

# Building a Balance:

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY, ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION, AND SMART LAND USE DECISIONS



## What do New Yorkers Think About Growth and Development?

In May of 2000 Cornell University sponsored a statewide poll of 901 randomly selected New Yorkers. The poll touched on a variety of general topics related to population growth and development. Some key results are highlighted here. Responses from counties experiencing different degrees of urbanization and growth were contrasted.<sup>1</sup>

Survey respondents included both homeowners and renters. While both groups had similar views on most issues covered by the survey, renters - who, as a group, are more urbanized than homeowners - are more likely to be dissatisfied with their locality and to think population growth is a problem.

The results illuminate some of the opportunities and challenges proponents of "Smart Growth" or "Quality Communities" face in New York State. Many of them point to the priority New Yorkers place on the environment and their quality of life.

- First, dominant housing and community preferences suggest continued pressure for population to sprawl out from urban centers. More people wish for than have the proverbial little house in the country.
- Second, most New Yorkers dislike the prospect of more population growth, associating it with many negative impacts.

- Third, New Yorkers strongly favor farm, open space, and environmental protection despite awareness of some economic trade-offs.
- Fourth, most New Yorkers favor government involvement in managing population growth, though support falls off among nonurban residents.

### Preferred Population Size and Density

Well over half of New Yorkers think the size of their town, county, and state are "about right." About two-thirds are content with the density of their neighborhoods. However, New Yorkers who are dissatisfied overwhelmingly prefer smaller and less densely settled population patterns, especially in their own neighborhoods. Residents of more urban and faster growing counties are the most likely to prefer smaller populations and lower density neighborhoods.

<sup>1</sup>Counties were classified into three groups along an urbanization spectrum using the proportion of the population in 1990 Census-defined urban areas.

1) "Least Urban" - Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chenango, Columbia, Delaware, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Lewis, Livingston, Ontario, Oswego, Otsego, Schoharie, Schuyler, Steuben, Sullivan, Ulster, Wayne, Wyoming, Yates. 2) "Intermediate"- Cayuga, Chautauqua, Clinton, Cortland, Dutchess, Fulton, Genesee, Herkimer, Jefferson, Madison, Montgomery, Oneida, Orange, Putnam, Rensselaer, Saratoga, Seneca, St Lawrence, Tompkins. 3) "Most Urban" - Albany, Bronx, Broome, Chemung, Erie, Kings, Monroe, Nassau, New York, Niagara, Onondaga, Queens, Richmond, Rockland, Schenectady, Suffolk, Westchester.

Counties were also ranked by rate of population growth during the 1990's and classified into three groups: 1) "Declining" (negative growth: Allegany, Broome, Cattaraugus, Cayuga, Chautauqua, Chemung, Chenango, Clinton, Cortland, Erie, Herkimer, Montgomery, Niagara, Oneida, Onondaga, Rensselaer, Schenectady, Schoharie, Seneca, St. Lawrence, Steuben, Tioga). 2) "Slow growth" (0-5% growth: Albany, Columbia, Delaware, Essex, Fulton, Genesee, Hamilton, Jefferson, Lewis, Livingston, Madison, Monroe, Nassau, New York, Oswego, Otsego, Schuyler, Tompkins, Washington, Wyoming). 3) "Growing" (greater than 5% growth: Bronx, Dutchess, Franklin, Greene, Kings, Ontario, Orange, Orleans, Putnam, Queens, Richmond, Rockland, Saratoga, Suffolk, Sullivan, Ulster, Warren, Wayne, Westchester, Yates). Greene, Orleans, Tioga, Warren, and Washington, counties had no respondents.

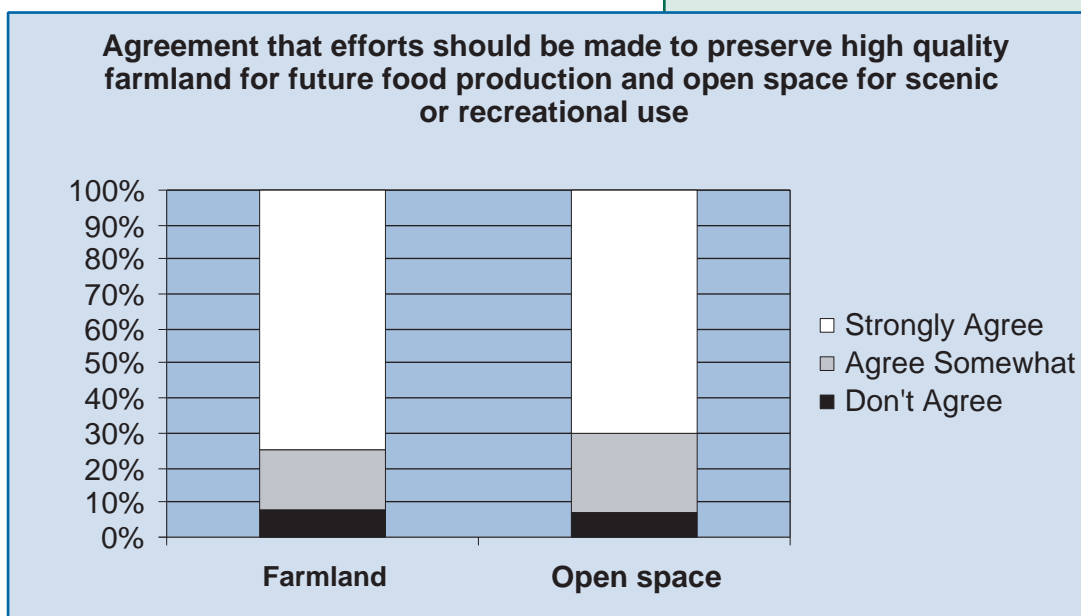
# Population Growth

More than three fourths of New Yorkers (76% overall; 66% in the least urban counties) associate growth with increased housing costs. Well over half (59% overall; 50% in declining counties) believe that an increase in the number of houses causes taxes to go up. Faster population growth in the community is seen as a boon to economic development by only 30% of New Yorkers. An equal proportion (30%) feel population growth actually hurts economic development. In contrast, there is very strong agreement (83%) that faster population growth in the community is harmful to the environment. This sentiment is quite uniform across the urbanization spectrum, but is weakest in the declining counties.

# Farmland and Open Space Protection

There is overwhelming agreement with the statement that "efforts should be made to preserve high quality farmland for future food production" (92% agree strongly or somewhat). Sentiments in favor of efforts "to preserve open space for scenic or recreational uses" are similar (93% agree strongly or somewhat). (Chart 1) The high levels of support do not vary much across counties by degree of urbanization or growth.

Chart 1



# Jobs and Economy versus the Environment

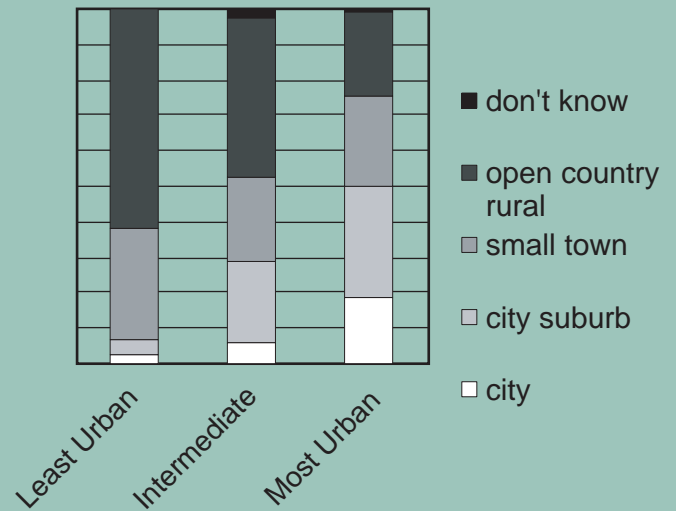
Do we worry too much about pollution and the environment and not enough about prices and jobs? Although the phrasing of this question does not force individuals to consider personal costs, a majority of New Yorkers (57%) disagrees and favors the environment. A similar majority (60%) agrees that we should protect the environment "even if it means jobs in the local community are lost" and that "we must sacrifice economic growth in order to preserve the environment" (62%). Though response patterns vary somewhat by question, residents of more urban counties tend to favor the environment most.

# Location and Housing Preferences

Most New Yorkers would ideally like to live in "open country rural areas" or "small communities" (56%). City suburbs are preferred by 27%; cities by only 15%. Almost half the residents of the most urban counties wish they could live in open country or small communities. In contrast, less than 10% of the residents of the least urban counties would prefer life in a city or city suburb. (Chart 2) New Yorkers strongly (83%) prefer to live in separate detached housing.

Chart 2

Preferred community type by urban status of county of residence

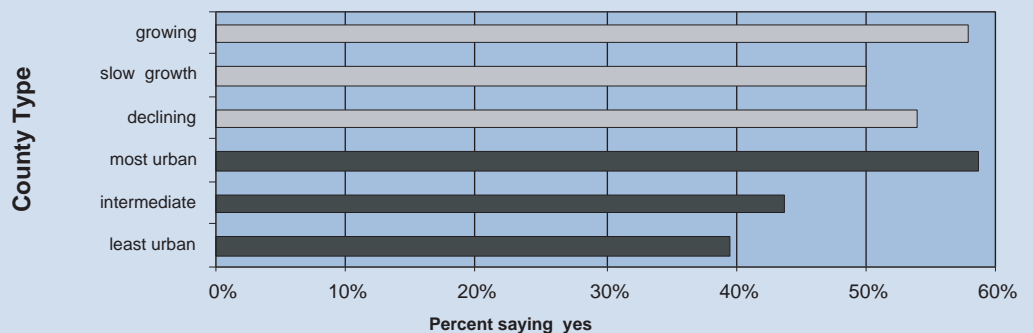


# Government Policy and Population Growth

When asked generally if government should be dealing with "problems of growth" or should "not intervene," the majority support an active governmental role. (55% should, 38% should not, 7% no answer). Support is strongest for local government in this role, followed by federal and then state government. However, support outside of the most urban counties drops below 50%. (Chart 3) Support also drops when reference is specifically made to the respondent's own community. Just over one in three respondents (37%) agreed that the town or county should do something "about the way population is distributed around your community," while 61% disagreed. Residents of growing counties were more likely than residents of other counties to agree with this sentiment.

Chart 3

Should government deal with problems of growth?



# Sprawl and Smart Growth

"Sprawl" is a term that is much more familiar than is "Smart Growth." Over half of respondents (52%) were familiar enough with the first term to attempt to define it. This is double the number of respondents familiar with the second (27%). Familiarity with "sprawl" increases with education and income, and was slightly more familiar among residents of the rural and the slowly growing counties. Would Smart Growth policies mean higher business costs? Among the small minority of people saying they were familiar with Smart Growth, slightly more agreed (48%) than disagreed (41%).

## Summary and Conclusions

In their lifestyle preferences and support for public policy, New Yorkers value low density living, open space, and scenic farmland. The more these amenities are absent or threatened, the more strongly they tend to be supported. Urban dwellers are the most likely to express discontent with their home location.

There is much pre-existing evidence to suggest that problems associated with sprawl are both familiar to New Yorkers and disliked. At the same time, many New Yorkers prefer to live in low density environments that tend to sprawl when individuals independently attempt to realize their dreams.

"Smart Growth" is being promoted as a solution to sprawl. So far, it is an unfamiliar term to most state residents, including those living in counties with increasing populations. Our survey did not directly define and measure support for Smart Growth policies. Such policies typically envision new development that concentrates around existing infrastructure, saving taxes while protecting open space and revitalizing existing population centers. Insofar as Smart Growth or New York's Quality Communities policies support such a vision, they will likely enjoy popular support.

However, New Yorkers in our survey express widespread, experience-based antipathy to population growth and density. One of the greatest challenges facing planners, politicians, and promoters who seek to implement a Smart Growth vision is to devise strategies, policies, and designs that can effectively shift the balance of preference towards higher density living in already settled areas.

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