

What do New Yorkers Think About Growth and Development?

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I. Recent Trends

Concern About Growth, Land Use, and Sprawl Has Increased

Interest in growth, sprawl, and related land use issues appears to be sweeping the country. In the past several years, studies have proliferated and media attention has mushroomed. Thousands of press stories have appeared. Major newspaper headlines that employed the favored term “smart growth” more than quadrupled between 1998 and 1999. But interest goes beyond the headlines. In a recent national survey by the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, nearly one fifth of respondents listed sprawl related issues (e.g. development, traffic, roads) as “the most important problem facing the community where you live”. The issue was most often highlighted by suburban, college-educated, white Americans. Overall, concern about sprawl increased since 1994 and ranked right at the top of the list of local concerns with crime and violence.¹

Consistent with this finding, grass roots organizations opposing sprawl or rallying behind varied “responsible land use” agendas have multiplied. Countless local initiatives and elections have taken up growth management or land use themes. The American Planning Association reports that close to 1,000 land use reform bills were introduced into state legislatures in 1999 alone, with about one in five becoming law.² The issue made an entrance onto the central national political stage in 1999 when Vice President Gore announced the Administration’s “Livability Agenda”, which bundled a handful of smart growth policies under a less edgy label.

Economic and Population Shifts Accompanied by Land Consumption

Interest has been driven by many factors. Among them, overall population in the United States is estimated to have grown by more than 13% between 1990 and 2000.³ Growth was dramatically higher in many states in the south and west. Growth was not uniform within regions, either. For complex economic and social reasons, both population and jobs -- often accompanied by congestion -- have moved increasingly to the suburbs and the outer suburbs.

During this period, the national economy also experienced a period of unprecedented growth and wealth creation. Americans have spent part of their wealth on ever larger houses per person.⁴ We have also consumed more land. One USDA estimate suggests that 25 million acres of nonfederal land may have been converted through development over a fifteen year period, a 34% increase.⁵ A Brookings Institution Study released in 2001 concludes that urbanization has consumed land rapidly even in regions like the Northeast and Midwest which have experienced only slow population growth.⁶

How About New York State?

How well does this portrait apply to New York State? On a community level, New York has followed larger trends as cities and first generation suburbs have seen people and jobs move outward, reinforcing

¹ See <http://www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/research/>

² See <http://www.planning.org/plnginfo/GROWSMAR/probac.htm>

³ See <http://blue.census.gov/population/cen2000/phc-t2/tab02.xls>

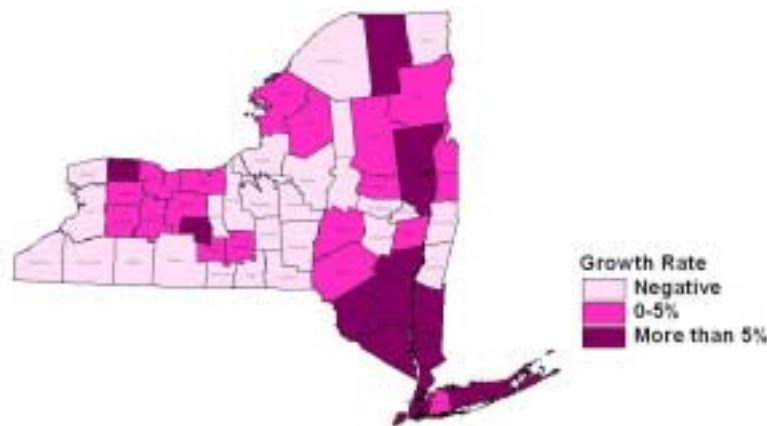
⁴ See http://www.nahb.com/housing_issues/fft2001.pdf

⁵ See <http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/land/pubs/97highlights.html>

⁶ See <http://www.brookings.edu/es/urban/publications/fulton.pdf>

lower density land use patterns overall. This shift came though Census estimates of New York's population growth in the 1990's are, at 5.5%, among the nation's lowest. At the same time, until recently New York's (especially Upstate's) participation in the strong economy lagged far behind that of other states.

Almost half of New York counties, all upstate, are estimated to have actually lost population in the 1990's. (See map) Those counties lacking a major suburban component, both rural and urban, tended to experience no growth or actual population decline. In contrast, population growth was relatively strong in the New York City metropolitan region and in upstate counties with mixed suburban and rural characteristics. In sum, while there has been only slow growth overall, New York has experienced a significant redistribution of population across its landscape.



Smart Growth in New York State

Does Smart Growth have salience as an issue in New York State despite the lack of overall growth pressures? The answer appears to be yes. Anti-sprawl and related policies have been adopted or debated in many local communities ranging from Long Island to Rochester and Buffalo. As in other states, an astonishingly diverse array of interest groups ranging from environmental groups to the state homebuilder's association have jumped on the bandwagon. At state and local levels, a diverse coalition of these stakeholders has actively jockeyed for position while seeking common ground and policy influence. Most anchor themselves in a core concept: concentrating new development in or near existing developed areas to avoid sprawling haphazardly across a low density landscape.

The vision that is collectively evoked by this collection of interest groups includes but is not limited to the protection of farmland, open space, and environmentally sensitive areas; the revitalization of inner cities and village main streets; the rehabilitation of historic structures and provision of affordable housing; the alleviation of traffic congestion and automobile dependency; and the more efficient use of infrastructure and taxpayer relief.

Whether this vision will motivate a politically coherent policy or lead to change on the ground in New York remains to be seen. A variety of Smart Growth bills has already been introduced into, though not passed by, the NYS legislature. In the meantime, Governor Pataki created the Quality Communities Interagency Task Force. In January 2001 the Task Force released a report with 41 recommendations

intended to help communities “in implementing effective land development, preservation and rehabilitation strategies that promote both economic development and environmental protection.”⁷

II. The New York Public’s Attitudes towards Growth and Growth Management

Highlights of the Cornell Study

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 urbanization⁸ and growth⁹ were contrasted.

The results illuminate some of the opportunities and challenges proponents of “Smart Growth” or “Quality Communities” face in the Empire State. Overall, the results solidify some key impressions. Many of them point to the priority New Yorkers place on the environment and “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 residents outside the most urban counties.

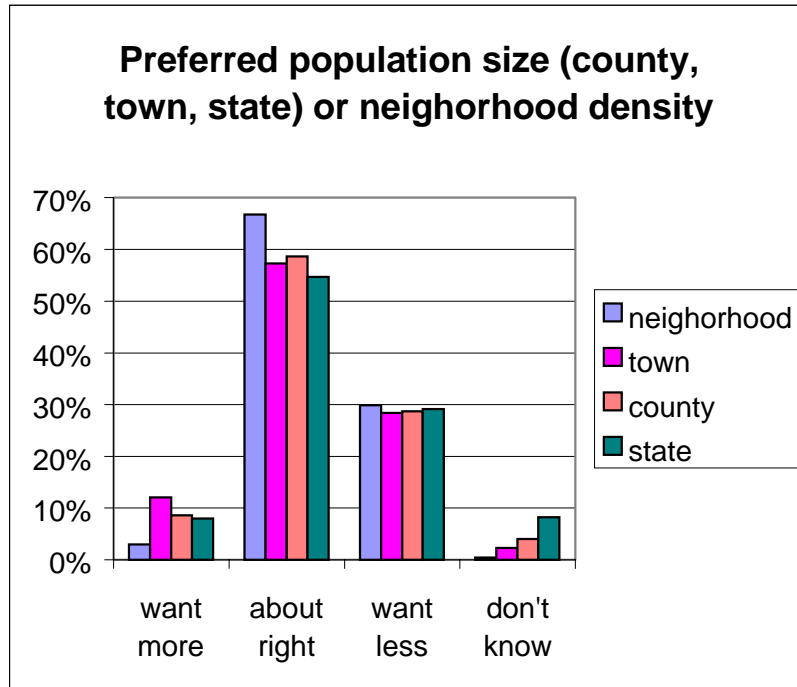
Preferred Population Size and Density – Few Welcome Increases

Well over half of New Yorkers think the size of their town, county, and state are “about right” (see chart). 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.

⁷ See http://www.state.ny.us/lgovdoc/cover_pdf.html

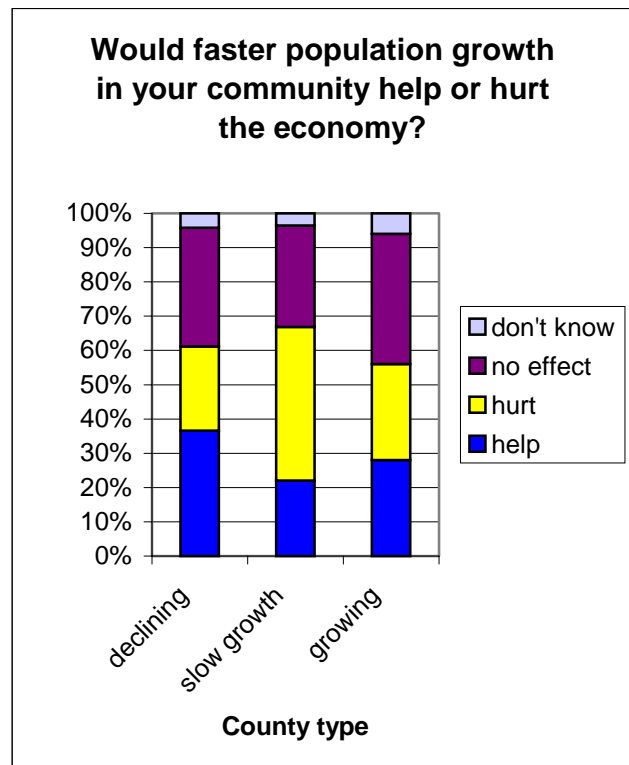
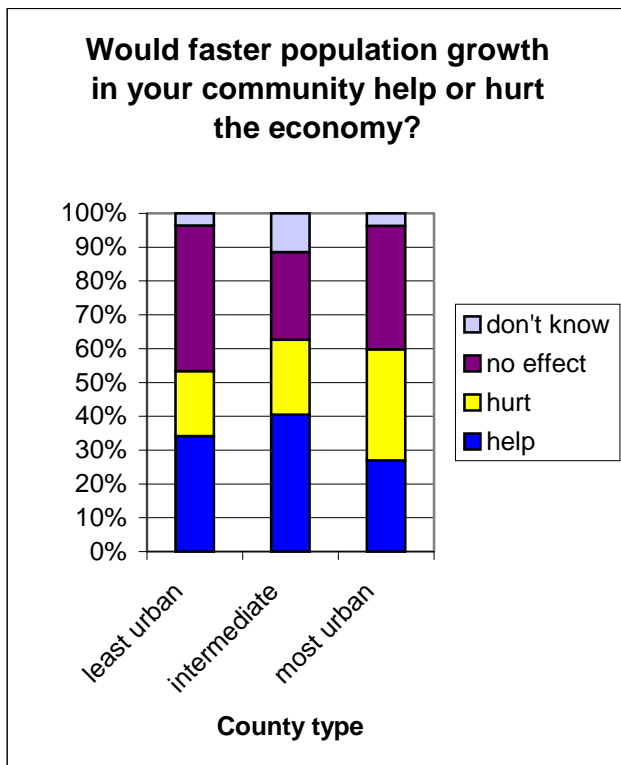
⁸ Counties were classified into three groups along an urbanization spectrum using the proportion of the population in 1990 Census-defined urban areas. “Least Urban” - Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chenango, Columbia, Delaware, Essex, Franklin, Hamilton, Lewis, Livingston, Ontario, Oswego, Otsego, Schoharie, Schuyler, Steuben, Sullivan, Ulster, Wayne, Wyoming, Yates. “Intermediate”: Cayuga, Chautauqua, Clinton, Cortland, Dutchess, Fulton, Genesee, Herkimer, Jefferson, Madison, Montgomery, Oneida, Orange, Putnam, Rensselaer, Saratoga, Seneca, St Lawrence, Tompkins. “Most Urban” - Albany, Bronx, Broome, Chemung, Erie, Kings, Monroe, Nassau, New York, Niagara, Onondaga, Queens, Richmond, Rockland, Schenectady, Suffolk, Westchester. Greene, Orleans, Tioga, Warren, and Washington, counties had no respondents.

⁹ 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.



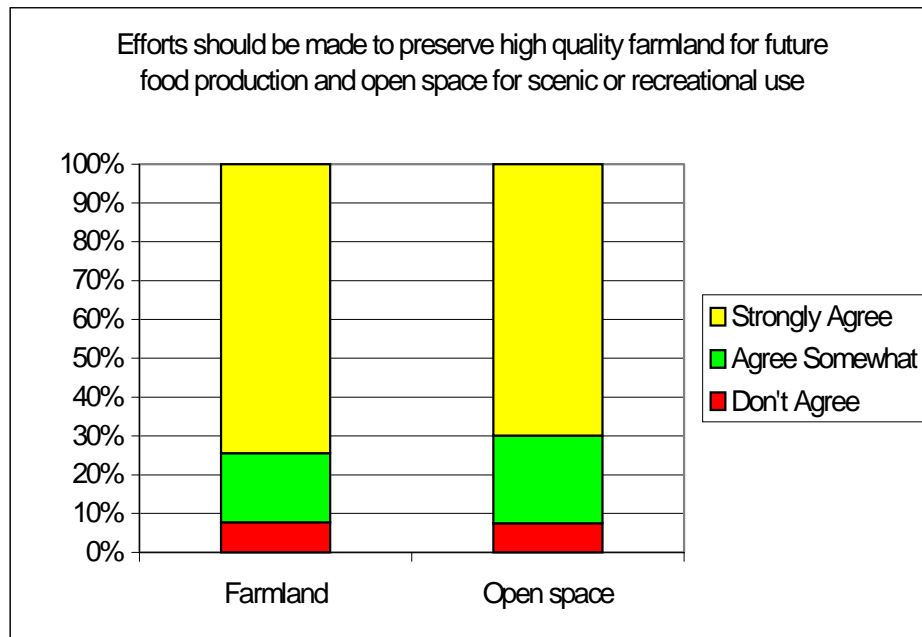
Population Growth – Linked to Higher Taxes & House Costs; Harm to Environment, even Economy

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. People from counties that lost population were more likely to associate growth with economic benefit, and people from the most urban counties were more likely to associate it with harm. (see charts) 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 ? – Yes!

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). (See Chart) The high levels of support do not vary much across counties by degree of urbanization or growth.



Jobs and Economy versus the Environment? - The Environment First

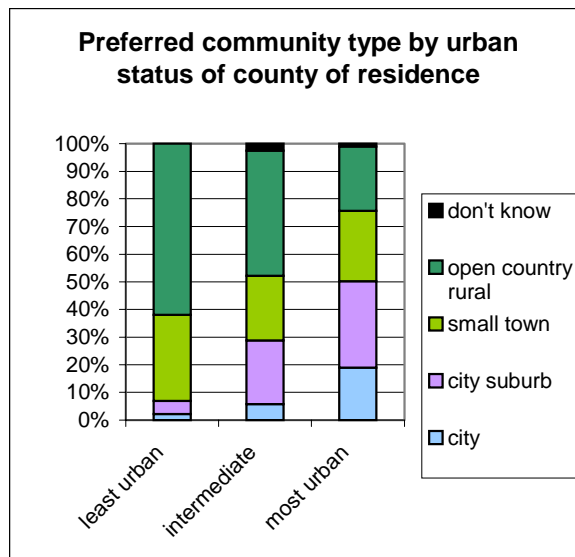
Do we worry too much about pollution and the environment and not enough about prices and jobs? A majority of New Yorkers (57%) disagrees and favors the environment. A similar majority (60%) agrees that we should protect the environment “even if it means jobs in the local community are lost” (see chart) 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.

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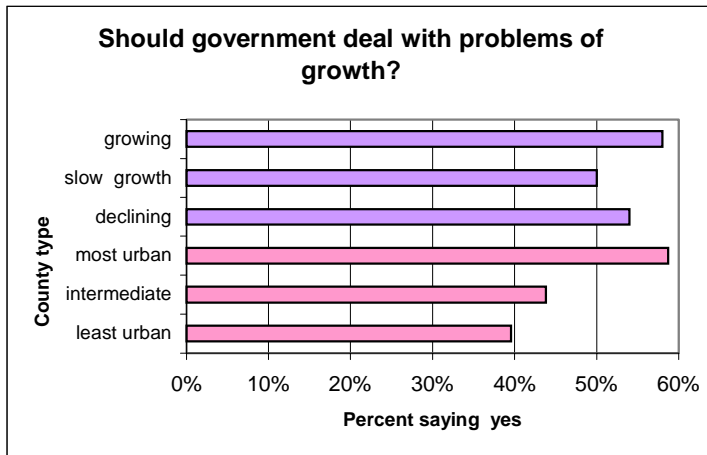
Location and Housing Preferences – Many Urban County Dwellers Wish for Small Town Life

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. (see chart) New Yorkers strongly (83%) prefer to live in separate detached housing.



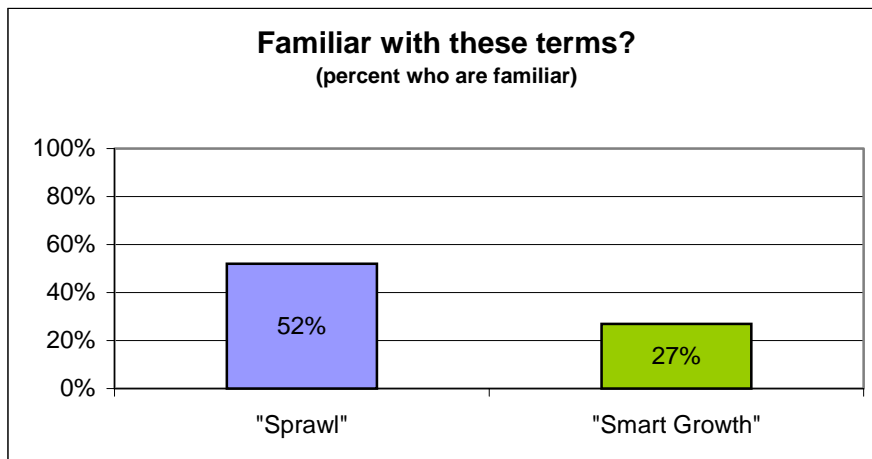
Government Policy and Population Growth – Support for Government Role Strongest in Urban Counties

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% (see chart). 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.



Sprawl and Smart Growth – “Smart Growth” an unfamiliar term throughout state

“Sprawl” is a term that is much more familiar than is “Smart Growth”. (see chart) 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 valued or 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 turn 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 recently announced 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 the 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.