PREFACE

On October 18-20, 1982, The Delta Assembly met at Toro Hills Conference Center in Many, Louisiana. This was the fourth regional follow-up to the 58th American Assembly on the topic “The Farm and The City.” For two and one-half days participants, who included farmers, urban planners, foresters, legislators, city and state officials, bankers, academics, media personnel, lawyers, and land developers, considered the interrelated problems of preserving both our nation’s dwindling farm lands and its center city areas.

Dr. Fritz W. Wagner, Director of the School of Urban and Regional Studies at the University of New Orleans, served as co-ordinator of The Delta Assembly. In this task he was ably assisted by Dr. Floyd L. Corty, Professor of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness at the Center for Agricultural Science and Rural Development in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The book The Farm and The City: Rivals or Allies, published by the American Assembly, was given to participants as background reading, together with a specially-prepared paper highlighting recent trends in the Mississippi Delta region of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.

Mr. Stephen Pitkin, Executive Director of the Shreveport (Louisiana) Metropolitan Planning Commission, and Mr. Richard Hollier, Chairman of the St. Landry Soil and Water Conservation District (Louisiana), made formal presentations highlighting urban and rural facets of the issue under discussion. Dr. A.M. Woodruff, Vice President of the Lincoln Foundation, and Mr. David H. Mortimer, Vice President of the American Assembly, welcomed participants on behalf of their organizations.

The Delta Assembly was sponsored by the University of New Orleans School of Urban and Regional Studies, the Louisiana State University Center for Agricultural Science and Rural Development, and the American Assembly, New York, New York. Financial support for The Delta Assembly was provided by the sponsors.

The Delta Assembly and its sponsors took no official stand on subjects they presented for public discussion and the participants spoke for themselves, rather than for the institutions with which they are affiliated. The Delta Assembly reviewed as a group the following statements; however, none was asked to sign the docu-
ment. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribed to every recommendation.

**INTRODUCTION**

Like central cities elsewhere, those of the Delta Region continue to lose population to expanding suburban peripheries. Left behind in the inner cities are disproportionate numbers of poor with limited education and few employment skills. This occurs as employment opportunities for those with limited skills decline due to the job outmigration. The city is faced with citizens needing more services, but is forced to finance those services from a diminishing tax base. It is easy to conclude that present trends are leading to cities that are permanently dependent “client-states” of the federal and state governments from whom they receive massive financial transfusions.

At the same time, outward sprawl from the urban core seeks out relatively inexpensive (by urban standards) raw land by “leapfrogging” over built-up areas to compete with farmers for lands on the urban fringe. Fueled by federal grants and state government policies which favor extension of sewer and water lines before a clear need is established; by mortgage policies which have traditionally encouraged new housing in peripheral locations; by a history of low energy costs; and by a highway construction program which has made long commuting trips feasible, the urban settlement pattern has moved with startling speed to simultaneously undermine central cities and pose a growing threat to the region’s agricultural interests.

Rural and urban dwellers are but dimly aware of the problems this settlement pattern creates for the other group. In days past, such isolation was relatively inconsequential as a slower-paced world and an abundance of natural resources compensated for the lack of understanding. It is the consensus of The Delta Assembly that in view of today’s conditions, it is imperative to monitor the rural-urban interrelationships and to design policies with these linkages in mind. To do less is to risk creating a series of thickly-populated urban belts unable to feed or clothe themselves from diminished agricultural acreages and depleted soils. Considered individually, the goals of many of our national policies and programs are laudable: to increase access to homeownership, to open
up remote and isolated areas, and to promote economic growth. The cumulative impact, however, is not uniformly favorable.

NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

An overriding concern of the conference focused on the increasing loss of prime farm land to urban sprawl. Of equal importance to the Assembly was the issue of the growing number of unemployed, underemployed and poor trapped either in a deteriorating city or in rural areas where farm jobs are often seasonal and low paying. What policy solutions will permit us to alleviate both concerns?

National policy relating to either cities or rural interests is difficult to gauge. It is the belief of The Delta Assembly that the ability of the urban and rural sectors to survive government policies has been drastically overestimated, when those policies undermine essential foundations of both sectors.

To understand the dilemma is to review American history. Suspicious of the evils of cities, our forefathers were primarily independent farmers whose memories of stifling regulations on property use were both vivid and recent. The documents on which our society is based assume that power centralized is power apt to be misused. In no area of life is this idea more evident than in our attitudes regarding use of property. Make a poor immigrant a citizen and allow him to purchase land of his own and he will become a staunch defender of the American way of life.

So long as the nation could afford the luxury of allowing expansion into unsettled lands in order to conquer the frontier, this policy was defensible and even noble. But, in the light of growing evidence that it is now having negative and perhaps irreversible side effects, should this policy be continued? Is there a base of power for or a possibility of consensus on methods to limit urban outward expansion?

Rural interests report that they are increasingly outbid for prime agricultural land by developers of shopping centers and subdivisions. To a degree the farmer makes up for this loss by sacrificing forest land for crop use or risking the agricultural use of flood plains or coastal wetlands. By so doing he not only incurs higher production costs, but also risks the wrath of environmentalists and sportsmen concerned with encroachment on the natural
habitat of fish and wildlife.

Inject into this equation the reality of limited and often conflicting data about the extent and impact of rural to urban land conversion, the devastating rate of inflation, and the ingrained fear of government controls over land use, and the true nature of the problem comes into focus.

The lack of appropriate and trusted forums to exchange rural and urban policy information further compounds the problem. Cities painfully remember the unfair treatment accorded them by malapportioned state legislatures biased toward rural interests. On the other hand, since the adoption of the “one man-one vote” doctrine by the courts in *Baker vs. Carr* (1962), rural interests have been out-voted frequently enough by more populous urban areas to raise their suspicions of urban motives.

The complexities of urban and rural policies are staggering. Agriculture, for example, has been alternately propped up and then clubbed down by a maze of supports, marketing quotas, embargos, and acreage restrictions. Urban policy, outwardly humanitarian in thrust and ostensibly directed to the assistance of the poor, might more properly be viewed as a boost to either the construction industry of financial institutions.

As a result, some now argue that virtually all remedies have been tried to no avail and that it might be appropriate to leave things to the fate of the market place. Yet, it is the free market place that has failed to meet many of the needs of the central city and the family farm in the past. For example, one Delta Assembly participant characterized American agriculture as “an island of free enterprise afloat in a sea of controlled economies,” referring to the fact that a great portion of American agricultural products are exported to controlled economies while the free market stops abruptly at the American shoreline.

**DISCUSSION OF THE PROBLEM**

“Give me land, lots of land” goes the opening refrain of a once-popular song. Unhappily, this simple, six-word phrase aptly describes both our urban and rural policies. Both are predicated on a ready supply of inexpensive prime land, and we are uniquely blessed with just such a resource.

The urban-rural balance of not long ago was based on geographic
separation, allowing each sector to pursue its destiny without interfering in the affairs of the other. When the two spheres came into conflict or, more aptly, competition at the urban fringe, the arbiter of this impasse was the market economy which swung heavily to the urban side. Agricultural land, long used for crop production, suddenly was viewed as likely subdivisions. Land values skyrocketed. Highway routes were selected which destroyed both urban neighborhoods and prime farm land. Giant sewer and water lines forged out from the city, funded by tax-exempt municipal bonds so easily issued as to be almost without critical scrutiny. Federally assisted public works projects leveed-off critical wetlands to "protect" homeowners, now blithely moving into slab-built houses in flood plains.

Meanwhile, the farmer was in retreat. Unable to resist at least considering land conversion to urban use, he also saw agricultural policy oscillate wildly as food, one of the few American commodities still in demand overseas, was alternately offered to curry diplomatic friendship and then withheld as a penalty. Locked into an immutable growing-cycle time frame and further subject to natural hazards, the farmer found himself, willingly or not, the nation's premier risk-taker, albeit one with startlingly little control over events which could make or break his fortunes overnight. Such conditions have all but erased the very small farmer from the American landscape, while countless others make do by earning the majority of their income from off-farm jobs. Farming is a demanding sideline in many respects.

The urban dweller, on the other hand, was not a universal beneficiary of growth policies. Today's urban resident sees a growing number of abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and underutilized land held without penalty. Just as land withdrawn from agricultural production weakens our ability to sustain the population, so does land only marginally on the tax rolls contribute little toward the cost of providing urban services. Yet, in both situations our national heritage has failed to provide a sound philosophical and legal foundation upon which to base a more stringent set of land use controls. Land-scarce European nations, unable by virtue of geography to afford such wasteful practices, do not allow this excess and consequently enjoy a more balanced development pattern.
Finally, our land use control mechanisms, such as they are, are a curious and almost unworkable mélange of federal, state, and local statutes and policies that sustain the legal profession to a greater degree than they protect either urban or rural interests. Most agree that land use controls should be administered by landowners at the local level. Yet, this view ignores the multiplicity of motives for land ownership and assumes that the common denominator of land ownership is alone sufficient to insure consensus on controls. History would suggest caution in pursuing such a belief.

Thus, as the nature of the rural-urban situation is examined, the path to an understanding of the problem is hindered by a lack of definitive statistical data and by an overabundance of anecdotal information, much of which recounts past errors in attempting to shape land use. Furthermore, the traditional American belief that, despite all odds, "we shall overcome," interferes with a clear view of the situation. As cities of the Delta Region have not recently suffered interruption of their food supply and with memories of the urban crises of the 1960's fading away, the urban-rural relationship apparently does not face an emergency. This state of events may, as evidence emerges to clarify the problem, be temporary, but the lull should not prevent attempts to define and solve these land allocation concerns before a crisis occurs.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM

Throughout the discussions, a final judgement as to the magnitude of rural-urban competition for land at the urban fringe was avoided; however, the potential for the situation to worsen into a mutually harmful relationship was recognized. The possible conflict deserves careful attention and conclusions reached deserve more formal input into future policy choices.

As recently as two or three years ago, those calling attention to the problem of urban-rural land conflict were few in number and were accorded little deference. Now that the dimensions of the rural facet of the problem are coming into focus, the topic is receiving wide comment. Such discussion should not lead to "scapegoating" or hasty expressions of panic, as these actions could be harmful. If a problem is identified, and it is the judgement of the participants that one is present, it will require a co-
operative effort to solve.

Other regions, for example the land-short New England states and the strongly outdoor-oriented Pacific Northwest, have already made a judgement that rural-urban land competition is a problem that must be faced. They have moved, sometimes decisively, but usually tentatively, to implement land use controls which are foreign to the Delta experience to date. Rather than wait until the problem worsens, a prudent course of action would be to increase public awareness of the problem and give wide exposure to some policy options deemed worthy elsewhere. An additional benefit of such a study would be realized when the question of legislative action and court acceptance of these policies is considered.

Since we are a society that has traditionally preferred incentives to sanctions as catalysts to action, consideration should be given to more positive inducements to deter movement away from the urban core. Such an inducement might be accomplished through the use of targeted tax incentives to individual homeowners to lower the generally higher city tax bills, or by the offering of below-market-interest-rate mortgage loans in designated city areas. Such policies would undoubtedly need to be accompanied by a companion policy to retain local industries lest they move to the fringe and force urban residents into long commutes, thus partially cancelling out the incentives to remain in the city.

Local government purchase of adjoining agricultural lands or the development rights thereto is another alternative. A rural landowner could thereby be compensated for any diminution in land value occasioned by future restricted use for agriculture. As a bonus, such measures can provide the city a measure of protection against population loss to the periphery. Obviously, the major problem associated with this approach is the general lack of local revenues available to pursue such a policy except on a sporadic basis.

Whatever solutions are considered must have strong support from a myriad of rural and urban interests or they will fail. If, before legislation is drafted, agreement on shared goals and objectives could be reached by such a coalition, then, and only then, would the legislative prospects be bright.
CONCLUSIONS

Prime agricultural land is too valuable to lose, particularly if there is no conscious realization that the loss is happening. Similarly, inner cities cannot lose people and tax revenues and remain viable entities. Both conditions — loss of rural land to urban sprawl and city out-migration to the fringe — are accelerating, even if there is disagreement on the exact rate and the effects of such conditions. While our heritage as a nation of free individuals dictates prudence in the adoption of land use controls, we are not powerless to address the issue. A rural-urban coalition, based on an acknowledgment of shared destiny, is potentially available to give direction to land use decisions that further regional and national interests while respecting to the maximum possible extent the rights of property owners.

It is hard to escape the conclusion that erratic, inconsistent federal policies and programs relating to urban and rural matters, have contributed to the problem. A more finely-tuned set of policies and programs emphasizing productive co-operation would probably accomplish far more than a maze of land use controls imposed on a reluctant population and administered by a hodgepodge of government agencies.

Another strong conclusion is that it is imperative that employment and educational opportunities be increased for those persons now left with few prospects in cities that are losing unskilled jobs. An earlier generation of such persons came from the farms to seek opportunities in the cities. The farms of today cannot absorb a reverse migration of disadvantaged individuals because agricultural jobs increasingly require technical skills. A major investment in human capital is clearly needed if there is to be a supply of the skilled persons necessary to be competitive in today's urban and rural world.
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* Discussion Leader
** Rapporteur
LOUPE, Dr. Denver T.
Baton Rouge, LA

LUNDY, Father George
New Orleans, LA

LYONS, Mr. Marvin L.
Baton Rouge, LA

MARTIN, Honorable James P.
Welsh, LA

MAYET, Mr. Guthrie
Lockport, LA

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Alexandria, LA

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New Orleans, LA

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New Orleans, LA

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Baton Rouge, LA

STAPLES, Mr. Charley
Baton Rouge, LA

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New Orleans, LA

WALES, Mr. Charles R.
Glenmora, LA

WILD, Mr. Edward
Welsh, LA

WILSON, Mr. John H.
New Orleans, LA

* Discussion Leader
** Rapporteur
The Final Statement of The Delta Assembly was written by Dr. Ralph E. Thayer, Professor, School of Urban and Regional Studies, University of New Orleans. Editorial assistance was provided by Ms. Jane Greene, Research Assistant, and printing preparation was handled by Ms. Jane S. Brooks, Assistant Professor.

For additional copies write to:

Coordinator
The Delta Assembly
School of Urban and Regional Studies
University of New Orleans
New Orleans, LA 70148