

KEEPING OUR CHARM: RESIDENTS, GROWTH, AND QUALITY OF LIFE ISSUES IN A SMALL BUT GROWING TEXAS COASTAL COMMUNITY

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Abstract.—This study assessed residents' perceptions of quality of life, conservation, and growth in a small, fast-growing coastal community. Data were collected from an on-site survey in Aransas County, TX, from 2006 to 2007. Results show that the residents are concerned about preserving their natural resources, maintaining a small-town atmosphere in their community, and ensuring citizen involvement in future planning efforts, especially with tourism. The implications of the study for Extension professionals and residents are discussed and suggestions are made for future research.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In many parts of the United States, coastal regions and communities are being transformed in response to population growth, urbanization, and tourism. Tourism development and growth provide economic opportunities for local residents and businesses but may potentially have negative effects, including reduced open space, traffic congestion, loss of community identity, and displacement of residences (Freudenburg et al. 1982, Salamon 2003). Consequently, local government and community leaders must become more aware of residents' concerns and attitudes to balance economic development and tourism with overall quality of life and environmental conservation.

In this paper, we report on the results of a study examining residents' attitudes toward growth and quality of life. Study objectives are: 1) to assess perceived concerns and attitudes toward growth, quality of life issues, and natural resource conservation; 2) to compare citizens' attitudes and concerns by length of residence; and 3) to discuss the implications of growth for the quality of life for residents of coastal communities.

2.0 METHODS

2.1 Study Area

Data used in this study were collected from a survey of Aransas County residents in Texas. This coastal county is located on the Gulf of Mexico near Corpus Christi. The geographic area provides an important case study because it possesses rich coastal resources for tourism development. Aransas County is adjacent to major metropolitan cities such as Houston and San Antonio and other coastal communities, including Corpus Christi, Galveston, and South Padre Island. Aransas County is also experiencing rapid population and economic growth. Total population in the surrounding area exceeds 5 million people (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). The per capita personal income in Aransas County was \$25,094 in 2002, a 21.2-percent increase from 1997. The estimated population in 2006 was 24,831, an increase of 38 percent since 1990. The county population was 72 percent white, 22 percent Hispanic or Latino, 3 percent Asian, and 2 percent African American in 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Local business sectors include seafood, oil production, tourism, sport hunting and fishing, boating, and water sports.

2.2 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from several sources in spring 2006 and summer 2007. Participants at the Sea Fair Festival and the Oyster Festival in Aransas County were approached by interviewers and asked to

participate in a research study. Questionnaires (written in English) were completed on-site. In addition, other community members were asked to complete questionnaires at local meetings of the Chamber of Commerce Board, Rotary Club, and Master Gardeners.

2.3 Survey Instrument

The main part of the questionnaire contained items to assess participants' attitudes towards growth and quality of life. Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The items in the questionnaire incorporated multiple dimensions of the meaning of place from the local perspective: community identity and vision, consumption and services, and quality of life (related to walkability, livability, recreation, and social interaction) (Green et al. 1996, Kang and Kwak 2003, Bengston et al. 2005, Fenton 2005). Items were also selected from local issues and concerns expressed in the Texas Community Futures Forum, a state-wide assessment conducted in each county by Texas Cooperative Extension in 2004. The most salient issue was the effect that rapid population growth might have on "coastal charm," which was perceived to be an important local amenity. The questionnaire also contained items measuring outdoor recreation activity participation and socio-demographic characteristics.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Respondents' Profile

From the contacts made during the survey process, 1,540 usable questionnaires were obtained. For the purpose of this study, only local residents (full-time and part-time) were included in the data analysis (n=923). Part-time residence status was determined by respondents' self-reports. Of the respondents, 68 percent were full-time residents and 32 percent were part-time residents. The majority (58 percent) of the residents were female, 52 percent were between 47 and 67 years of age, 31 percent had some college/technical school education, and 87 percent were white. More than 60 percent of the residents had annual family incomes of at least \$50,000 (Table 1).

Table 1.—Socio-demographic profile of residents

Resident Variables	N	Percentage	Census data
Age			
18-24	44	5%	6%
25-34	72	8%	9%
35-44	99	12%	14%
45-64	430	50%	27%
> 65	208	24%	20%
Gender			
Male	370	42%	50%
Female	518	58%	50%
Education			
Less than high school	40	4%	25%
High school diploma	176	19%	29%
Some college/technical school	291	32%	24%
University graduate	260	28%	15%
Graduate degree	148	16%	6%
Household income			
Under \$15,000	26	3%	24%
\$15,000 to \$30,000	90	11%	24%
\$30,001 to \$50,000	190	23%	22%
\$50,001 to \$75,000	195	24%	15%
\$75,001 to \$100,000	144	17%	7%
> \$100,000	184	22%	8%
Race and ethnicity			
White	794	87%	87%
African American	9	1%	1%
Hispanic	60	7%	20%
Asian	9	1%	3%
Native American	8	1%	1%
Others	28	1%	5%

Note: The total numbers of demographic variables do not add up to the total number of study participants (923) due to missing data.

The majority of respondents had lived in the county less than 5 years (59 percent), and 11 percent had lived there more than 15 years. Just over 30 percent of the respondents work in the county, including about 45 percent of the full-time residents but only 4 percent of the part-time residents. Thirty-five percent receive a retirement pension. Currently, 85 percent of the residents participate in outdoor activities such as fishing, walking/hiking, and wildlife viewing.

Compared to the most recent Census data for the county (U.S. Census 2007), the survey respondents showed similar socio-demographic characteristics in age and gender distribution but exhibited slightly higher income and education than average. The sample contained a lower proportion of Hispanic individuals as well (Table 1).

3.2 Attitudes about Growth and Quality of Life

Table 2 shows the mean scores on the items pertaining to growth and quality of life for full- and part-time residents (1=Strongly Disagree, and 5=Strongly Agree). Overall, respondents agreed that growth and the future of the local environment are important to them. Specifically, respondents felt that citizens should play a role in guiding the character of future growth (mean=4.4), liked the small-town feel of downtown Rockport and Fulton (4.3), recognized that tourism is likely to remain the mainstay of the Aransas economy (4.3), and felt strongly about preserving local windswept oaks (4.4) and other natural features such as oak motts (a copse or small grove of trees,

particularly of live oaks, where a tight group shares a root system), wetlands, and prairies (4.3). Residents also felt that they lived close enough to local stores (2.5), did not prefer to shop at large chain retailers (2.5), and did not agree that seeing their neighbors less is better (2.0).

Several significant differences were also found in comparing full- and part-time residents (Table 2). Part-time residents felt more strongly that Aransas County had adapted well to new arrivals over the last 20 years (mean=3.7), had stronger positive feelings about the small-town feel of Rockport and Fulton, and were more willing to agree to a slight increase in taxes to preserve natural areas.

Table 2.—Mean scores and t-test results for growth and quality of life items for full and part-time residents

Statement	Overall Mean ¹	SD	Mean Full-time	Mean Part-time
Population growth has had a positive effect on the character of our community	3.5	1.2	3.4	3.5
Aransas County has adapted well to the arrival of new people over the last 20 years	3.5	1.0	3.4*	3.7
Aransas County needs growth in order to prosper	3.5	1.3	3.5	3.5
City and county government should play a role in guiding the character of future growth	4.0	1.0	4.0	4.0
Citizens and citizen groups should play a role in guiding the character of future growth	4.4	0.8	4.4	4.4
Tourism is likely to remain the mainstay of the Aransas County economy	4.3	0.9	4.3	4.3
Seeing and interacting frequently with neighbors is important to me	4.0	1.0	4.0	4.1
I live close enough to walk to local stores	2.5	1.4	2.5*	2.7
I would like to be able to drive less and walk more	3.4	1.2	3.4	3.5
The less I see my neighbors the better	2.0	1.2	2.0	2.1
I like the small-town feel of downtown Rockport and Fulton	4.4	1.0	4.3*	4.5
I prefer to shop at a large chain retailer rather than small local stores	2.5	1.2	2.5*	2.3
Interesting shopping is important in a tourism-based economy	4.2	1.0	4.2	4.1
I enjoy purchasing fresh seafood from local boats and docks	4.2	1.0	4.2*	4.4
I would be willing to give up some yard space in return for more walkable neighborhood and closer proximity to shops and retail	3.0	1.4	3.0	3.1
It is important to preserve the remaining areas of windswept oaks	4.4	0.9	4.4*	4.5
I will be willing to endure a slight increase in taxes to preserve important remaining natural areas	3.2	1.3	3.1*	3.3
There are already enough natural areas preserved in Aransas County to ensure my grandchildren enjoy the same natural environment as I do	2.6	1.3	2.6	2.6
Natural areas, such as oak motts, floodplains, wetlands, and prairies are important to the economy of Aransas	4.3	1.0	4.2	4.3

*Significant differences in the mean scores using independent t-tests between full-time and part-time residents (p<.05).

¹ Strongly Disagree=1, Strongly Agree=5.

Because Aransas County has seen so much growth in the last decade, we explored the relationship between length of residence and attitudes toward growth using Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Residents were categorized into five groups by length of residence: less than 1 year, 1 to 5 years, 6 to 10 years, 11 to 15 years, and more than 15 years. In the

analysis, significant differences were found between these groups (Wilks' lambda $F=1.863$, $p=.000$). When we explored these differences using MANOVA, the post-hoc results showed that residents who lived in Aransas County the longest (more than 15 years) had different attitudes from more recent residents (Table 3). For example, the longer-term residents had

Table 3.—MANOVA and post-hoc results for growth, quality of life and length of residence items

Items	F	Sig	Length of Residence				
			<1 year	1-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	>15 years
Percentage in total sample			27%	32%	17%	13%	11%
Aransas County needs growth in order to prosper ¹	3.92	.004	3.50	3.69 ^a	3.64 ^b	3.34	3.08 ^{ab}
City and county government should play a role in guiding the character of future growth	2.83	.024	3.97	4.19 ^a	4.02	3.99	3.77 ^a
Seeing and interacting frequently with neighbors is important to me	4.07	.003	4.08 ^a	4.16 ^b	3.92	3.89	3.70 ^{ab}
I would like to be able to drive less and walk more	3.06	.016	3.40 ^a	3.49 ^b	3.32	3.39	2.92 ^{ab}
The less I see my neighbors the better	4.40	.002	1.84 ^a	1.98 ^b	2.02	2.12	2.49 ^{ab}
I will be willing to endure a slight increase in taxes to preserve important remaining natural areas	4.10	.003	3.30	3.03	2.97 ^a	2.83 ^b	3.51 ^{ab}
There are already enough natural areas preserved in Aransas County to ensure my grandchildren enjoy the same natural environment as I do	2.71	.029	2.58	2.80 ^a	2.62	2.72	2.27 ^a
Population growth has had a positive effect on the character of our community	.81	.519	3.49	3.55	3.40	3.48	3.30
Aransas County has adapted well to the arrival of new people over the last 20 years	.67	.614	3.38	3.46	3.39	3.51	3.27
Citizens and citizen groups should play a role in guiding the character of future growth	.95	.433	4.35	4.44	4.44	4.26	4.37
Tourism is likely to remain the mainstay of the Aransas County economy	.27	.897	4.29	4.26	4.30	4.18	4.25
I live close enough to walk to local stores	.65	.631	2.59	2.48	2.33	2.55	2.56
I like the small-town feel of downtown Rockport and Fulton	.95	.435	4.27	4.40	4.36	4.24	4.21
I prefer to shop at a large chain retailer rather than small local stores	.84	.502	2.55	2.38	2.54	2.55	2.36
Interesting shopping is important in a tourism-based economy	.93	.449	4.14	4.24	4.16	4.00	4.21
I enjoy purchasing fresh seafood from local boats and docks	.56	.696	4.26	4.17	4.18	4.18	4.36
I would be willing to give up some yard space in return for more walkable neighborhood and closer proximity to shops and retail	.91	.459	3.19	3.00	2.98	3.17	2.92
It is important to preserve the remaining areas of windswept oaks	1.79	.130	4.40	4.42	4.44	4.31	4.67
Natural areas, such as oak motts, floodplains, wetlands, and prairies are important to the economy of Aransas	1.96	.100	4.27	4.08	4.34	4.19	4.34

Note: Similar superscripts indicate significant differences using Tukey's post-hoc comparisons.

¹ Strongly Disagree=1, Strongly Agree=5.

less desire for community growth than respondents in the 1- to 5-year or 6- to 10-year resident groups. The longer-term residents also felt that they should rely less on government to guide future development than respondents in the 1- to 5-year resident groups. Longer-term residents were also less active in communicating with neighbors and less willing to drive less and walk more than people in the 0- to 1-year and 1- to 5-year groups. On the other hand, longer-term residents were more concerned about the sustainability of natural resources and open space and more willing to endure a slight increase in taxes to preserve important remaining natural areas than was any other group.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study affirm the importance of identifying and understanding the attitudes of local residents towards economic, cultural, environmental, and quality of life issues that impact coastal communities. The study also found differences by residence status (part-time/full-time and years in residence) and community attitudes that require more investigation. These results suggest possible conflicts between amenity-oriented and economic-oriented residents. Study findings could enable extension educators in Aransas County and other areas along the Texas coast to better help local citizens explore the tradeoffs involved in tourism development and natural area conservation. Through such programs, Texas' coastal residents could take quality of life issues more fully into consideration so that potential conflicts could be anticipated and minimized for all local stakeholders. The findings also suggest that there may be widespread support for growth policies that benefit both amenity-related and economic-related features of the community. However, other important information about county residents like racial and ethnic diversity and homeownership provide excellent baseline data that may help local officials and extension agents gain support for tourism development or conservation programs in any county.

It should be noted that one limitation of this research is the convenience sampling method. These data are cross-sectional and study participants were not randomly selected residents from Aransas County. The large number of questionnaires collected, however, does reveal some very significant trends, and suggests that properly designed and administered convenience-sampled surveys can still provide extremely useful information for extension educators. The results of this survey have already been instrumental in encouraging local county and city officials to engage the public on growth issues.

5.0 CITATIONS

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