

rural new york minute

ISSUE NUMBER 12/DECEMBER 2007

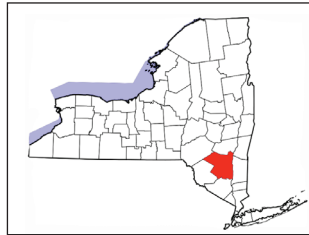
Are towns outside of NYC feeling the effects of rural gentrification?

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As the dust settled from September 11, 2001, many New York City residents considered leaving. Census estimates reveal a post 9-11 net population loss for NYC and its immediately adjacent counties, when foreign immigration is excluded. In contrast, counties more distant from NYC experienced net population gains, in some cases increasing demand for housing and affecting the social fabric of some of the more rural communities, changes often associated with “rural gentrification.”

Rural population growth is primarily driven by urban expansion, retirement migration, and people seeking specific amenities. All three of these processes involve some degree of *gentrification*. “Gentrification is the process by which higher-income households displace lower-income residents of a community, changing the essential character and flavor of that community.”**. Sonya Salomon’s *Newcomers to Old Towns* describes the main features of rural gentrification. She notes that while there is a general lack of the immediate *physical* displacement of existing residents so often seen in the urban context, more apparent is a subtle *social* displacement, as existing local institutions change or wither, social mores become more sub-urban and less “small town,” and conflicts over land use priorities and decisions arise.

To explore rural gentrification further, we examined U.S. Census Bureau data and conducted interviews with several key informants (including town supervisors, tax assessors, realtors, planners, and librarians) in rural towns in Ulster County, a metropolitan county some 100 miles up the Hudson River from NYC.



Still about 50% rural in 2000, Ulster County reversed its trend of population loss from the 1990s to begin slow annual growth from 2000 to the present. Even though the rate of population growth has been less than 1% per year, local governments and planning boards have expressed concern about a housing crunch as well as what they perceive as changes to the character of their more rural communities. Interviewees were asked questions about a range of topics, such as the change in year-round in-migrants, demographic shifts and housing availability and affordability, land use conflicts, and their perceptions of changes in levels of civic engagement and lifestyles among residents.

Interviews with the town supervisors of both Marbletown and Lloyd gave a broader picture of the changing landscape. Local governments face challenges from population growth and rising housing costs. Rising land values and property taxes seem to be re-shaping these towns, findings echoed in a 2005 housing affordability study. There is significant concern that the children of current residents would be unable to afford housing in the area or even pay the rising taxes on inherited land – a defining char-

acteristic of gentrification in urban areas. With a significant rise (65% in one case) in property taxes over the last five years, towns are already seeing major changes in the ownership of large parcels, particularly farmland, according to our interviews. Another interviewee talked about the “Hamptonization” of one of the villages in his town. Others mentioned the “lagging” villages, dwindling in number, with affordably-priced housing.

Rural gentrification has also affected the local politics of some land use decisions, with many of the major land transactions in Ulster County now involving national development companies bidding against national open space advocates. Both jockey for position in the national land arena through a series of local contests. Local governments feel pressure to act preemptively on land use issues, and several towns have recently revised their comprehensive plans and zoning ordinances to keep pace with what some perceive as new challenges and others view as new opportunities.

A social and political shift has occurred as well. In one rural town, the supervisor reported being the first Democratic supervisor elected “maybe, ever.” In the past decade the town board has gone from having one Democrat to having five. The profile of the town’s residents has changed from mostly year-round farmers and small-business owners to greater diversity, including weekenders, second-home owners, and a substantial gay community. These newer residents are beginning to vote, and overall are more likely to vote Democratic, according to the town supervisor.

In an interview, Dr. Japonica Brown-Saracino, a gentrification expert from Loyola University, emphasized that public libraries often serve as institutions where newcomers establish footholds in a new community, often as volunteers or in leadership roles. The director of the library in Stone Ridge, NY (Town of Marbletown) confirmed this idea. The demand for new databases and wireless internet access has been an accelerating challenge in her library and all the systems in the mid-Hudson area since the year 2000, attributable in part to new residents from NYC. Many of the “newcomers” are actually longer term second-home owners now settling in the area full-time, especially as they approach retirement. Typically, as they spend more time in town, their demands for services grow.

Overall, our research suggests that the social and economic life of some rural towns in Ulster County are changing – driven largely by changes in population *composition*, rather than sheer population *growth*. Shifting land values, changing local institutions, and the rising cost of living are all changes that may be described as consistent with “rural gentrification.” Given the nature of these changes, cooperation between in-movers and longer term residents is needed to enhance the quality of life for everyone. ♦

* Claiborne served as a summer 2007 intern with CaRDI with funding by the EDA University Center at Cornell.

** (Housing Assistance Council 2005).