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Farmers and Rural Kansas Communities: Planning for the Future

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Abstract

Rural communities everywhere face ongoing questions about their resilience and plans for their futures. This study analyzes the perceptions Kansas farmers have of their communities as a basis for considering how rural planners might address such questions. Drawing primarily on interviews with 149 farmers across the state, as well as on a survey and Census data, the study finds that farmers perceive a variety of recent demographic, social and economic changes in their communities. The majority of these perceived changes are negative. Farmers in smaller, shrinking communities in the western part of Kansas were least optimistic about what is to come. Despite these perceptions, more than one in four farmers could not articulate ideas for desirable change. Planners in rural communities may need to engage residents in visioning exercises, and are likely to find that strategies for rural self-development and regional centers are most compelling to these residents.

Keywords: rural communities; rural planning; Kansas; farmer perceptions; community change

1.0 Introduction

More than a quarter century ago, Frank and Deborah Popper (1987) dismayed many residents of the U.S. Great Plains region by suggesting the area was best suited to becoming what they called the “Buffalo Commons.” Citing decades of depopulation, soil erosion, and the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer, the Poppers predicted that over another generation or so, “the rural Plains will be virtually deserted” (Popper & Popper, 1987, p. 16). Under the Buffalo Commons solution, the federal government would “de-privatize” the area by purchasing land from its current owners. Subsequently, they forecast:

... the small cities of the Plains will amount to urban islands in a shortgrass sea. The Buffalo Commons will become the world's largest historic preservation project, the ultimate national park. Most of the Great Plains will become what all of the United States once was – a vast land mass, largely empty and unexploited (Popper & Popper, 1987).

For many residents of the rural communities to which this proposal applied, the concept was at once a shock and a push to consider what the future would and should hold.

In the years since their provocative proposal, the Poppers have softened somewhat on its presentation, suggesting that the Buffalo Commons idea serves mainly as a

useful “metaphor” for examining the future of the Great Plains region, rather than a plan or prescription (Popper & Popper, 1993; Popper & Popper, 1999). Other scholars of rural regions and communities have offered additional analyzes and planning recommendations for rural futures, some of these also specific to the Great Plains (e.g., Kotkin, 2012). Meanwhile, certain trends have persisted within the region while other new issues have emerged. Many rural Great Plains communities continue to grapple with concerns such as shrinking and aging populations, loss of jobs and nearby services, and environmental degradation. Growth has occurred in other communities, driven in part by interest in traditional energy sources such as natural gas and oil, and renewable energy sources such as wind and biofuels (Leistritz & Coon, 2009). Climate change impacts are a looming uncertainty as well, and are likely to affect different parts of the region differently (Ojima & Lockett, 2002; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007).

Overall, rural Great Plains communities, like rural communities in other areas of the world, face ongoing questions about their resilience and plans for their futures. Contemplating these futures requires consideration of the region in question both as a whole and at finer scales. Great Plains sub-regions, states, and communities are diverse, and face both shared and unique circumstances. In addition, the people who inhabit these places must be part of the discussion of their futures, since they have the most at stake in what happens there, and may have different understandings and expectations. In rural communities, the voices and preferences of farmers are especially important, as McManus et al. (2012) point out, because engagement between farmers and their communities is key to the resilience of those places. Moreover, such viewpoints have been largely absent from most analyzes and policy prescriptions.

This paper considers the views of rural residents, specifically farmers, in contemplating the future of rural Kansas communities. It explores three related questions. First, how do Kansas farmers understand the changes occurring in their communities? Second, what do these farmers desire and predict for the future of those communities? Third, what factors seem to explain the variation in these views? As key contributors to the rural Kansas economy, and as residents of the communities in question, farmers must be a fundamental part of envisioning and bringing about the future of these places. The sections that follow: describe the study setting, review the relevant literature on rural land use planning, describe the study approach and findings, and offer a preliminary framework for a context and scale-specific planning approach in rural Kansas that responds to the views of the people who live there.

2.0 Kansas: A Laboratory for Rural Planning?

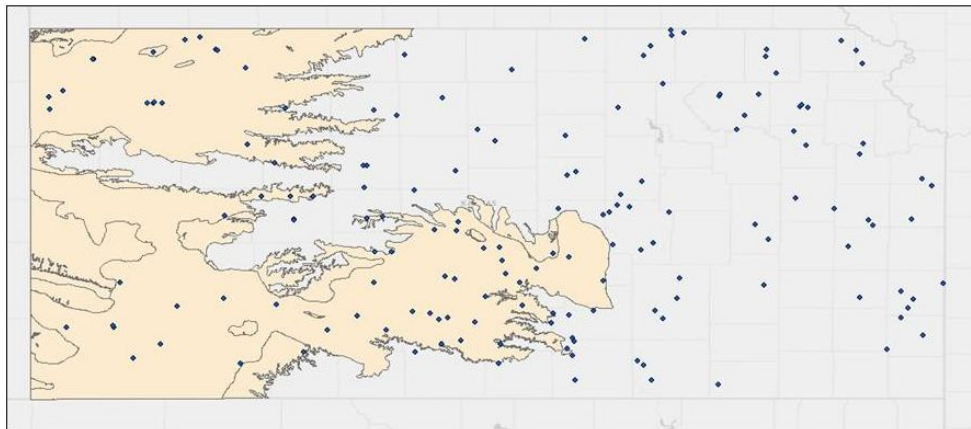
Kansas’s rural and agricultural heritage is implied in its nicknames, including the Wheat State and the Sunflower State. Situated squarely in the middle of the United States and the region known as the Great Plains, Kansas has had and continues to have a strong agricultural presence. In 2010, the state ranked first in the nation for sorghum production and second for wheat production (University of Kansas Institute for Policy and Social Research [IPSR], 2012). It also has the third-most farmland acreage of any state.

Despite this agricultural emphasis, Kansas in fact has a good deal of diversity. With respect to demographics, only about half of the state’s 2.8 million residents actually live in rural areas or small communities, according to the U.S. 2010 Census.

Nonetheless, the state is sparsely populated, with a population density (34.9 people per square mile) that ranks 41st out of the 50 states. Some rural communities are growing rapidly, as a result of their proximity to larger metropolitan areas. Others are losing population each year, and find themselves in counties with less than 5000 residents. While the state population grew 6.1% between 2000 and 2010, this growth is considerably slower than average U.S. state growth of 9.7% (IPSR, 2012).

The state is also diverse in its physical characteristics. For example, Kansas has a striking rainfall gradient, ranging from scant average annual precipitation in the western part of the state to much wetter average conditions in the southeast. The Ogallala (High Plains) Aquifer, whose water sustains many communities and farms, is located in western and south-central Kansas (see Figure 1), and is an ongoing subject of debate given projections for its eventual depletion. Irrigated crops comprise about 10% of the state's total, and are located primarily in the Ogallala region. Biotic regions include grasslands in the west, deciduous forests in the east, and mixed forest-prairie ecotones in between.

Figure 1: Location of Farmer Interviews Within the State of Kansas.



Source: Map Courtesy of BJ Gray; Shaded Area Shows Ogallala Aquifer.

With respect to local government units, Kansas has 105 counties and 289 school districts. Combining county, municipal, town, special districts and school districts, the state has a total of 3931 units of local government. This, surprisingly, is the fifth most of any U.S. state, behind only the much more populous states of California, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Texas (IPSR, 2012). At the same time, however, explicit land use planning activities in rural Kansas are limited. For example, 50 of the state's 105 counties have neither planning nor zoning activities in their unincorporated areas. Other types of planning resources, such as county extension offices, have begun to consolidate their services in response to budget cuts (KSRE, 2011). Discussions of community planning, then, require consideration of a complex governance landscape.

Like many U.S. states, Kansas has faced economic challenges in recent years. Although unemployment rates have been better than national averages (6.7% in 2010, compared to 9% nationally), average annual income in Kansas is below average (\$38,936 compared to \$46,751; IPSR, 2012). Relevant to this study, budget cuts at the state level have led to the restructuring or defunding of state-funded programs that may contribute to rural community resilience. In 2011, for example,

Governor Sam Brownback withdrew state funding for the Kansas Arts Commission, making Kansas the only state not to have an arts agency with state financial support (Biles, 2011). In September 2012, Governor Brownback announced the end of the state's Main Street Program, which provided resources to revitalize community downtown areas (Rothschild, 2012). School funding issues are a further, ongoing debate that extends into each annual Legislative session.

3.0 Whither Planning in Rural North American Communities

Notions of rural North America and its communities, including in the Great Plains states, often take one of two opposing perspectives. On one hand is an idyllic image of “tranquil, unchanging farmsteads and small towns” (Daniels & Lapping, 1987, p. 273). On the other is a bleaker view of areas beset by severe “economic and demographic decline” (White, 1994, p. 29). While neither image is entirely accurate, ideas of the best approaches to plan for and sustain these rural communities likely stem in part from a sense of which vision or circumstance is more accurate or compelling.

There may, in fact, be “two rural Americas,” one at the rural-urban fringe and another more remote, or “deep” rural (Daniels & Lapping, 1996). Both types of places “are in need of new and bold settlement policies and programs” (Daniels & Lapping, 1996, p. 285). In rural areas affected by exurban or metropolitan sprawl, “ad hoc rural regional” activities are emerging to drive discussions about rural futures (Hamin & Marcucci, 2008). Whether similar activities are happening in “deep rural” areas remains to be seen. In any case, understanding which planning approaches may be best in a particular rural area first necessitates an examination of what distinguishes rural planning from other planning efforts.

Hahn (1970) was among the first to articulate a vision of why rural areas required different planning than urban areas. He noted that “the transplantation of planning programs from urban to rural areas often results in misinterpretation of values held by a community's residents. While it is certainly true that often too much is made of rural-urban differences, they do exist” (Hahn, 1970, p. 47). Since planning strives to serve and represent the public interest, understanding the values of rural residents is a necessary starting point to any planning efforts. Moreover, planners should be sensitive to differences *among* rural areas. Frank Popper's (1984) analysis of rural land use policies and poverty in the Northeast United States, for example, analyzes efforts to confine growth and density in rural areas. Such policies, however, would be highly unusual in more sparsely populated rural regions.

Analyses of rural governance have flourished in years following Hahn's (1970) article. Several of these investigations focus on basic issues of planning for small towns (e.g., Cohen, 1977; Daniels et al., 1988; see also Deines, 1980, for a review of this literature.). Other work is more boldly prescriptive. In the same year the Poppers' proposed their Buffalo Commons idea, for instance, Daniels & Lapping (1987) recommended a rural regional resettlement policy of “small town triage.” Through such a policy, government investment would “seek to promote regional centers with a ‘critical mass’ of people, public services, and economic activity which in turn can be expected to grow and support a number of small towns within a radius of up to 30 miles” (Daniels & Lapping, 1987, p. 274). Growing communities of 2500-5000 people would be the first priority for public sector funds. Less populated and/or shrinking communities would be “triaged” much like the mortally wounded on a battlefield.

Another thread of rural planning literature focuses on rural development as a key strategy for addressing rural concerns. Much of this literature focuses at the community level. Green (1997), for example, suggests rural communities can and should pursue a “self-development” strategy for improving their conditions. The premise of this sort of strategy is that it “must be community based, emanating from within the community to provide sustainable solutions” (Green, 1997, p. 181). Earlier research on the results of these sorts of rural self-development efforts (Flora et al., 1991, 1992) showed that success factors include: building on strengths of the community and workforce skills, reliance on local funds to leverage capital from outside the community, access to technical information, and community support. Luther (1997) describes a similar rural vision, whereby communities would engage in a participatory process of “self-actualization.” Planners in this context would need a diverse skillset, including expertise in economic development planning, community organizing, and community development (Luther, 1997, p. 161). Capacity to innovate through network relationships is a further leverage point for rural development (Murdoch, 2000).

Sustainability has been an implicit and sometimes explicit theme in discussions of rural development. Contributions in Audirac’s (1997) edited volume make these connections apparent, addressing issues such as sustainability and rural revitalization (Clugston, 1997), policies for sustainable rural community development (Furuseth & Thomas, 1997), and agriculture and urbanization (Heimlich & Barnard, 1997). More recently, analyzes of rural areas have turned to the notion of resilience as an overarching goal. A resilient region or community is one that is able to recover from external disturbance. Such a community is also adaptive and future-oriented (Ratner & Moser, 2009), and likely has higher levels of bonding and bridging social capital (Besser, 2013).

Finally, another vein of literature considers not only what should be done in rural regions and communities but whose voices do and might contribute to such planning efforts. While Popper and Popper (1999) note that their status as distant academic observers provides them an unbiased perspective in addressing the Great Plains, others explore the ways that voices of rural residents are influential. On one hand, Jones (1995, p. 47) calls these “lay discourses of the rural,” and warns that they are “unruly forces” that “cannot be expected to provide a version of the rural that can be mapped, categorized, analyzed, or defined by academic discourses.” On the other hand, McManus et al. (2012) draw explicitly on farmer perceptions to investigate rural community futures in Australia. They argue that resilience of rural communities “is an outcome of people’s perceptions of the physical environment, their sense of belonging and job opportunities” (McManus et al., 2012, p. 28). Farmers interviewed in their study saw local economy and jobs, quality of the local environment, and a sense of belonging as key community features.

No matter what planning occurs, or whose voices are part of that planning, the future of rural Great Plains communities in general, and Kansas communities in particular, is fraught with uncertainty. U.S. Census data reveal that some communities and counties are experiencing precipitous drops in population, while others are growing. In many locations, schools have closed, school districts have consolidated, and numerous services, including local businesses and banks, health care, county extension offices, and post offices, have been lost. Other growing communities are building new facilities. In any case, a sense of how the people who live in these rural communities feel about them and their future prospects is essential to the

conversation. At a minimum, the voices of rural residents can help illuminate current perceptions of recent change, thus giving planners a foundation for moving forward.

4.0 Study Approach and Methods

This study is part of a larger, five-year, interdisciplinary project examining farmer land use decisions in Kansas. While the broad focus of the project is to understand farmer decision-making during an era of considerable attention to both biofuels crops and climate change, a specific topic of interest is in the mutual interactions between farmers and the places they call home. Given the ruralness of much of the state of Kansas, and the ongoing prominence of agriculture throughout it, farmers are a vital aspect of these small communities. The findings here draw from three sources of data: a survey of Kansas farmers conducted in fall 2010; interviews with farmers completed in summer 2011; and U.S Census data on the population trends of the Kansas cities or towns in which the interviews took place.

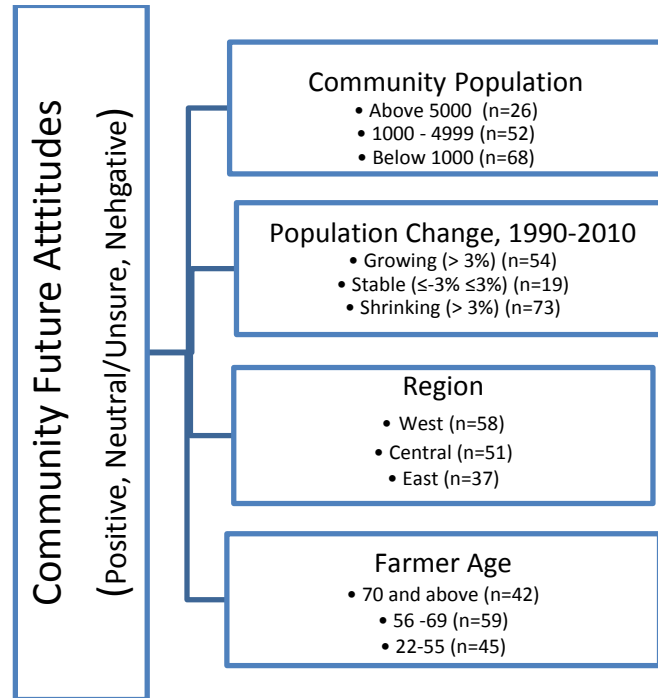
The survey was sent to 10,000 farmers in fall 2010. This survey, which had a response rate of 23% ($n = 2319$), asked farmers general questions about their work as well as specific questions about their cropping decisions. The particular survey question used in this study asked the farmer's age. The survey included a section where farmers who were willing to answer additional questions could provide their contact information. Out of the 600 names received through the survey, we conducted 149 in-depth, semi-structured interviews in summer 2011. These interviews, the primary data source, occurred in six regions of the state divided by zip codes. Interview numbers in each region are representative of the relative number of farms and the number of survey responses there. Figure 1 shows the interview locations. From these locations, the third set of data on community demographics was gathered from the 2010 Census.

Interviews averaged two to two and a half hours in length, and covered a wide range of topics, including several questions about the interviewee's community. Interviewees were asked to name the city or town they considered to be their community, followed by questions specific to that place. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and then coded into NVivo, a qualitative analysis software. The coded data allows examination of specific topics of interest within the otherwise immense data set. For the purposes of this study, the codes of interest are: perceptions of community change, desired changes to the community, and expectations for the community's future.

Analysis of these data used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Exploration of the first two research questions for this project (perceived community change, and desires for and views of the community's future) involved qualitative analysis of the interview data. Themes within the interview responses to the relevant questions were identified using standard qualitative techniques (Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2011). Non-parametric analysis was used to investigate the third question (explaining attitudes towards the future). Farmers' predictions for their communities' futures were grouped into one of three categories – positive, neutral/unsure, and negative. This ordinal dependent variable was then compared to community size, community growth trends, region, and farmer age. Each of these independent variables was also grouped into three ordinal categories that reflect characteristics of the sample. Community population is shown as small (under 1000), medium (between 1000 and 4999) and large (above 5000). (The average population in the interview communities was 4147.) Growth rates were determined using the rate of change between 1990

and 2010. Growing communities are those with greater than three percent growth, stable between three percent decline and three percent growth, and shrinking communities with greater than three percent population loss. The six interview regions were collapsed into three regions, ordinally directed from west to central to east. Finally, the three categories for farmer age were: above 70, 56-70, and 22-55. (The youngest farmer interviewed was 22; the average interviewee age was 60.) Figure 2 illustrates the variables used in this non-parametric analysis.

Figure 2: Non-parametric Analysis Variables, where Attitudes are the Dependent Variable.



Source: Author

5.0 Findings

As described above, Kansas communities are diverse in numerous ways. The interview communities (n = 116, since some communities were home to multiple interviewees) were no exception. In addition to their locations throughout the state, these communities ranged in size from 29 to 87,000 persons. Of the communities in the interview sample, 42% (n = 49) experienced population growth between 1990 and 2010, while the remaining 58% (n = 67) lost population over those two decades. During the summer of 2011, much of the state, especially western Kansas, grappled with moderate to severe drought, while the far northeast part of the state experienced substantial flooding from the Missouri River. From within these diverse circumstances emerged patterns corresponding to the three questions guiding this study.

5.1 How do Kansas farmers perceive the changes occurring in their communities?

In response to an interview question about what had changed in their communities in recent years, farmers (n = 145) unsurprisingly described a wide range of situations. They perceive both positive and negative change in these communities, with the clearest emphasis on two broad themes: *population and social change*, and *changes in economic conditions*. Nearly all interviews mentioned some sort of community change related to one or both of these two themes. Fifteen interviewees (10%), though, indicated that their communities had changed very little in recent years. Overall, for those farmers who described changes in their communities, negative responses, drawing on words such as “loss,” “decline,” and so on, were more prevalent than positive responses.

With respect to *population and social changes*, 28 interviewees (19%) mentioned specifically that their communities were experiencing declines in population ranging from slight to dramatic. One farmer in southwest Kansas characterized this trend as a “gradual, inevitable, unending decline” (I-20)¹, while another in the same region noted that the small towns across the state were “just drying up” (I-60). This population loss evoked negative connotations for the interviewees, who seemed largely resigned to their communities’ decline. Conversely, for the fourteen interviewees (10%) who observed that their communities had gained population, this trend wasn’t always viewed as a positive change. Farmers in communities near larger cities, for example, described influxes of “non-farm” residents whose lifestyles might conflict. Similar to the “collision” between city and country Daniels (1999) and others have analyzed, one farmer noted that “nitwits” in his city’s government were trying to pass new rules that would prohibit farmers from driving their equipment through town (I-135). Others described the situation of becoming a “bedroom community” or a place where they do not know as many people as they previously did. Seventeen interviews (12%) in both growing and shrinking communities spoke specifically about what they perceive as a loss of social ties among residents. One expressed this sentiment as follows: “It’s not like it used to be, you know, several years ago. Farmers helped each other. Not anymore. It’s everybody for himself” (I-39). Others bemoaned what they perceive as a loss of a strong work ethic, especially among younger residents.

Changes related to *economic conditions* were the second broad theme described in the interviewee responses. While a few farmers spoke generally about jobs lost (more common, n = 12) or gained (less common, n = 4) in their communities, many more described specific changes. The single most common response to this question (n = 35, 24%) was a listing of community businesses, facilities, and/or services that had closed in recent years. Restaurants, post offices, co-ops, hardware stores, farm implement dealers, and grocery stores were among the closures farmers noted in their communities. A typical expression of this sort of change is reflected in the words of a farmer from southwest Kansas who noted:

... it’s interesting to me, at one time [community name] had two movies, we had one, two, three, four, five clothing stores, one shoe store, two hardware stores, and umpteen gas stations, and all of that’s gone. I mean, Main Street USA is closing down, and there’s talk of bring a Wal-Mart to town, which

¹ Interview numbers are listed after any interview quote.

I'm not sure will be good or bad. I think everybody's got their own opinions on that. But Main Street USA is not what it used to be (I-5).

School closures and consolidations were an especially prominent concern mentioned by 31 farmers (21%). These interviewees noted with sadness the loss of their schools, or worried what would happen to their communities if an existing school were to close. A farmer in north-central Kansas, for example, noted that the loss of his community's school, and consolidation of the school district with a neighboring district was "the biggest controversy for quite a while here" (I-94).

In addition to these accountings of diminished or lost community assets, 21 interviewees (14%) noted development of new facilities, businesses, or services. Sometimes these new community features were built at the same time as other assets were lost, such as the north-central Kansas community center which a farmer there described as a "lifeline" during a time when population was dropping and the school had closed (I-92). In other cases, this new development coincides with increasing community population. A further observation is that farm sizes are increasing. Fifteen interviewees (10%) noted this specifically. While farm sizes are not a community change per se, they are reflective of larger-scale changes happening across rural Kansas and of farmer perceptions of what constitutes their "community." Larger farms mean fewer farmers, which results in additional rural change.

In describing these sorts of changes to their communities, some farmers went on to explain the changes to their daily lives that resulted from them. In particular, eleven farmers (8%) reflected on the increased amount of driving they needed to do to meet their daily needs. An interviewee in south-central Kansas, for instance, noted that there is "no place to get milk. You have to drive 17 miles [one way]" (I-78). Another in the southwest part of the state remarked: "People in this country are very mobile. Going to [larger city in region]... they go there to shop. It's kind of a social thing to go there and get away. They have a nice park over there and a zoo. Fifty miles is less than an hour's drive, so that's a hop skip and a jump" (I-2). As rural communities change, so do the daily activities and patterns of their residents.

5.2 What do These Farmers Desire and Predict for the Future of Those Communities?

Beyond the changes they had observed, the interviews also asked farmers to consider what they would change about their communities if they could. In addition, farmers responded to the question: "What do you predict for the future of your community?" The replies to these questions are both related to and reflective of the struggles and changes many perceive to be ongoing in rural Kansas communities. They also reflect considerable variation; farmers are not of one mind when it comes to their hopes for and attitudes towards their communities.

One hundred and thirty-nine of the interviewees responded to the question of what they would like to change in their communities, if that change were possible. Here it is noteworthy that 37 people (27%) indicated that they were unsure or did not feel that any change was needed. Despite the mostly negative descriptions of recent changes in their communities, over one-quarter of the interviewed farmers could or did not suggest ideas for addressing the concerns previously expressed. Some of this was a sense of resignation, as expressed by a

northeast Kansas farmer who responded: “I’m fine. I ain’t changing it. It’s just going to change by itself, whatever, however the economy goes, I guess” (I-148).

Beyond this sense of inability or a lack of desire to change their communities, the greatest number of farmer ideas for change centered on the same themes addressed previously: *population/social change*, and *economic change*. With respect to population, fifteen interviewees (11%) expressed a desire to have more people in their community. More specifically, twenty-three farmers (17%) wished that social changes, ranging from different attitudes to different behaviors, were important to them. For example, a north-central Kansas farmer remarked: “this county has a fairly, fairly strong anti-development attitude. Or, anti-progress, isn’t necessarily the word, but um, it’s not very conducive to encouraging businesses to locate here. You have to have businesses to have jobs, but then it loosened up some in the past year because they realized finally the extreme negative effect it had with their zoning...” (I-13). This comment suggests a recognition many farmers seem to share that some kind of direct attention to community conditions and reasons for decline is very important.

With respect to specific amenities or services, fully one-third of interviewees (n=46) indicated a desire to add or return such things as grocery stores, local businesses, schools, or doctors to their communities. In some cases, desires were quite modest, such as for an ATM machine or a Casey’s (a gas station/convenience store chain common in Kansas). Others longed for an increase in jobs through new industry, and expressed the wish that young people and families could be encouraged to live or return there. Overall, farmers appear to be looking for changes that would sustain their communities while keeping intact many of the features they appreciate about rural life.

Finally, in anticipating the future for their communities, farmers again conveyed a range of attitudes and sentiments. While many of these attitudes are complex, it is possible to characterize them as being primarily positive, negative, or neutral/uncertain. Positive attitudes are those that emphasize a future of maintaining and/or enhancing community assets. Negative attitudes highlight declines and losses. The neutral/uncertain category comprises those interviewees who did not have an opinion or who anticipated a mixed future, with some positive and some negative elements. Of the 146 views expressed as to what the future holds for their communities, 30 (20%) were positive, 49 (34%) were negative, and 67 (46%) were neutral or uncertain. Beyond these rough characterizations, though, important commonalities emerged within each attitudinal category.

The farmers who were most negative about the future of their communities largely anticipated ongoing declines, and used words such as “withering away” or “dying” to describe these towns. There were hints of regret in these assessments. As one farmer in southeast Kansas put it, “I don’t really want to utter this, but I don’t see a bright future” (I-125). Despite their disappointment, these interviewees predicted a dwindling and aging population, further consolidation of schools and services, and fewer and larger farms. Some indicated a specific anticipated event, such as closure of an existing school, as the likely tipping point beyond which their community would not recover.

Interviewees who had mixed, neutral or uncertain views of their communities’ futures explained their attitudes in slightly different ways. Most prominent among these views was a sense that the future is dependent on either external or internal

forces. External forces included “the economy” and fuel prices as potential determinants of what would or could happen. For example, some interviewees noted that high gas prices were limiting the number of people who might move to a rural community and commute to work in a larger city. Other interviewees, though, felt that effort within the community was also important. This sort of mixed viewpoint is exemplified in the words of a south-central Kansas farmer, who said:

Well, I hope it survives...but I...I could see some real...as long...as long as we...maintain...a good school system and maintain...the...Christian standards, we'll have...church and a good school and...while...both of the banks have satellite offices in Wichita, as long as they keep a bank here and we have a post office, I think the community will survive in a fashion. I think we're...we're close enough to Wichita...unless gas gets real expensive to where...our...commuters can't afford...that 30 mile drive, I think the community will survive. If gas gets to 6, 7 dollars and those young couples can't survive...can't do it because housing is housing, if you got a decent place to live, it's not that much more expensive in Wichita than in [community name] (I-67).

While his hope is for a resilient community (and in this case, population was shrinking), this interviewee recognizes the complex forces and contingencies at work.

Those interviewees with positive attitudes towards their communities' futures described conditions that contrasted sharply with the negative attitudes. Instead of population loss, they noted population increases. Their communities were also seeing an increase in young people and families, as opposed to an aging population. Some further observed that their locations, proximate to larger cities, as important. A northeast Kansas interviewee, for example, reflected as follows:

Well, I guess I'm optimistic about it um, there's more young families coming into town all the time it seems like, um, and I don't know if, you know, I'm sure some of them are working at [expanded employer] but some of them are my classmates that came back home to have a job, so um, no I think it looks good, I mean [community name]'s pretty much halfway between Lincoln, Nebraska and Manhattan, Kansas, so I mean, and it's a junction of two major highways you know... so I think you know they're building a new convenience store there ... so um, I, I think that looks good... (I-34).

Even in a community with a fairly stagnant population, this resident noticed signs of a positive future. The presence of community schools was another indication of optimism for these more positive interviewees.

5.3 What Factors Seem to Explain the Variation in Farmer Attitudes Towards the Future?

It is, of course, expected that farmers would hold different attitudes about the future of their communities. Such variation may reflect the different situations in these communities as well as different characteristics of the farmers themselves. Non-parametric analysis, as described above, was used to examine the relationships between community size, population change, region, and farmer age and the degree of optimism interviewees expressed. Table 1 contains the data from this analysis.

Table 1. *Tau C Results Relating Interview Characteristics to Farmer Attitudes*^a

| Characteristics | Relationship to Farmer Attitudes (tau C) ^b |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Community Size | .25** |
| Population Change | .31** |
| Region | .15* |
| Farmer Age | .07 |

Notes:

a: Attitudes classified as positive, neutral/unsure, or negative

b: Strength of relationship assessed using Kendall's Tau C

* = .05 level of significance

** = .01 level of significance

This examination reveals that three of the four interview characteristics analyzed have a significant positive relationship to farmer attitudes about the future of their communities. More specifically, farmers in larger communities have more positive attitudes about those communities' futures than do farmers in smaller communities. Farmers in communities where the population is growing are similarly more positive than those in communities with stable or shrinking populations. With respect to regions of the state, farmers in eastern Kansas are more positive about their communities' futures than are those in central Kansas, and central Kansas farmers are more positive than those in western Kansas. A farmer's age, on the other hand, is not a predictor of his or her community future attitude.

6.0 Discussion and Conclusions

Although concern for the future of rural communities has prompted much debate and a number of strategic recommendations, thus far there has been little attempt to understand what the residents of those communities observe, anticipate and desire with respect to the places they call home. Understanding these views is essential to evaluating appropriate planning strategies, because planning efforts at any scale are unlikely to succeed without the support of those affected. This study provides a starting point for such understanding, but its Kansas focus is limited, and should be augmented by similar studies in other rural regions.

Interviews with farmers across the state of Kansas reveal a wide range of perceptions. A number of noteworthy findings within them can help guide discussion about future planning for these rural communities. With respect to changes occurring in their communities, farmers are aware of, and in many cases, concerned about, population shifts. While population decline is of particular concern, population growth that results in perceived conflicts between farm practices and new residents is also worrisome. Overall, the loss of "what used to be" in terms of a rural, agricultural lifestyle seems to be a key regret among these farmers. Similarly, loss of community assets, what Norris-Baker (1999) referred to as "physical-social structures," is noted and rued. Schools, especially, are seen as a critical community resource without which, ongoing decline seems inevitable. Many farmers also recognize that their own daily behaviors are influenced by community

circumstances. Driving considerable distances for basic needs, for example, is noted as a necessary, if undesirable, element of these circumstances.

While their predominant perception of recent community change was negative, the fact that over one-quarter of interviewees were unable to think of anything they would do differently in their communities if they were so able is striking. It is unclear whether this reflects a sense of futility, disempowerment, or simply a lack of ideas. The implications for planners, though, are important as it suggests a need for some basic visioning processes in order to generate possibilities. Those farmers who did have specific ideas for community change focused very little on grandiose suggestions and instead contemplated small-scale changes such as enhancing or restoring community assets and looking for ways to entice new residents, especially young families, to live there. Planners working in these settings may well need to be equipped with the versatile skillsets Luther (1997) described, in order to tackle an array of social and physical planning issues.

In addition to these strong emphases on social and economic issues, the lack of attention to environmental concerns in the interviews is also noteworthy. While three of the interviewees wished for more rain or a more reliable source of water, and a single farmer predicted the depletion of the Ogallala Aquifer, environmental issues were an inconsequential aspect of farmers' views of their communities. This is not to say that farmers are unaware of environmental concerns; instead, they do not connect them to recent, desired or future community change. Since planners often view environment as the cornerstone of the "Three E's" of sustainability, they will need to be prepared to help draw those connections.

Whatever planning takes place in rural Kansas needs to account for the variation in perceptions there. Planners in western Kansas, for example, would face more skeptical views of the future of those communities. Similarly, planners working with very small and shrinking communities (where planning resources are generally scant or non-existent) would need to be prepared for less optimistic outlooks. The age of residents, though, does not appear to influence how they feel about their communities' futures.

With respect to how specific planning recommendations might resonate with Kansas farmer perceptions, the Buffalo Commons proposal, in that it shifted some land ownership from private to public hands, and emphasized Kansas as parkland more so than working agricultural landscape, is unlikely to gain traction in the future, even if demographic shifts might support it. Environmental issues, including landscape restoration, are simply not a part of Kansas farmer perceptions of or aspirations for the places they live, and private property remains the status quo. The "triage" approach, on the other hand, though perhaps somewhat harshly named, may resonate in part with rural residents who recognize that their lives have already begun to be ordered by proximity to regional centers. Combining this approach with aspects of rural self-development could be a starting point for conversation. Another important early task is an assessment of the size of community around which a sustainable future can be envisioned. Daniels and Lapping (1987) recommend a minimum of 2500 residents, but White (1994) argued that as few as 500 may be feasible in western Kansas. Given this five-fold variation in suggested minimum population, additional efforts to quantify the population parameters of a sustainable future should be undertaken sooner rather than later.

Planners working in rural settings such as Kansas should be prepared to help residents there envision what is both desirable and feasible, while carefully avoiding the framing of environmental issues in terms that might be off-putting. This study, of course, focused only on the views of farmers. Although agriculture is still a very prominent force in rural areas, the views of other rural residents must also be considered. It seems likely that these residents would share a fondness for the slower, more convivial elements of rural living, but only further investigation can confirm this. Also, while community and regional visioning is a key first step, planners will need to address the challenges of low population density and the perceived loss of social ties when initiating these efforts. Although rural residents may be accustomed to traveling long distances for their daily needs, planners ought to assume that convenience will be important to gathering their input. While great, these challenges are also worthwhile, as the trajectory of unplanned communities in rural settings leaves less room for optimism.

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