bid for a traffic recount on one of the main rural roads slated for improvement, Sheldon Road (see Figure 1). Due to the groups' persistence and advocacy, the city abandoned the road-widening project until such time that the traffic volume warranted the changes.[8] The groups' success regarding rural roads, albeit provisional, suggests that active involvement in local political and planning decisions has been bolstered and strengthened by the groups' cumulative efforts, including the RVP.

Figure 4. Rural versus "improved" roads in Elk Grove, California.

Photos by first author, taken 12/28/2006

The RVP also affected the relationship between the groups and the broader community. One of the main goals adopted by the groups was to reinforce their representation of the community with valid and credible data on rural resident's preferences for rural Elk Grove. While the groups did not "have the funds or resources to do a statistically significant, representative survey," they sought to represent a general community perspective.[9] This created new discussions amongst community members. As one participant said, "The neighbors who do communicate with each other are discussing the project and the issues. In that way, the process is starting a discussion in the community."[10] Although these discussions were a positive sign, the rural advocates truly had hoped that they would find more eager advocates for rural preservation; instead they found apathy.

> There were even people in my neighborhood that I thought I could count on who backed out in the end…A lot the people are not that friendly toward each other. I don't know if the two acres and busy lives plays into them not really knowing each other. I even tried to hold a meeting of my own, but no one was interested. People kept pushing me off. There is so much complacency; people saying 'things aren't that bad.'[11]

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[8] Personal communication with project participant, 11 June 2007.

[9] Interview, 6 July 2007.

[10] Interview, 5 July 2007.

[11] Interview, 5 July 2007.

The project helped participants to feel more confident representing the community and to prioritize community issues,[12] but the lack of widespread participation in the project made rural leaders question their ability to represent others' opinions. The sentiment was: "It is harder to say that we are representing the community when we can't get people to show up to a meeting."[13] Thus, involvement in the RVP caused the group to reflect on what it is that makes up "community." They felt as though they were trying to "create community where there isn't any."[14] The common ground they were expecting to find was elusive.

Yet, their conclusion was that no one else was doing the work they thought was so vitally important, so they had better do it themselves. All RVP participants interviewed mentioned their personal drive to engage in community work in the face of local apathy and their own disappointment regarding other residents' unwillingness to participate in a project that the participants feel to be important for the whole community. In the face of continued challenge, the leaders decided to try, try again.

> We just try it another way. Sometime you learn the hard way. Things take time. Persistence is a key value. We just have to keep after it. Those who stay realize you just have to wear them down. Keep at it. We have to figure out how to make it work better.[15]

Persistence, it seems, is an important asset for community work, and all of the participants interviewed displayed this quality. Although they did not find a well-spring of rural advocacy foot-soldiers, leaders reported that the general sentiment from non-attendee residents was one of support.[16]

Despite the frustration of not discovering a general rural populace as motivated as themselves, participants noted three insights they gained through the process:

1. To effectively engage others in community work, the groups have to be able to demonstrate the personal significance or relevance of the issues to their desired audience.[17]
2. Wider involvement, especially by younger people, would have further legitimated their efforts.[18]
3. There is potential to be proactive now and in the future by using open communication and continuing to value community input.[19]

Although participants sought to deflect the NIMBY label as an externally imposed representation from the city, they found it effective to activate the not-in-my-backyard sentiment within the broader rural Elk Grove community. This meant specifying how impending issues were personally relevant to other rural residents. Project participants noted that when there is an actual threat to where someone

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[12] Three respondents noted an increase in personal confidence to represent others.

[13] Interview, 6 July 2007.

[14] Group comments from interactive project evaluation, 2 July 2007.

[15] Interview, 6 July 2007.

[16] Interview, 6 July 2007. It must be noted that this optimistic assessment is coming from those seeking positive reinforcement, so although we trust our respondents' statements, this perception of support has not been externally evidenced.

[17] Group comments from interactive project evaluation, 2 July 2007.

[18] Group comments from interactive project evaluation, 2 July 2007.

[19] Interview, 2 July 2007; Interview, 6 July 2007.

lives they "come out of the woodwork, but until something actually threatens their lifestyle, they could care less."[20] The advocates found that they should play into the "not-in-my-backyard" sentiment because "people only care when an issue is close by."[21] Another went so far as to say: "We've tried to convince and cajole people [to hold these meetings and participate] but they just don't care unless it is in their backyard. They don't understand the big picture." So, in the case of the RVP, the "NIMBY" idea, instead of being detrimental, had to be leveraged in a specific context to stimulate more participation from other community members. Robbins (2004) describes a similar phenomenon known as the environment and identity thesis in political ecology, wherein subjects engage in political action specifically because of a perceived connection to their local ecologies and lifestyle.

The elaborate posturing and recruitment efforts by some active community members, in contrast to the often silent many, suggests the existence of a "professional participant," a person who not only involves her/himself but also solicits more participation from others who are less involved. The professional participant is someone who commits substantial time and effort to public participation processes. In exurban and urban fringe areas this is usually attributed to the professional roots of many incoming migrants who seek to live in rural areas because of their perceived amenity value. These migrants arrive by choice and with significant professional training and political skills (Duane, 1999; Nelson, 1992; Walker & Fortmann, 2003; Woods, 2005, Travis 2007). The "professional participant" takes on leadership roles not simply because of their own personality and temperament, but also because they have the time and resources to do so (Nelson, 1992; Travis, 2007; Walker et al., 2003; Woods, 2005).

Though successes such as the turn-around in road widening were heartening (Elk Grove Planning, 2009), there were obstacles to realizing all of the groups' goals. Specifically, the organizations chronically operated under crisis-mode management that prevented them from thinking holistically about the problems before them and kept the groups in a defensive stance. This suggests that in order to effectively confront present and impending threats, groups must be focused and well-organized. They must work to create a broad community foundation for change to support and maintain any successes they have. Without adequate community support, advocacy groups' efforts may be wasted on uncooperative or unmotivated potential local allies.

4.0 Discussion

This section uses the RVP as a case to understand larger issues and debates. We first argue that in land-use planning, policy-makers and governments should move away from the NIMBY frame, which posits opposition to development as negative, and toward a dialogical politics that views opposition as an integral part of dialogue and democracy. Second, the RVP provides insights into the urban-rural interface, allowing us to argue that differences in values and meanings attributed to rural landscape aesthetics and function are at the heart of conflicts at the urban-rural interface. These differences in values and aesthetic judgments cannot be glossed over, but rather must be expressed in democratic decision-making. Finally, we evaluate the RVP by placing it in the context of the previous two issues and debates presented.

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[20] Interview, 5 July 2007.
[21] Interview, 5 July 2007.

4.1 NIMBY and its contradictions: toward a dialogical politics

We noted above how the community groups resisted an externally-imposed NIMBY label, yet relied on the key motivating factor of self-interest to mobilize fellow community members. Drawing from Lake (1993) and Gibson (2005), below we discuss this NIMBY paradox as it relates to community development by reframing opposition from being inherently bad to being an essential part of a dialogical politics that is necessary in democratic decision making. Lake (1993) and Gibson (2005), aware of the prevailing and overwhelmingly negative portrayal of NIMBY activities, present alternative views of NIMBYism, both the people engaged in civil opposition and the purposes and meanings behind the activities associated with such groups. Extending their arguments, we further the conversation, emphasizing the utility and importance of considering alternative views of land use planning and public input through activities which are often framed as "Not In My Back Yard." Rather than rejecting such points of view outright, we argue, that considering the views and knowledge of the public in land use decisions is not only politically worthwhile but can also lead to better land use outcomes.

Not-In-My-Back-Yard activism, commonly known as NIMBY, is often portrayed in a negative light. "NIMBY refers to the protectionist attitudes of and oppositional tactics adopted by community groups facing an unwelcome development in their neighborhood" (Dear, 1992, p. 288). Since NIMBY groups are known for their oppositional politics and activism, planners and government officials do not typically value these groups as part of the land use policy process. Thus, the traditional treatment of NIMBY activism is that of a syndrome, a problem to be dealt with and overcome (Dear, 1992; Lake, 1993; Schively, 2007; Wolsink, 1994). These treatments imply that opposition is a problem, not an integral part of the land use debate; that "selfish parochialism" generates conflict which, in turn, prevents the attainment of desired social goals (Lake, 1993).

Lake (1993) proposes an alternative view, positing that NIMBY actions are a countervailing force to the interests of capital. This kind of oppositional activity is the second part of Polanyi's double movement (Patel, 2010; Polanyi, 1957). Public decision-making processes often benefit powerful, vested interests which may not be transparent about their intentions (Gibson 2005) and that directly contradict the interests of less powerful citizens. In this way, by opposing "ill-conceived and costly projects, local opposition movements could be doing the public a big favor" (Gibson, 2005, p. 382). The civic good may in fact be multi-faceted and difficult to identify, but it is very unlikely to come into existence by just following the political-economic interests of government officials and business leaders. Indeed, social theory notes the impossibility of a singular "civic good" identified by technical rationality, as the public good must always be socially negotiated under democratic conditions (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Habermas, 1987). That multiple perspectives exist and that these must be brought into dialogue highlights the communicative interest of knowledge and counters characterizations of NIMBY groups as irrational (Dear 1992, Lake 1993). Thus, land use debates, including those over *locally unwanted land uses* (LULUs) (Dear, 1992; Schively, 2007), can provide a forum for more fair and democratic policy deliberation, ultimately improving the land use decisions made vis-à-vis the people most affected. This reframing allows us to see that NIMBY can be a convenient and powerful label used by decision-makers to silence and dismiss opposition as illegitimate, and thereby prevent dialogue with oppositional groups.

There can be no neutral expert technocracy (Beck, 1992; Jasanoff, 1992); every decision has political or other motivations (Gibson, 2005) and will benefit some members of society more than others. In Lake's (1993) terms, any LULU project represents only one particular solution to a problem. The particular options chosen to address a community issue reflect a political-administrative choice to favor some interests over others. Gibson (2005) and Lake (1993) argue that by building a more contested and democratic policymaking space—for example, by seeking to implement Habermas's (1990) ideal speech situation—we can improve the decisions made for all involved. The specific outcomes of the constant oppositional pull between societal interests ("capital" versus "community" for Lake) reveal the relative political empowerment of either side in any given place at any given historical moment (Gibson, 2005; Lake, 1993). Accordingly, a high level of oppositional activity is often a sign of high levels of community empowerment. Prevalence of NIMBY or other opposition groups indicates a relatively powerful position for them at a particular political moment. Recognizing the dialectical connection of NIMBYism to capital and to the planning process requires a reconsideration of singular "rationality" and the relative "legitimacy" of the community position. In this light, NIMBY is no longer irrational obstructionism but is an important expression of public will and, as such, plays an essential political role.

Having rethought the legitimacy of NIMBYs, the NIMBY phenomenon can be seen as an indicator of growing civic activity despite imbalances in power and economic resources. NIMBY activism is a personally engaging form of political participation. Instead of sitting idly by, local opposition groups actively leverage symbolic, political and economic resources to advance alternative, competing public policy solutions. This is a legitimate form of "real" participation and involvement in political affairs. Accordingly, solutions to "the NIMBY problem" should recognize the fundamentally democratic potential of such movements (Gibson, 2005).[22] We suggest that NIMBY groups' levels of opposition are dialectically related to their placement on Arnstein's ladder. For example, when a group is treated in a tokenistic fashion from the outset, it is more likely that strong and confrontational NIMBY-type sentiments will arise. In contrast, groups treated more as partners will likely reduce confrontational stances or not resort to them in the first place. In other words, oppositional stances from citizens' groups are directly related to their treatment by the formal planning processes rather than groups operating with a persistent and unresponsive oppositional stance no matter their reception in the planning process.

Additionally, while some believe the problems caused by NIMBYs stem from "too much access to the policymaking process" (Gibson 2005: 396), limiting the access of NIMBY or other opposition groups will not only increase their oppositional stance but also undoubtedly limit public accountability and will restrict public debate about issues of concern to the populace. Participation in decision-making is a cornerstone of democracy—to what ends are we willing to go in pursuit of easy, efficient governance? A more contested political field, wherein many different parties express their views of the situation and their ideal solutions, allows for presentation of the various opinions of a diverse society as well as providing an important check on authorities (Gibson, 2005). Substantive debate about the parochial and common interests served by various options can create a better range of solutions to a given situation (Gibson, 2005; Lake, 1993).

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[22] See Wolsink (1994) for an example of a potentially undemocratic solution to NIMBY opposition.

The Sheldon Community Association and the Greater Sheldon Road Estates Homeowners Association's active drive to get others to agree with their efforts does make them appear to be a group with a particular self-serving agenda to promote, and, therefore, a NIMBY effort. We argue, however, that the negative connotation of the label does not accurately or fairly capture the groups' intent. Instead, the RVP can be seen as an attempt at creating meaningful spaces for participation. Since the groups' participation in planning processes thus far had been tokenistic at best, the groups sought a more engaged and substantial experience. As such, their opposition and action was the result of being relegated to the lower rungs of the ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969). In seeking more power and relevance to decision makers, their actions came to be viewed as NIMBY like. Lake (1993) suggests that political struggle resulting from groups' actions can lead to local influence over decision makers, thereby bolstering the democratic process. This was the intent of the community members behind the RVP; they sought to make inroads for public input in planning decisions regarding the rural areas of the city. In this way, projects like the RVP are drivers, and markers, of a healthy and vibrant civil society.

By ignoring the reality of different values and interests that must be expressed in a democratic society, the "NIMBY" framework does not adequately capture the complexity of the political, social, economic and cultural issues in rural Elk Grove, along the urban-rural interface generally, nor in society as a whole. Instead, we need a different framework in which to view this kind of opposition. We argue that this alternative framework is a dialogical politics in which technical rationality is not allowed to trump communication of difference in values and interests, and in which outcomes must be negotiated. The existence of these community groups, and the RVP on which they embarked, can help develop this kind of politics.

4.2 The Rural-Urban Context

The community-generated visioning data which emerged from the RVP provides insight into living on the urban-rural fringe, revealing nuances of the conflict over rural and urban amenities, the struggle over environmental protection versus personal property rights, and rural identity in an exurban or semi-rural area on the urbanizing fringe. These findings highlight that different values relative to, and perspectives on, the meaning of "rural" exist and those differences must be resolved through democratic decision-making processes.

We define the urban-rural interface as the space of negotiation of the physical, social, economic and cultural differences between urban and rural communities and lifestyles. The literature identifies several distinct issues arising at the urban-rural interface. Some relate to farmland amenities, conversion, and fragmentation (Irwin, Nickerson, & Libby, 2003; Kuminoff, Sokolow, & Sumner, 2001; Libby et al., 2002; Sokolow, 2004). Some authors also note considerable conflict along political, economic, social and cultural lines (Libby et al., 2002; Sokolow, 2004), and changes to rural culture and character resulting from new forms of settlement such as exurbia (Duane, 1999; Irwin, Cho, & Bockstael, 2007; Nelson, 1992; Theobald, 2004; Travis, 2007; Walker et al., 2003).

The distinction between rural and urban may be blurring (Libby et al., 2002) and the full range of implications of integrating rural, agricultural landscapes and settled, residential populations—especially if much of the "new" rural population is non-farming—are still unknown, and will vary by local context. In the suburban fringe of

California's Central Valley, agricultural land is a major form of open space and many urban and suburban residents believe that "nearby agriculture improves a community's quality of life through its visual and other aesthetic properties, habitat uses, and contrast with urban congestion" (Kuminoff et al., 2001, p. 7). Because of the myriad ways it is valued as a public good, open land is typically sought after—and fought over—by urban and rural dwellers alike despite its nominally private ownership. The two activist community groups in the RVP advocated for rural preservation consistently, regardless of the purpose of the proposed development. The groups did not categorically oppose every proposed development, but they were sensitive to the form and function of the proposed facilities, whether the facilities were for residential, commercial, infrastructure, or other uses.

Yet, urban development versus open-space is not the only fault line. Project participants generally positioned "old timer" residents against "new" in-migrants, a conflict identified in the literature (Woods 2005).[23] In rural Elk Grove, disagreements most often resulted from a discrepancy between values and expectations concerning the level of services offered. Longer-term rural residents expect slower traffic, septic sewage treatment and less roadway lighting while new rural residents, many of them migrants from nearby urban areas, express concern over a lack of services readily available to them on the urban side of the city. Thus, while academic divisions between rural and urban areas are in many ways arbitrary, the meanings behind them and resulting expectations cannot be dismissed so easily. These concerns over landscape aesthetics and function are often at the heart of conflicts at the urban-rural interface.

4.3 Evaluating the project

As a PAR project, the RVP had important impacts. The collaborative, community-based work undoubtedly increased community capacity, defined as the community's ability to meet its own needs now and in the future. It also brought more people into working for community development and influencing the future of the rural area.[24] The RVP made the group get out and ask questions of local rural residents, thereby expanding the circle of people with which the group interacted. They were able to get feedback from people they may not have approached previously.[25] The project helped to engage people in the organizations' work, a change of long-lasting value beyond the project period. In these and other ways, the project created small but valuable steps toward the goal of creating a rural vision and bringing the community together over common concerns.[26]

The RVP serves as a prime example of the process of community development and the utility of participatory, community-based research. The purposeful engagement of local actors in cultural, political and economic policy and opinion making pairs well with Lake's (1993) alternative conceptualization of NIMBY as subversive political action. In other words, there are two layers of action occurring: the micro scale issue of empowering two local groups to advocate more effectively for their constituents and the macro scale issue of how groups who engage in this type of

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[23] Although farmer versus non-farmer differences often cause urban-rural conflict (Libby et al., 2002; Sokolow, 2004), in more semi-rural or exurban rural areas other issues are the primary source of conflict.

[24] Group comments from interactive project evaluation, 2 July 2007.

[25] Group comments from interactive project evaluation, 2 July 2007.

[26] Group comments from interactive project evaluation, 2 July 2007.

advocacy are enacting an alternative form of public discourse and action, *a dialogical politics*, especially in regard to public goods. Depending on the political balance of power (i.e., whose agenda is moving policy at any particular moment), city or local government officials can seek to defuse or soften the opposition to local development initiatives. One tactic for moderating public opposition to expansion of urban areas into rural is to (negatively) label issue groups in an attempt to decrease their influence on government policy and procedures. NIMBY is one label used for this purpose, as discussed above.

The RVP also demonstrates that the concept of community itself is in flux, or is, at a minimum, not always what we expect it to be. Rural areas, similarly to urban ones, have definitions and expectations thrust onto them whether or not the assumptions are true in some objective sense (Woods, 2005). Moreover, concern over perceived threats to rural life is not universally felt. Some residents may take an active role preserving rural communities' character while others may be complacent about the changes taking place. NIMBYism becomes a locally-mobilized mechanism for engaging apathetic communities, and also, as an imposed label with negative connotations, a motivation to garner greater support. In this case, city officials dismissed heartfelt and sweeping judgments voiced by the few, so those vocal few took it upon themselves to "prove" their wider legitimacy.

However, the NIMBY knife cuts both ways. As the active minority sought greater support, they had to mobilize the NIMBY sentiment to convince fellow residents there were imminent dangers in their own backyards and, even still, they found neighbors who simply did not share their concern. Leaders such as these become a kind of "professional participant," someone who does what others will not; someone who speaks up and fights for what s/he sees as very important, even as neighbors dismiss the potential threat posed to them or do not deem it important enough to become involved. The RVP shows that some will take charge and rush forward on everyone's behalf whether or not they can garner the widespread participation and support of their peers. While some call this leadership, others may see it as intrusive representation. Nevertheless, the legitimacy of various concerns (or "felt needs") remains, as does the need for representation of the diverse points of view present in these complex situations.

5.0 Conclusion

Rural Elk Grove is a community in flux, poised on the fringe of approaching urbanization and shaped by the cultural, social, and economic drivers of land use changes along the urban-rural interface. Responding to these, RVP participants struggled to generate a level of local participation that satisfied their own expectations. The groups are civically engaged and involved in local politics, following every city council and planning commission meeting and decision. They oppose "development" of the area, citing the importance and significance of the rural character of the built and natural environment. The RVP can be read as a NIMBY against developer-driven-development or a locally-cohesive initiative in favor of development-based-on-community-preference, depending on the perspective chosen. Land use decisions and community involvement make for complicated politics, but it is through such complexity that sensitive and just outcomes emerge (Lake, 1993). Hence, there is a need for a dialogical politics that attempts to create an ideal speech situation instead of dismissing groups opposed to developer interest.

Although we only detail a short period of time for this study, one participant argued that community work that is effective must be persistent.[27] Dear (1992) concludes that NIMBY groups follow a life cycle, the end of which includes patient, slow wearing down of opposition until victory or acceptable compromise results. While Dear's (1992) characterization is antagonistic to NIMBY generally, if his descriptions are generalizable, the groups in rural Elk Grove have reached their organizational "maturity," having reached a stage wherein they can wait out the bumps in the road and still be there to advocate for what they believe in. The RVP legitimized their efforts, lessening the negative connotations of the imposed NIMBY label and led to significant victories like stopping the widening of Sheldon Road.

This study highlights a participatory approach to community work that validates community-designed and community-led advocacy efforts. This approach allows for genuine participation by utilizing participatory methods and valuing and validating all participants' knowledge, interests, and values. There are mutual benefits to researcher participation. By creatively working with communities, beneficial and empowering solutions are possible for the community itself and the community developer involved. Participants repeatedly validated and reaffirmed that an official link to an institution such as UC Davis not only builds credibility for local organizations, but also acts as a conduit for information.[28] Participants revealed that groups allied with universities "gain access to resources" they would not have otherwise, such as access to professors' and graduate students' skills, current studies, and up-to-date information to share with the city.[29] For project participants, the connection proved a valuable asset.

In the end, the process of the RVP strengthened advocacy efforts. The project gave voice to the concerns and preferences of rural residents. This in turn influenced negotiations with city officials and planners. The RVP offered rural residents/activists the opportunity to challenge or support policy decisions based on locally-based knowledge and data that reflected local interests decided on by the groups. The model of engagement was significant because there were notable procedural benefits for those involved. By participating in the process, and being validated as community researchers, participants fostered effective behaviors and skills for future group activities and community capacity for future work was increased.

The situation in rural Elk Grove is complex, multi-faceted, and ongoing, warranting further investigation and participation. Next steps could be continued support to the groups to encourage completion of the visioning data collection process, followed by a thorough analysis of the findings, the results of which could be an important contribution to the continued civic engagement for the groups involved and to knowledge about the urban-rural interface.

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[27] Interview, 6 July 2007.

[28] Comments from group discussion, 21 February 2007.

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