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# The Conservation of Rural Character in Community Design

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## Options for Further Research on the Preservation of Rural Character and Recommended Action for OPPI

In fall 2002, OPPI commissioned a study of the conservation of rural character from Planscape and Senes Consulting. *Key Learnings: A Primer for Discussion on The Conservation of Rural Character in Community Design* contains a summary of the background information prepared by the consultants, as well as areas for discussion by OPPI members.

At the 2003 conference and in an additional teleconference, OPPI sought additional input from members who have experience in the areas of rural development, heritage conservation, environmental planning, and agriculture to determine what the Institute should do to continue to address this topic.

What we have learned so far is that the topic is extremely complex, so complex that a single paper probably could not do justice to the issue. Also, thinking and practice in this area is not fully developed, and it is probably too early to prepare any kind of definitive treatment. Ontario jurisdictions are still struggling to define rural character and to develop ways to preserve what is valued in rural areas. The good news is that by being among the first to tackle the issue, OPPI has an opportunity to raise its profile and engage in some ground-breaking work.

This work would involve first, articulating what we mean by rural values. Planners need to move beyond a definition of rural as simply “not urban.” Second, we need to begin an inventory of practices that contribute to conserving rural character. Since many practices are still in the experimental stage, this would be an ongoing project. Only when these matters have been addressed can OPPI speak with a strong voice on this important topic.

## **Options for Further Research on the Preservation of Rural Character.**

Five main areas are identified for further research:

- What are rural values? What needs to be conserved and why?
- Where are there good examples of rural character conservation?
- Who else is exploring the rural character issue? Can we collaborate with them?
- What role has government played in the conservation of rural character? What role could it play?
- What role should planners have? What successes have planners had in other similar areas that could be transferred to this area?

Although the resources needed to properly address even one of these areas is beyond the capacity of OPPI at this time, opportunities do exist to encourage dialogue. Opportunities also exist for partnerships with other organizations/individuals that are pursuing similar issues.

OPPI can pursue a strategy of encouraging continued conversation and sharing information and experiences. OPPI can also help put an emerging topic on the map and, in creating an inventory of good practices, can provide a source of information on which others can build.

### ***Recommended Action for OPPI***

Given the Institute's limited budget, it is important to manage expectations for OPPI's involvement in the ongoing process of understanding and promoting the conservation of rural character. OPPI could:

- encourage continued dialogue;
- incorporate a better definition of rural values into planning practice;
- document relevant research and existing examples;
- draw attention to local successes in conserving rural character.

### **Options:**

- Create a "bulletin board" on the OPPI website to encourage debate and capture input into the five areas of further research listed above. The bulletin board will be summarized quarterly and ideas for follow-up could be directed to the Policy Development Committee.
- Develop a statement of rural values for planners working in this area that will help guide professional practice.

- Involve other OPPI Working Groups in exploring the issue of rural character in areas that relate to their interests, and ask them to report to PDC by fall 2004.
- Seek out opportunities to collaborate with organizations that are also addressing this topic.
- Let academics and students know that the topic is of interest to OPPI and that we are interested in opportunities to participate in or draw on current academic work in the area.
- Support Districts that are interested in sponsoring programs or events that deal with the topic.
- Consider a category within the Excellence in Planning Awards to recognize the effective conservation of rural character.

OPPI Council will consider these options at a Council meeting in March 2004. Please forward your comments and suggestions on the options presented no later than February 13, 2004. Submissions can be directed to OPPI via [submissions@ontarioplanners.on.ca](mailto:submissions@ontarioplanners.on.ca)