

**Rural Landowners and Urban Sprawl:
Examining Influences on Landowner Decisions to Sell or Develop Their Land**
● Summary of Survey Results ●

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Rationale. The urbanization of rural areas throughout the United States has become an increasingly important issue for rural and farming communities. In 1992, a report to Michigan's governor on Michigan's Environment and Relative Risk highlighted the lack of land use planning as a "high-high" risk for the future well-being of Michigan. The conversion of rural land to urbanized uses could not occur without rural landowners' participation in the sale and development of their land. Hence, it becomes important to understand the factors that motivate rural landowners to make such decisions regarding their land. The objective of this research was to determine the mechanisms underlying landowners' intentions to sell or develop all or part of their land. This study specifically focused on rural landowners in the Huron River Watershed and their intentions to sell or develop their land within 5 to 10 years. The Huron River Watershed is located within Southeast Michigan and is currently faced with rapid development, as it is adjacent to Detroit and its outlying suburbs.

Methods. All landowners known to own 10 or more acres within the watershed were selected to participate in a survey about their land, plans for their land and general land-use issues. Landowners were identified through plat maps and property tax records. The survey was developed using a slightly modified version of Reasoned Action theory, one of the most widely tested and empirically successful models used by social scientists for understanding human behavior. The survey was administered in the summer of 2000 by the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research at Michigan State University. Up to three mailings were utilized to increase response: 1) an initial survey mailing with cover letter and postage paid return envelope; 2) a reminder postcard (sent approximately one week later); and 3) a final survey mailing with cover letter and postage paid return envelope (sent approximately one month after the original mailing). The original sample consisted of 7,157 persons; after removing non-deliverables, duplicates (respondents who identified themselves as owning more than one parcel in the area and as having received more than one survey), and ineligible persons (deceased persons as well as those who no longer owned land in the area), the final useable sample size was 6,699. Of these, 3,380 responded to the survey, resulting in a 50% response rate.

Brief Results

Characteristics of Landowners

Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 99 years, with an average age of 55 years. Two thirds (66%) of the landowners surveyed were male. Most (64%) did not have children currently living within their household, although 74% did have children who would inherit their land. Twenty percent of the landowners indicated that they owned more than one parcel of land within the watershed. The majority (56%) of respondents described their current economic situation as "comfortable" and 49% indicated that their income (before taxes) in 1999 was \$75,000 or more.

Characteristics of the Land Owned

(Note: Since several landowners owned more than one piece of land, landowners were directed to respond on the basis of the largest parcel that they owned.) While some landowners indicated that they owned parcels of less than 10 acres, for those owning 10 or more acres the average acreage was 33 acres and ranged as high as 1300 acres (median=12 acres, mode=10 acres). On average, landowners owned their land about 17 years, with length of ownership ranging from less than one year up to 80 years. Most (91%) of the landowners obtained their land by purchasing it. Most (62%) considered their parcel to be located within a "developing rural area," while an additional 32% felt their land was located within a "rural area"; the remaining landowners were split between being unsure about the type of area in which their land was located or describing it as a "suburban area," "urban fringe area," or "urban area." Most landowners indicated that prominent natural features were located on or near their land (within 5 miles): 67% said that a stream or river was on or near their land, 57% said a lake, 80% said wetlands, and 46% said state, city or federally protected land was near their land. The vast majority (80%) of landowners used their land for residential purposes, 28% used their land for agricultural production, 21% used it for recreation, 14% used it for investment purposes, and 4% used it for development.

Landowner Values

Landowners were provided a list of values of possible importance to them and asked to rate them as being "very important," "somewhat important" or "not important" (respondents were also allowed to mark an "unsure" response). Most landowners (83%) rated "Quality of Life" as being "very important," followed by 69% rating "environmental protection" and 66% rating "protection of animals and plants" as being "very important." Landowners were more mixed when it came to "outdoor recreation" (44% "very important" and 44% "somewhat important") as well as "job security" (36% "very important" and 38% "somewhat important"). Only 23% of landowners rated "community development" as "very important" (49% rated this as "somewhat important"); 21% rated "economic growth" as "very important" (52% rated this as "somewhat important"); 21% rated "employment opportunities" as "very important" (46% rated this as "somewhat important"); 20% rated "community services" as "very important" (57% rated this as "somewhat important").

Attitude toward the Development of Rural Land

Landowners were asked a key question to ascertain their general attitude toward the development of rural land (usually referred to as "urban sprawl" in the popular literature). Nearly half of the landowners (48%) said they "definitely" believed "that rural land should be protected from urban development" while an additional 39% "somewhat" believed that this was the case (8% said "not at all" and 4% were "unsure"). Younger landowners, female landowners, and those with smaller parcels of land were statistically significantly more supportive of protecting rural land than were their counterparts (i.e., older landowners, male landowners, and those with larger parcels of land).

Attitudes Regarding Land Use Issues

Respondents were presented with several statements regarding land use to which they were to respond "strongly agree," "mildly agree," "unsure," "mildly disagree," or "strongly disagree." Almost half (46%) of the landowners strongly disagreed and 24% mildly disagreed with the statement: "The impact of urban development is not as bad as people say it is." Older landowners, male landowners, and those who owned larger parcels were significantly more likely than their counterparts to agree that the "impact of urban development is not as bad as people say it is." Nearly half (48%) of the landowners strongly agreed and 35% mildly agreed that "most people are poorly informed about the impacts of urban development."

Under half (42%) of the landowners strongly agreed and an additional 25% mildly agreed that "there is too much emphasis on short-term economic goals in land-use planning in Michigan." Respondents were somewhat split in terms of the notion that "people who wish to develop rural land should be free to do so": 12% strongly agreed, 20% mildly agreed, 12% were unsure, 28% mildly disagreed and 29% strongly disagreed. As before, older landowners, male landowners, and those who owned larger parcels were significantly more likely than their counterparts to agree with this statement.

Over half (58%) of the respondents strongly agreed and 22% mildly agreed that "land use is rapidly changing" where their land is located. Thirty-nine percent strongly agreed and 30% mildly agreed that "keeping my land as it currently is will help prevent urban sprawl in the area"; even so, 42% of landowners strongly agreed and 31% mildly agreed that they "felt powerless to prevent urban development."

When asked if certain stakeholders had "too much influence on land-use decisions in Michigan," the majority of landowners (59%) strongly agreed this was true of developers while most landowners strongly disagreed (43%) or mildly disagreed (27%) that this was true of farmers. Environmentalists received a more mixed rating, with roughly equivalent proportions of landowners believing that "environmentalists have too much influence on land-use decisions in Michigan" (18% strongly agreed, 22% mildly agreed, 20% were unsure, 22% mildly disagreed and 19% strongly disagreed).

When asked questions pertaining to the role of government in land use, respondents were somewhat split in their responses. About one-third (32%) strongly agreed that "there are too few government programs to help preserve rural land in Michigan" (19% mildly agreed, 32% were unsure, 9% mildly disagreed and 8% strongly disagreed). Under one-third (29%) strongly agreed that "current government programs to protect rural land in Michigan do not work well" (26% mildly agreed, 40% were unsure, 4% mildly disagreed and 1% strongly disagreed). A similar split occurred on the statement: "Local government regulations promote development of rural land." Twenty-four percent of respondents strongly agreed with this, 26% mildly agreed, 31% were unsure, 13% mildly disagreed and 7% strongly disagreed.

Landowner Intentions for their Land

When presented with the statement, "I intend to sell or develop all or part of my land in the next five to ten years," 36% of the landowners indicated that this was "extremely unlikely." An additional 19% believed that this was either slightly or quite unlikely. Fifteen percent felt it was extremely likely that they would be selling or developing their land within this time period while an additional 22% felt it was either quite or slightly likely. Older landowners and those with larger parcels were significantly more likely than their counterparts to indicate that they were likely to sell or develop their land within the next five to ten years. When asked to whom they would prefer to sell their land if they decided to do so, nineteen percent indicated that they didn't care to whom they sold the land; 24% preferred a family farm, 17% a private trust, 9% a farm business, 8% a developer and 3% the government (39% chose "other"; respondents could choose more than one option).

Attitudes toward Selling/Developing their Land

Several questions on the survey followed a fairly complex "semantic differential" format used to measure components of the theory of Reasoned Action as applied to land use decision making. Semantic differential questions ask the respondent to evaluate a statement by placing it on a continuum (here a 7 point continuum) between two opposite adjectives (e.g., good versus bad). When presented with the statement "selling or developing all or part of my land in the next five to ten years would be..." a strong minority indicated that this was neither good nor bad (23%), wise nor unwise (27%), harmful nor harmless (37%). Even so, there was a tendency for people to choose bad as opposed to good in describing this statement (32% chose options on the "good" side while 46% chose options on the "bad" side of the continuum).

Landowners also tended to evaluate current urban development/sprawl negatively: 29% indicated that "increasing urban development in South East Michigan" is "quite bad" and 22% indicated that this was "extremely bad." Similarly, 27% felt that "increasing urban sprawl in the area where my land is located" is "quite bad" and 30% indicated that this was "extremely bad." Thirty-two percent felt that "the current rate of land use change in South East Michigan" is "quite bad" and 24% felt that it is "extremely bad."

Respondents were asked to evaluate the likelihood of certain effects occurring if they decided to sell or develop their land within the next five to ten years by choosing along a continuum on the basis of the adjectives "likely" and "unlikely." Respondents had a slightly greater tendency to choose responses on the "likely" side of the continuum than on the "unlikely" side when asked if selling or developing their land would "increase urban development in South East Michigan," "increase urban sprawl in the area where my land is located," "increase the current rate of land use change in South East Michigan," "harm the visual beauty of the area where my land is located," and "harm the ecological health of the area where my land is located." They were more neutral about or had a slight tendency to think the following effects were unlikely: "help expand the community services available where my land is located," "harm outdoor recreation opportunities where my land is located," "promote economic growth where my land is located," and "promote the quality of life of people living near my land."