

## *Introduction*

### THE IMPORTANCE OF BALANCE



*Aerial view of Great Bay Estuarine system with farmland along the Squamscott River. photo by Sarah Thorne*

**T**he importance of balance and interrelationships in the natural environment is well understood. We know that a sharp decline of one species within an ecosystem can have serious, long-lasting negative consequences for all other life in the system. Each species plays an essential, although perhaps unseen or under-appreciated, role in the survival of the whole.

This same principle of ecological balance applies to the complexity of a human society. Loss or absence of members of one or another segment of a human community can have a profound impact on the health and prosperity of the whole. In New England, and particularly in our state of New Hampshire, we are starting to see that well-intentioned actions by members of small communities can have unfortunate long-term consequences for the region's inhabitants.

This book, along with its companion documentary and Web site, is our effort to show how a relatively small segment of the human ecosystem—the state of New Hampshire—is being substantially

altered in just this way, to its economic and social detriment. The most significant and potentially most harmful consequence is the high out-migration of young adults. This exodus will leave New Hampshire with slowing workforce growth, declining numbers of children—the future workforce—and a population aging at an even faster rate due to increasing numbers of older residents.

This demographic shift appears to some as a natural change because of the aging baby boom generation. But most of it results from land-use and development choices made in the state's many, mostly small, communities—largely in reaction to increasing property taxes.

Towns and cities have made land-use decisions over the past decade in the context of a regional culture that values preservation over growth. That regional culture includes a strong attachment to the uniquely town-centered New England tradition, where many very small municipalities believe land-use decisions are theirs alone to make, without regard for any impact beyond their borders.

But collectively, these community-based decisions are having far-reaching effects on the economic and social environment of the entire state and on the greater New England region as well.

Despite the slowdown in population growth, New Hampshire residents continue to see sprawl development use up large tracts of land, increase traffic, and in some places alter the community spirit of their historic and picturesque towns. We should not be surprised when residents react to the effects of residential sprawl by trying to stop or severely restrict further residential development. But this is the wrong course to take.

Rising property taxes have also moved many communities to limit residential growth in the belief that increasing numbers of children are causing their tax bills to rise. But school enrollments have been falling nearly everywhere in the state while at the same time school property taxes have been escalating, for reasons that have nothing to do with the number of children.

The twin perceptions of runaway growth and exploding school enrollments are driving voters and planning boards to place more limits

on residential development, especially on types of housing attractive to or affordable for younger or working people. One example is increasing minimum lot sizes, which only enlarges development's footprint and creates more sprawl. Another is giving speedier approval and a warmer welcome to age-restricted housing—the only housing discrimination allowed by law.

Widespread but false perceptions of high growth cloud people's ability to grasp the facts of slowing growth and declining numbers of young people. Voters perceive what they see around them. They focus on any sprawling development. If a couple of families with children move into a neighborhood or some new homes are built nearby, it seems to confirm the perception of an exploding school-age population.

Too often it is affluent families from other states who occupy these homes, contributing to the illusion of burgeoning numbers of school-age children. Communities are not providing housing affordable to their own younger generation. Recent graduates, young professionals, and working families are forced to choose between ever-longer commutes and leaving for other regions with more housing choices and more reasonable costs of living. This pattern of long commutes—45 minutes to an hour—has both environmental and social consequences.

New Hampshire's quality of life, cultural opportunities, and advantageous tax climate have attracted large numbers of maturing baby boomers and retired people. This influx has to a degree camouflaged the exodus of young adults. But New Hampshire and the rest of New England are aging more rapidly than other areas, greatly diminishing the region's prospects for economic growth.

This situation is extraordinary because it is both unintentional and self-induced. Each year in virtually all New Hampshire towns, newcomers and old-timers come together to practice direct democracy through Town Meeting government. This structure of a great many small, local governments with high citizen participation served the state and region quite well for most of the past three centuries.

But the deep-seated culture of local autonomy has allowed each community to favor what it desires for itself, even at the expense of what the state or the local region of communities needs to sustain economic health. When young people are unable to settle and establish families, commitment to community and sense of place are diminished. Something vitally important is lost: social capital.

Social capital is the advantage communities gain from all the vital interrelationships and connections that make a cohesive and successful society. When workers cannot find affordable homes near their jobs and thus must commute long distances, they have much less time and energy for family and community relationships and responsibilities—social capital is lost. When older people are isolated from other age groups and the larger community and see that their children or grandchildren cannot afford to live anywhere near them, still more social capital is lost. Bonds between generations, both within families and within the larger community, are broken. Commitment to public education and to the future declines.

We do not seek villains to blame for the present situation. Rather, this is an account of how people in small towns and cities are making decisions they think are best for themselves without sufficient understanding of the profoundly negative present and long-term consequences.

Fortunately, the unbalancing of New Hampshire's human ecology is happening slowly enough that it can be changed. If people act soon, working together in towns and cities over the next few years, we can avert a very undesirable future.

Our purpose is to raise awareness of the negative outcomes of basing local residential development decisions primarily on one issue—school costs—instead of on the full range of social, economic, and environmental needs and concerns of balanced, vibrant communities.

The other five New England states are experiencing many of the same issues related to local autonomy and the out-migration of young people that we will examine here in New Hampshire, where we live. But New Hampshire towns and cities are under greater pres-

sure because they pay a significantly larger proportion of the costs for public education and other local government functions than do municipalities in other states.

This book explains the changing demography of New Hampshire, its causes and its consequences. Throughout the book and companion documentary are stories of New Hampshire residents of all ages who are struggling with these issues. We also find some answers to how people can start in their own communities to turn this tide. Many of the changes that can help solve our human ecology problems are also good for the environment and for the social fabric of our towns and city neighborhoods.

Our goal is to foster a statewide conversation that will result in greater understanding and motivation to change—to restore generational balance and social capital. If people read this book but fail to take any action to be more welcoming to younger residents, the consequences for our communities and our state will be bleak indeed.