

What should we do about Rural America?

This issue of the *Leopold Letter* focuses on public policy, a relatively new arena for our work. Over the past decade, the Leopold Center has devoted almost all of its attention to research on alternative production practices and environmental issues.

As we enter our next decade of work, we are convinced that we also need to pay attention to public policy. Public policy both shapes and is shaped by public attitudes. These attitudes translate into public support—or lack of it—for policies that affect our future.

The predominant attitude toward rural communities is that they have no future. In fact, this attitude seems to prevail even *within* rural communities. In 1991, rural sociologist Curt Stofferahn and his colleagues published the results of a survey conducted in several midwestern rural communities. They discovered that most rural towns harbor only two visions for their communities. One vision sees their town's death as inevitable due to economic decline, and their role as helping to ease the transition. The other vision also shows a dying town, but they cling to the notion that they can keep the town alive by attracting industry.

It is generally fair to assume that people outside rural communities have already given up on rural America. Margaret Usdansky's 1992 *USA Today* article in which she suggests that "small towns have a lot of history, little else" probably reflects the attitude of most Americans.

This attitude about rural communities is, of course, entirely based on economic analyses. The assumption is that since rural communities have outlived their economic usefulness, they no longer have a right to exist.

Very little attention has been given to the *social* and *cultural* values of rural communities. We are left with the choices of abandoning rural communities, sticking it out to help bury the

At fifteen, I could define failure fast: to die in Minneota, Minnesota. – Bill Holm

Small, rural towns have a lot of history, little else. – Margaret Usdansky

corpse, or nurturing the naïve hope that some "industry" will move into town and "save us."

The reality is probably not that simple. Aside from the fact that rural communities have made major contributions to our national good, we are now faced with the unsettling question of what we want to do with our rural landscape. *If the farms and towns that populated our countryside disappear, what will replace them?* Will what replaces them continue to serve the public good?

A few sociologists have given us snapshots of what the rural landscape of the future might look like. Frank and Deborah Popper have suggested that much of the Plains should be returned to a "buffalo commons"—a kind of wildlife preserve. Willard Cochrane recently suggested that such a commons might be given back to Native Americans as a new enterprise zone for a thriving bison business. Jedediah Purdy predicts that given current trends our rural landscape



Community development leader Karl Stauber (right) met with Fred Kirschenmann and other Leopold Center staff when he came to Ames in August to address the Rural Iowa Summit (see his comments, page 4).

might be divided between huge industrial complexes and an "idle playground for the rich."

Earlier this year, Northwest Area Foundation president Karl Stauber addressed the Center for the Study of Rural America, a program of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City. He said one of the most critical public policy questions in the 21st century is whether or not, and how, to invest in rural America. Stauber suggested that without public action, rural America will continue to decline, leading to the "relocation of those with the most intellectual, financial and social assets." In other words, without imaginative public policies the very assets that might revitalize rural communities will disappear from those communities.

Stauber also suggested that a policy of government support "based on cheap commodities and labor is shortsighted and unlikely to produce broad-based public benefits." He also suggested that reciprocity is fundamental to establishing a new social contract for rural America. What will non-rural America get in return for supporting new initiatives to revitalize rural America economically, socially, and intellectually?

It is time for us to decide together what kind of future we want for rural America and how that future will serve not only our farms and our rural communities, but our city cousins as well. The Leopold Center intends to help foster those conversations in Iowa as part of our new policy initiative.

Karl Stauber's paper is available on the web at <http://www.Kc.frb.org/PUBLICAT/ECONREV/PDF/2q01stau.pdf>.