

*Horton's*

# *Michigan Notebook*



## *Political & Social Commentary*

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### **Preserving the Rural Character of the Community**

*Neighboring residents oppose locating an electric plant in Handy Township*

**By Steve Horton**

Preserving the rural character of the community. That was one of the points brought by a resident at a recent Handy Township Planning Commission meeting. Or more precisely, a concern that this ‘character’ might be irreparably altered, or even lost, if a gas-fired electric generation plant ends up on a 145-acre parcel in the southeast corner of the township.

As the crow flies, that’s probably about four miles southeast of the Village of Fowlerville and a similar distance southwest of the City of Howell.

This is not the first time I’ve heard this sentiment used as a rallying cry against a proposed or possible development project.

Over the years the ‘rural character’ argument has been employed in opposition to a mobile home park and numerous housing tracts. The classic line is usually, “I moved out here to get away from the city and all of the congestion.”

Which is the ‘rub’ as they say. The folks opposing these sorts of projects were often recent arrivals, while the land (upon which the

development would occur) was usually owned by a long-time resident—the property part of



a farm that had been in the family for three-or-four generations. To the newcomers the farm was part of the picturesque setting, but to the old-timer it was a valuable commodity; a source of economic well-being.

It had been awhile since I’d heard this argument. The Great Recession had put a screeching halt to new housing construction in these parts, including the high-density proposals that brought opposition, so it had been collecting dust.

But I heard it used again during the ‘Calls to the Public’ when the Handy Township Planning Commission and then the Township Board considered rezoning a large parcel of vacant land on the west side of their jurisdiction to an Industrial classification. The land was located between Grand River (a major highway) and the railroad tracks—ostensibly a desirable location for factories.

But the homeowners who lived nearby felt otherwise.

Which is understandable. I can't imagine too many people who have chosen to live in the country, preferring to trade a view of forests and fields for the sight of an industrial facility complete with a parking lot filled with cars and pick-ups. Or the commotion that such a development would likely bring to the setting.

So, what is the rural character of this community? Is it corn fields? A stand of woods and tangled underbrush? Deer wandering into your backyard? Cattle grazing in a pasture? The sight and sound of a tractor planting a crop in the spring?

Does it include a subdivision of homes setting on half-acre lots with manicured lawns, flower beds, and a scenic view of the neighbor's woods and corn field? Is it graveled roads, but also paved driveways? Is it the farmer who raises livestock and crops, but also the resident who commutes back and forth from home to the job in the city? Is it defined by how many or how few live in the area? Finally, what does one do to preserve it? And how do you know when it's being threatened?

I toss out those questions, not with any expectation that they'll inspire a good deal of discussion, but rather to suggest that the answers—or even how you regard the questions themselves—is often a matter of personal perspective; dependent on just where you're sitting on the fence.

For the recent arrivals, having come here “to get away from the city and all of the congestion,” this area of rural Fowlerville (judging by their comments) seems idyllic.

For the longtime resident, viewing the scene from a different history, the sheer numbers of new arrivals have brought the city and its congestion with them. These old-timers know all about a changing rural character, having watched this area gradually

evolve from a farming community to becoming part of the suburban sprawl that's crept out further and further from metro Detroit.

**FROM MY OWN PERSPECTIVE**—which includes growing up on a dairy farm north of Fowlerville, of having left the farm life long ago, but also of having stayed in the community to earn my livelihood as a journalist—the area still has many of the visible aspects of a rural landscape. The fields of crops, the fenced pastures with assorted livestock, the horizon of trees, the river and tributary creeks, the sumac along the fence rows, and the young rabbits darting in and out of the tall grasses next to the roadway are still part of the geography.

So, too, are all of the new homes in what were once empty fields—two, three, or more in a row. There are stretches of once isolated back roads that now have as many residences as a village street. And ten miles from town you turn off a graveled road into a subdivision with paved streets, curb and gutter on their edges, and rather elegant-looking homes; their exteriors a far cry from the old, two-story clapboard farm homes, although there are still plenty of them around.

What's evident to me, now that I've become an old-timer, is the change in the culture that's taken place since I was young. The tenor of the community, the institutions under which we functioned, and the social venues that existed within which we interacted. As a community, we certainly weren't one, big, happy family, but the relationships seemed more closely knit since many more people worked, shopped, and socialized within the community. We either knew most of our neighbors, or knew of them. When a motorist drove past your rural home, you waved since chances were the driver and passengers were those you knew.

But such an observation could have been and probably was made by the people of my parents' generation, by my grandparents and their contemporaries, and I grew up hearing about the 'good old days' from my great-grandparents. From the appearance of the first white settlers in this neck of the woods in the mid-to-late 1830's, cutting down those trees, clearing the land for planting, draining the swamps, and building mills, stores, and roads—going forward, the rural character of the community has been changing.

The coming of the railroad to town in 1872 and, a few decades later, the proliferation of the automobile both had profound impacts to the way-of-life and living that existed hereabouts. Of equal significance was constructing the freeways that connected metro Detroit to other areas of the state.

**I HAVE A GREAT AFFECTION FOR THE RURAL CHARACTER OF THIS COMMUNITY** and wish to preserve as much of it as possible, particularly the habitat necessary for wildlife. But I try to be a realist and to view preservation and economic development as a balancing act, not an 'either-or' decision. Given Fowlerville's location on a major highway between Detroit and Lansing, population growth was and will still be inevitable. And with that increase has come the big-box stores and the franchises. The proximity to the Detroit area and its auto plants, along with the freeway and affordable land prices, have also aided in bringing factories (many of them auto suppliers) to the local industrial parks. Those factories offer decent paying jobs to area workers. All of that, directly and indirectly, has helped my business. Even so,

I try not to get too caught up in nostalgia. The farm life and the culture of the community that existed here over a half-century ago, and that I was part of, is a pleasant memory. But I realize, having the

advantage of hindsight, that the economics of production agriculture and of milking cows—get big or get out—were even then pushing out the small operator. That's not to say we, as a society, might not be better off reverting to that economic model; however, that's a different discussion.

As far as the question at hand—of whether or not an electric generation plant should locate in the southeast corner of Handy Township—this is the reality as I view it. There are two natural gas pipes that will intersect at this site and running parallel to it are high-power electric transmission lines. In the production of electricity, producing power with natural gas is seen as a healthier and cheaper alternative to coal or nuclear power. Thousands of homes and businesses need electricity. The more affordable the better.

So, is that more important than keeping the neighborhood looking as rural as possible or preserving as long as possible a certain way-of-life? If that's the only consideration, then perhaps the answer is 'yes.' The needs of the many outweigh those of the few.

Having said all that and offered a utilitarian judgement, a discussion on how this plant might affect the surrounding countryside is not a frivolous consideration. Nor in this case is it the only impact to ponder. The economics are important, but the proposed development will also be looked at by county, state and federal officials. Among their considerations will be the environmental impact to wildlife, waterways, and, very importantly, the quality of air. Those, too, if you use a broader canvas, are part of the rural character of the community.