Conversion of Recreational Residences: A Case Study of Its Measurement and Management

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For Canada's planners, geographers, and regional scientists, residential change in rural and small-town Canada is a subject of renewed interest (Dahms 1988; Hodge and Qadeer 1983; Joseph et al. 1988). One special case of residential change is the conversion of recreational residence properties to permanent residences. Such conversion generates changes in and demands on local areas, which the host community often finds difficult to manage. Conversion pressures include demands for new or improved levels of local services such as paved and widened roadways, sewers, a water supply, and garbage collection. Changing social structures resulting from conversion pressures also can generate conflicts over attitudes toward local norms, institutions, and economic development initiatives in rural communities. Under most existing land-use schemes, the conversion of recreational residence properties to permanent residences is difficult to manage, and most available institutional data bases do not readily track this kind of change.

After providing in the next section the conversion of recreational residence properties with a "spatial orientation", we will discuss how conversion can be conceptualized in the context of a rural amenity region. A description of the proposed methodology for examining the conversion of recreational residence properties is followed by a case study that illustrates its measurement and management.

A version of this paper was presented at the 1990 Annual Meetings of the Canadian Association of Geographers in Edmonton, Alberta. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of CMHC.

ISSN: 0705-4580 Printed in Canada/Imprimé au Canada

Spatial Orientation

Studies of small towns and rural areas tend to have one of three spatial orientations. The first focuses on specific interactions between rural areas and an adjoining urban system (Bryant et al. 1982; Coppack et al. 1988; Krueger 1980; Russwurm 1974; Yeates 1987). For example, Bryant et al. (1982) refer to "the city's countryside" in describing the subject of their study and their conceptualization of the direction of dominant interactions. Yeates (1987) focuses on the integration of urban settlements and the economies of communities at the rural edge of the urban complex.

More recent contributions to this literature have concentrated on the development and evaluation of conceptual and theoretical frameworks for examining social and physical change in the "urban field", giving special consideration to the importance of amenity landscapes as an engine of change. In his detailed discussion of "rural amenity", Coppack (1988) highlights both the complexity of this concept and its importance as a motivational agent in the development of the urban field. Bryant (1988) sketches an outline of the pressures and "stresses" on amenity locations in the urban field generated by the new economic rationales of flexibility and change in communications and technology of production. Coppack and Preston (1988) combine these economic rationales with the notion of "amenity" as a high-order good in their review and refinement of the urban field development model.

The second spatial orientation in rural studies fixes on the small towns, villages, and hamlets in the rural milieu, particularly on individual places or systems of small towns. The interest of Dahms (1984) in proving the viability of small towns in Ontario and the arguments of some researchers (Hodge and Qadeer 1983; Perry et al. 1986) for "counterurbanization" or small-town renaissance are examples of this spatial orientation. Dahms's (1988) descriptive analysis of small towns across eastern Canada illustrates the specific local and regional outcomes that the interactions of economic opportunity and rural amenity value can have on a community's social and physical character.

A third spatial orientation focuses on the rural context itself within some defined region or jurisdiction. This orientation includes a diverse range of topical studies such as employment shifts (Coffey and Polèse 1988), patterns of recreational activities (Helleiner 1980), access to health-care practitioners (Joseph and Bantock 1984), and population change (Joseph et al. 1988).

The research discussed in this paper adopts aspects of all three spatial orientations, with a specific focus on the rural context itself. As a component of local residential change, conversion activity concerns rural jurisdictions that feature attractive recreational amenities, are within a reasonable weekend commuting distance of large urban areas, and already possess a well-developed stock of small-lot recreational properties. Regional uniqueness merits recognition as well because historic patterns of settlement, population change, demand for and availability of residential properties, and existing infrastructure contribute to the enhancement or mitigation of conversion pressures.

Conversion Process

Although the conversion of properties is an important issue for rural communities, much of the current research on the conversion of existing properties or structures has focused on urban areas. It can be argued that this urban focus stems largely from the interest in inner-city "gentrification" that has dominated the attention of geographers, planners, and regional scientists in recent years (Bunting 1987; Ley 1986; Smith 1986). In this context, Ley (1986) has suggested that increased numbers of building permits for renovation, an increase in the turnover of property ownership, and the provision of more amenities in inner-city districts all indicate that gentrification is occurring.

Russwurm (1974) and Bryant et al. (1982) moved outside the urban core to examine the conversion of rural properties to higher density urban uses. In these cases, the increased turnover in property ownership is assumed to be an indicator of both the location and changing relative rates of conversion.

On a more general level, Hamilton et al. (1986) suggested that where the value of land is increasing, reinvestment in structures is warranted and even required. Such a condition appears to exist in many rural amenity areas where there are no longer any parcels of land to develop (for example, all lakefront property is already developed) or where government regulations restrict the further creation of recreational properties to preserve public access or for conservation purposes. A growing demand for rural amenity properties leading to increased land values is probably also the result of changing patterns of income and leisure time concomitant with the aging of the Canadian population (Helleiner 1980; Mitchell 1988).

Manifestations of these conditions in rural amenity areas are the conversion of seasonal structures to all-season structures (for example, the winterization of summer cottages) and changes of seasonal

residency to permanent residency. Many cottages converted to all-season structures serve as permanent residences either for retirees or for commuters who work in urban areas. Thus, the conceptual starting point of the analysis that follows is a recognition that conversion stems from a combination of increasing property values and population change, both of which generate land-use and management pressures on rural amenity regions.

Measuring Change in Recreational Residences

While the measurement of some aspects of population change is reasonably straightforward, the measurement of the changing value of property and reinvestment in structures is fraught with technical difficulties. The conceptualizations of conversion reviewed, however, indicated an alternative methodology for the examination of recreational residence conversion: a detailed analysis of local building permits.

Local building permits have two advantages over such comparable data sources as the Statistics Canada Building Permit Summaries. First, they provide a complete non-aggregated record of all types of works authorized by formal permit. Second, they provide a geographically accurate delineation of spatial patterns on a local scale. Building permits provide a count of: (1) the residential structures whose occupancy statuses have changed from seasonal to permanent; (2) the new permanent residential structures for which permits were issued; and (3) the residential demolitions approved, which corresponds crudely to the removal of units from the housing stock. It must be recognized, however, that some residents undertake conversion or associated renovation work without the benefit of a building permit—especially where existing land-use zoning precludes permanent residency and where permits would be formally refused (Hamilton et al. 1986).

Because concerns about triggering an increased property assessment or committing local zoning by-law infractions likely have a smaller influence on a respondent's completion of census questions than they do on decisions about whether to apply for conversion permits at the local municipal office, a comparison of building permit data with census data will reveal just how much building permits might underestimate conversion activity. Specifically, census "Occupied Private Dwellings" data can be used to measure the increase or decrease in the number of households reporting permanent residence within the local area between census years. As building permits tend to underrepresent conversion activity, it is expected that the census will record a greater

change in the number of local permanent households than can be accounted for by permit records. The difference between the number of permanent households recorded in the census and the new or converted residences reported through building permits can be attributed to conversion of existing seasonal-use structures without permits (de facto conversion).

In general, this methodology compares new residences added to the local housing stock with the number of households living within the jurisdiction and allows for the estimation of conversion impacts (Halseth 1989). Two cautionary notes are required, however. First, it must be recognized that a certain proportion of new households may be attributable to changing family structure and size. Thus, information on local housing and population change is needed to assess whether conversion activity is a principal factor in residential change. Second, in comparing building permit data with census data, it also must be recognized that the two sources deal with the notion of conversion activity (or "occupancy change") in different ways. Building permits provide a record of physical change to a structure, and the concept of conversion is based on the physical work required to move a structure from the seasonal housing submarket to the permanent all-season submarket. In the census, occupancy status and changes to that status are behavioural notions based on whether occupants consider their current occupancy to be temporary or permanent. "Occupied Private Dwellings" therefore represent those units of the local housing stock suitable for all-season habitation which are actually occupied as such. In this sense, occupancy change may represent behavioural changes independent of physical changes to the structure.

In the following case study of rural Ontario, conversion activity is mapped on the scale of individual concession-lots. Concession-lots date from the original township survey in Ontario in the 1800s by the British Army Royal Engineers. In the case study area described in the next section, the average concession-lot is approximately 500 × 1,500 meters and encloses an area of approximately 75 hectares. Although this mapping scale imposes some limitations, it is possible to delineate broadly the principal recreational areas along the waterways from the predominantly rural and agricultural areas of the case study region.

Case Study: South Elmsley Township

Located along the Rideau Lakes in the United Counties of Leeds and Grenville in eastern Ontario, the Township of South Elmsley features attractive and well-developed residential amenity properties. Below

we examine the changing residential mix in South Elmsley between 1981 and 1988 to illustrate the geographic patterns of conversion activity and to observe the operation of an Ontario Ministry of Housing zoning by-law amendment mechanism designed to assist in the management of conversion activity.

The historic pattern of settlement and transportation infrastructure development has influenced the geography of South Elmsley and established the local context for recreational residence conversion activity. The Rideau Lakes region was largely uninhabited by white settlers before the War of 1812, but access to the area and rates of settlement changed dramatically following completion of the Rideau Canal in 1832 (Kennedy 1984; Leggett 1985). The historic pattern of recreational land use and cottage development in South Elmsley mirrors that of other central Canadian resort areas in that it was initially developed as a resort hotel destination in the "northern" wilderness catering to an elite able to afford such distractions. "Cottaging" during those early years provided upper-class families with a way to spend their summers in the countryside while the family wage earner traveled to Ottawa or Kingston during the business week (Kennedy 1984). Since the 1930s, improved accessibility—afforded first by ferryboat service, for a brief time by passenger rail service, and, more recently, by quality road access—has opened up these recreational opportunities to a wider cross-section of the public (Butler 1980; Osborne and Swainson 1985).

Initially, cottages were built at lock stations and narrows, such as Rideau Ferry, along the Rideau. Recreational residence land uses now dominate the shorelines of the navigable waterways of the township. This pattern appears to have been based on accessibility to the water, the primary attractive feature of these recreational properties. Only rarely does the depth of residential development exceed the single row of properties immediately bordering the water. Another kind of accessibility concerns the historic development of, and present levels of maintenance for, roadways into the area. That the southern shore of the Rideau Lakes should be the most extensively developed is not surprising since many of the early trails and wagon roads connected with the Rideau Canal from the south side. Today, Highway 15 provides high-quality, year-round access to properties along the southern shore, while along much of the northern shore road access is still via narrow gravel roads cut through the bush.

The present-day settlement pattern across South Elmsley comprises three elements. The first is a scattered set of small communities and hamlets. Usually located at principal crossroad or historic transshipment or milling points, these hamlets characteristically contain one to four commercial businesses and between 10 and

40 residences. The second element is the pattern of dispersed residences along the linear road network of the township. Many of these are farm residences associated with dairying or other more marginal agricultural activities, and the rest are rural residences associated with local employment, local retirees, and, more recently, exurban settlement or hobby farming. The third settlement element is associated with the recreational amenity properties. Clusters of cottages along the lakes and waterways are set in the rural milieu of dispersed settlement and marginal agricultural lands. Recreational amenity properties follow a distinctly linear land-use pattern along the margins of the lakes and navigable waterways of the township (Figure 1). This linear pattern also contains an element of dispersion, as the picture is one of separated strings of properties which often form isolated cottage "neighbourhoods" of four to 10 properties connected to the main roadways by a single driveway.

The transportation infrastructure of the township can be described by three levels of road quality and traffic use (Figure 1). The local-use networks usually consist of unpaved roads, often privately owned and maintained, which connect cottage clusters or the more remote farm holdings with the regional transportation system. The local secondary roads are public roads, which are mostly paved and maintained throughout the year. Generally, these roads cross the agricultural areas of the township, connect the small networks of local communities, and act as the principal intertownship routes for local residents not living along a major regional highway. The regional highway network comprises parts of provincial Highways 15 and 29. This network not only provides local transportation but also serves as the principal routes for through traffic, connecting the region with the Ottawa and Kingston urban centres.

Two tiers of activity linkages operate in the region. The first tier involves internal interactions among the small communities and rural population in or just outside South Elmsley Township. These communities include Rideau Ferry, Delta, Portland on the Rideau, Westport, Perth, Newboro, and the Town of Smiths Falls. These internal linkages provide local commercial activities and employment opportunities for a proportion of the local population, as well as support facilities for agricultural activities. Dahms (1984) suggests that a significant proportion of both local employment and local shopping occurs within such a network of internally linked small communities.

The second tier of linkages corresponds to the region's proximity to external urban areas and competing recreational areas. The Rideau Lakes region is within an hour's driving time of the Kingston and Ottawa urban areas. At this distance, afternoon and weekend recrea-

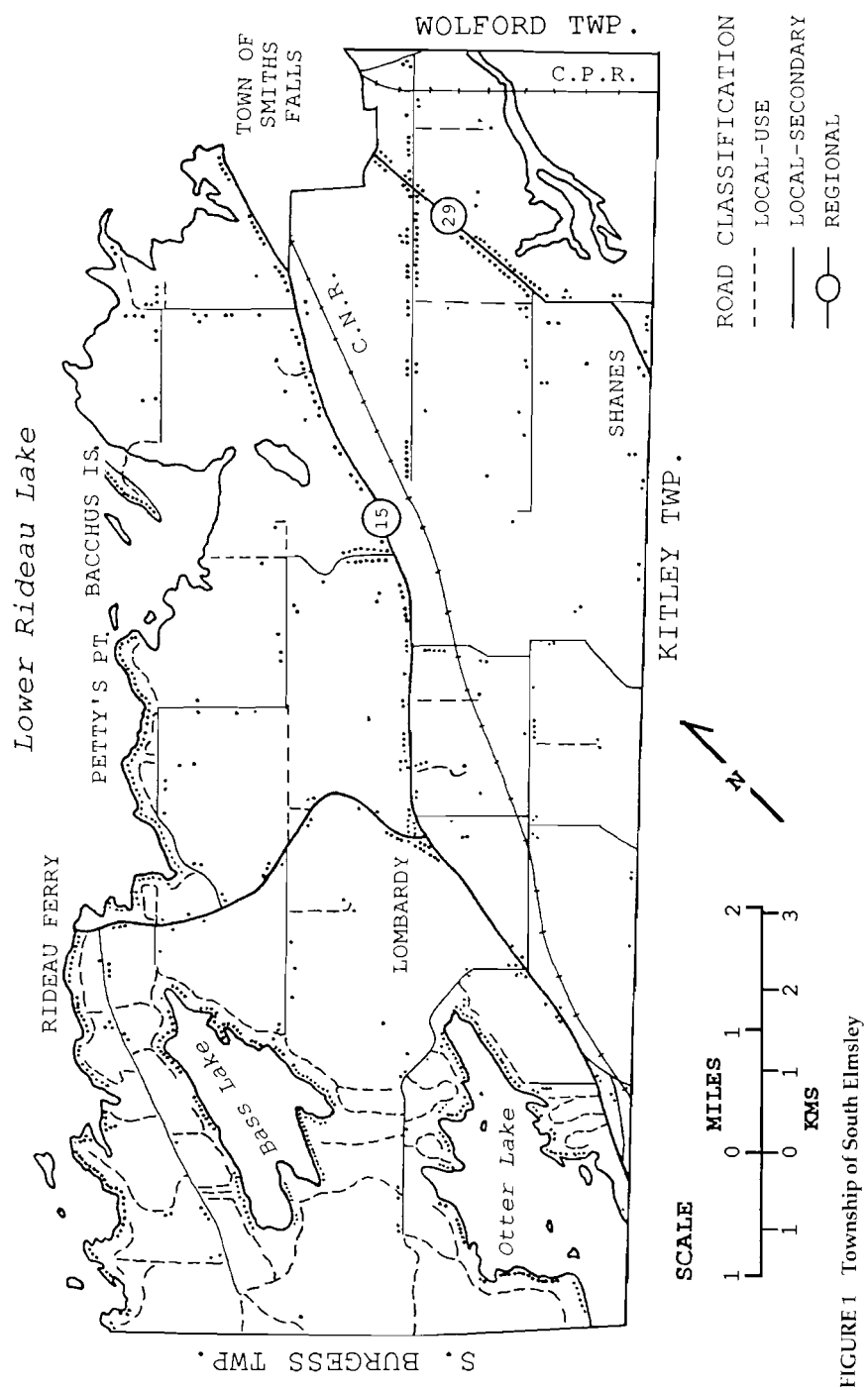

FIGURE 1 Township of South Elmsley

tional opportunities are within reach for urban residents, and jobs in Kingston and Ottawa are within reach for local residents. The Rideau Lakes area is also within three to four hours' driving time of Toronto and Montreal. While this opens up the recreational opportunities to a much larger market, the region must also compete with the Muskoka Lakes region in Ontario and the Laurentians in Quebec for a portion of this market.

Within South Elmsley, recent commercial development around the Rideau Ferry community illustrates the local economic impacts of amenity-based residential change. The increase in recreation-oriented commercial developments adds to the recursive process of increasing demand for locally available amenity properties. The existing supply of such recreational properties is already well developed, and this, together with the community's accessibility to urban centres, makes the conversion of existing cottage and seasonal-use properties to permanent residences attractive to both retirees and local and long-distance commuters.

Recreational Residence Conversion and Its Management

The Township of South Elmsley has grown dramatically in recent years (Table 1). Between 1971 and 1986 the population increased 89 percent, or from 1,445 to 2,735, thus nearly doubling population density from 15 to 28 persons per square kilometer. According to records in the Building Department of the township, from 1981 to 1985, 71 building permits were issued for new residences. In addition, while two demolitions were approved, 32 building permits were issued for new cottages. The location of these cottages followed the expected pattern coinciding with the linear boundaries of recreational lakes and waterways. Since the number of occupied private buildings between the 1981 and 1986 censuses increased by 100—from 845 to 945 (see Table 1)—conversion activity (100 – 71 = 29) contributed to almost 30 percent of the township's residential change. Moreover, because only 16 permits were formally issued for conversion of use, the remaining conversion activity (29 – 16 = 13) was attributable to de facto conversion. This probably included conversion of a few existing cottages without a formal occupancy change building permit.

To map the various conversion activities, building permit records were reviewed in detail with the local building inspector. This was necessary to determine for which permits work was actually undertaken (sometimes a building permit is issued but the work does not go ahead for various reasons) and to establish which permits resulted in

TABLE 1 Demographic Profile of South Elmsley Township

Population[a]	1971	1971-1976	1976	1976-1981	1981	1981-1986	1986	1971-1986
Number	1,445		1,994		2,525		2,735	
Number change		549		531		210		1,290
Percent change		37.9		26.6		8.3		89.3
OPD[b]	**1971**		**1976**	**1976-1981**	**1981**	**1981-1986**	**1986**	**1976-1986**
Number	N.A.		625		845		945	
Number change				220		100		320
Percent change				35.2		11.8		51.2

a. Population data from 1971, 1976, 1981, and 1986 censuses of Canada.
b. "Occupied Private Dwellings" data from 1976, 1981, and 1986 censuses of Canada.

conversion activity even in cases where no formal "conversion" permit was issued. The inspector's knowledge of local residents also helped with the evaluation of activity precursive to conversion.

The evidence presented below relates to a period covering 1983-1987 and the first half of 1988, a period in which similar numbers of cottage conversions—that is, by renovation, addition, or winterization of existing cottages—and recreational property conversions—that is, by new residential units resulting in the conversion of properties from seasonal to permanent occupancy uses—were observed (see Table 2 where it also appears that renovations and, more recently, additions are the principal types of cottage modification precursive to conversion).

The location of both types of conversion is shown in Figure 2. On the one hand, cottage conversions are concentrated at Rideau Ferry and eastward along the Rideau Canal to Petty's Point, coincident with the area of older, developed cottage properties in the township. On the other hand, recreational property conversions are concentrated between the western boundary of the township and the community of Rideau Ferry. Also, while Bass Lake appears to have little conversion activity of the latter type, Otter Lake was the site of some nine conversions of recreational properties, located largely along the lake's northern shore.

To summarize, areas of the township with older cottages are generally experiencing the highest level of conversion activity, generally involving building permit work to existing residential structures. This contrasts to the more recently developed cottage property areas where conversion activity tends to take the form of construction of a new residential unit. Recent cottage property subdivisions and the value of preservation work on historic cottage structures contribute to this differential pattern.

TABLE 2 Building Permits Resulting in Recreational Residence Conversion, Township of South Elmsley, 1983-1988

		Cottage Conversion				
Year	Recreational Property Conversion	Renovations	Additions	Winterizing	Total	Total
1983	2	1			1	3
1984	4	2			2	6
1985	5	1		1	2	7
1986	1				0	1
1987	7	6	6		12	19
1988[a]	7	2	2		4	11
Total	26	12	8	1	21	47

Source: Township of South Elmsley Building Department Permit Records, 1983-1988
a. Building permit records available to September 1988 only.

Clearly, the Township of South Elmsley, like many jurisdictions in rural amenity regions, is feeling the impacts of conversion. Thus, in an attempt to control conversion, it adopted Limited Services Residential (LSR) zoning as a management tool.

In 1978 the Ontario Ministry of Housing published a *Discussion Paper on Seasonal Residential Conversions* (Ontario Ministry of Housing 1978). The ministry recognized the difficulties inherent in the tracking, and therefore the management, of conversion activity. It also recognized the social implications for local rural communities and the financial implications for local governments potentially arising from a changing residential mix. Thus, the ministry proposed implementation of a revised set of land-use zones in rural resort municipalities, thereby providing local authorities with a mechanism with which they might manage the conversion issue.

The proposed "staged servicing" residential zones would permit conversion from seasonal to permanent residential uses, providing the landowner applied to the local government for rezoning. The ministry argued that the adoption of Limited Services Residential (LSR) and Limited Services Residential-Holding (LSR-H) zones would do three things: (1) let property owners know the limits to servicing commitments by the local government; (2) identify areas of currently seasonal residential land use which may be suitable candidates for conversion to permanent residential uses; and (3) provide a mechanism for tracking the rates and location of conversion activity (Ontario Ministry of Housing 1978).

The distribution of LSR zoning as of September 1988 (Figure 3) reveals that the area between Rideau Ferry and Petty's Point, which is the older and more established cottage area, has the greatest con-

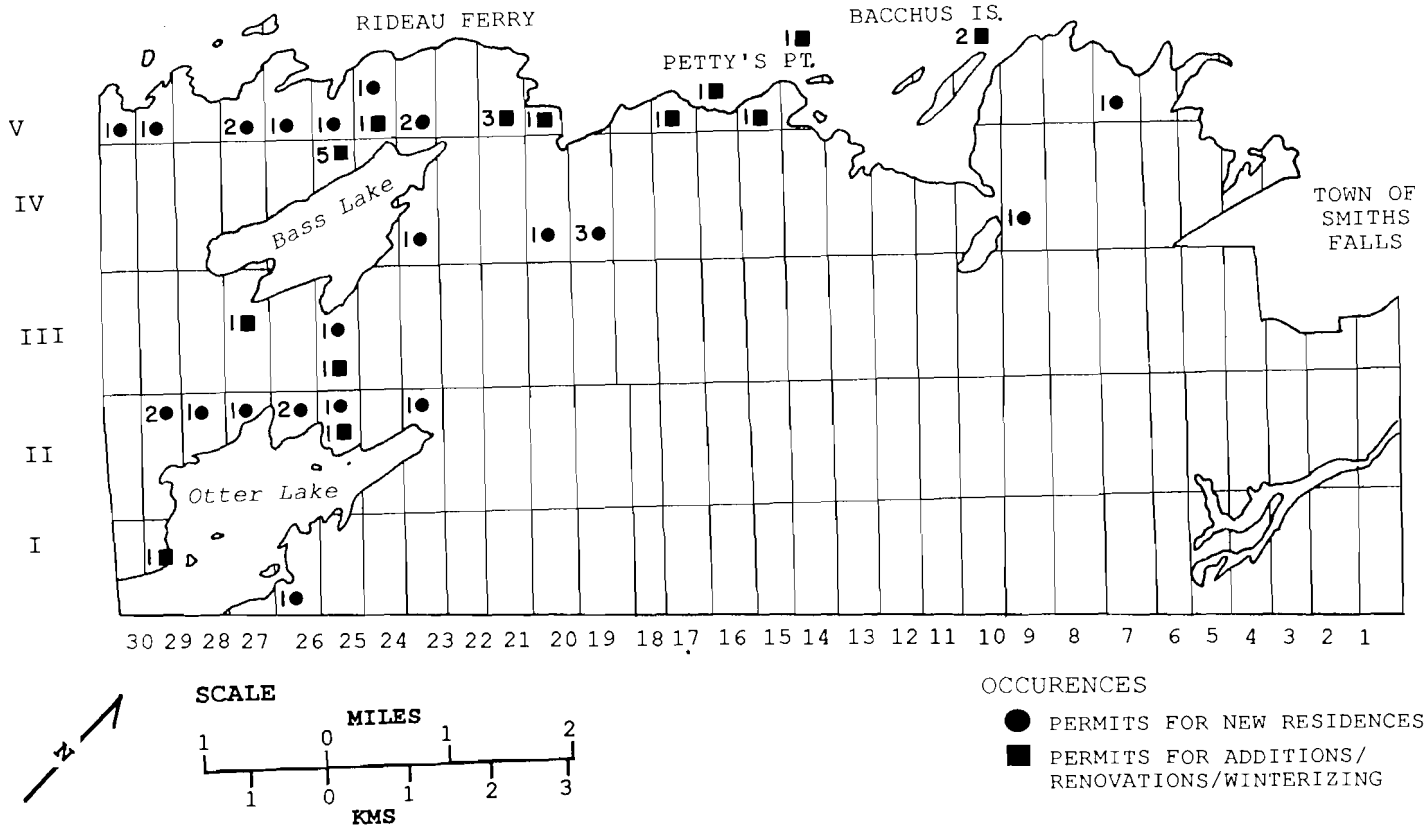

FIGURE 2 Building permits for the conversion of seasonal use properties/structures in the Township of South Elmsley, 1983-1988

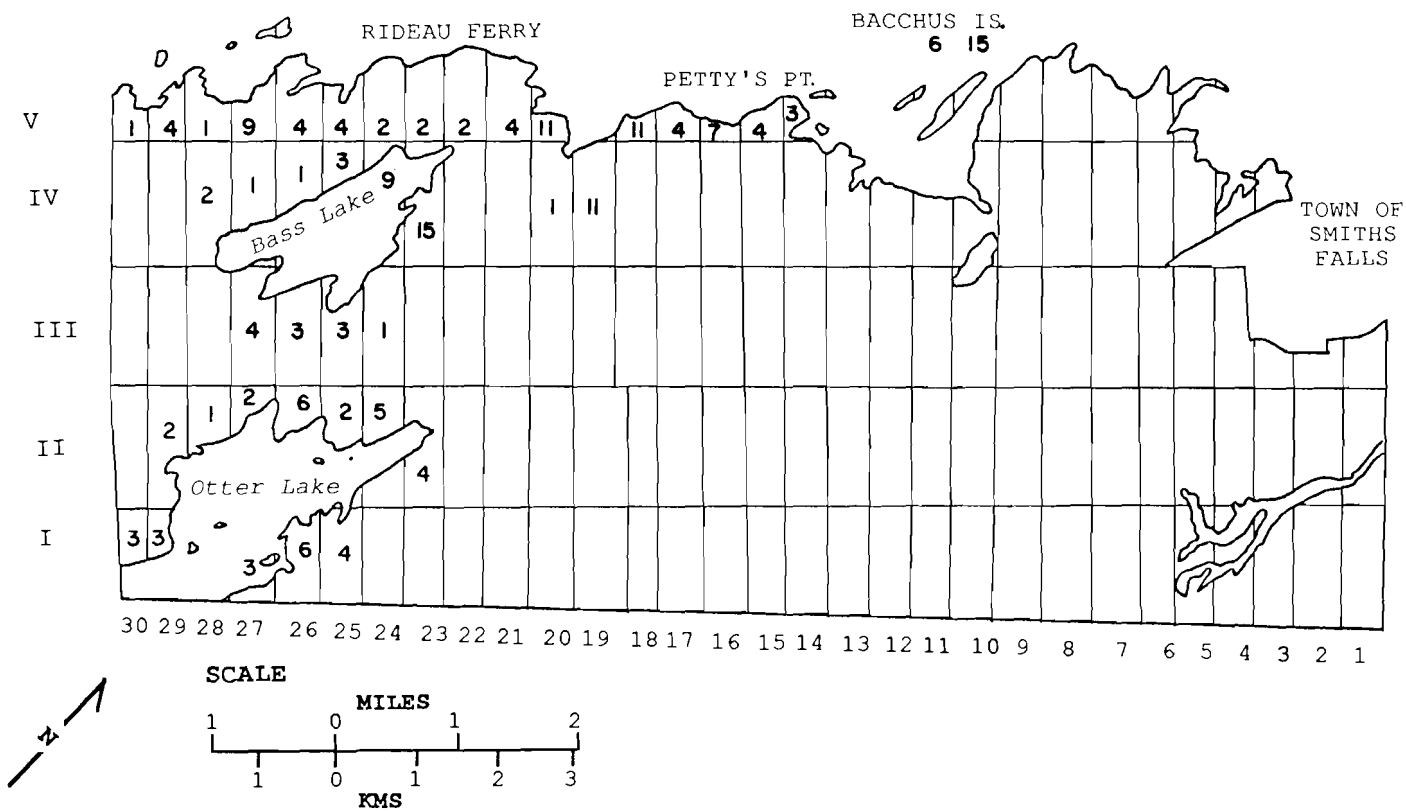

FIGURE 3 Number of properties zoned "Limited Services Residential" in the Township of South Elmsley (as of September 1988)

centration of LSR-zoned properties (Township of South Elmsley 1984). The area to the west of Rideau Ferry as well as in the vicinity of Bacchus Island also has a number of properties zoned LSR. Otter and Bass lakes each have approximately the same number of LSR-zoned properties.

While adoption of the ministry's LSR zoning programme has helped the Township of South Elmsley broadly delimit areas of conversion activity, it has not been as successful as hoped for three reasons. First, the delineation of conversion activity clusters has not proved to be much more precise than an intuitive prediction. Second, as a method for tracking rates of conversion activity, there still appears to be considerable underreporting. In this case study, only about half of the local conversion impact was recorded through the building permits process (Table 1). Third, on the setting of limits to servicing commitments, arguments before the local municipal councils for increased residential services now include statements to the effect that since rezoning to permanent occupancy was approved, the local jurisdiction is under increased obligation to provide basic residential services.

Conclusion

In this case study, housing stock change through conversion is identified as an important element of growth in a rural region featuring attractive recreational amenities. In the Township of South Elmsley, recognition by the local government of conversion pressures allowed a more detailed investigation of the spatial distribution of conversion of recreational properties and of existing recreational structures. An attempt to manage conversion by adopting the Limited Services Residential zone programme of the Ontario Ministry of Housing has not been entirely successful, however.

The methodology used addresses such issues as the volume, rates, and local diversity of conversion activity, and provides a structure for the comparison of local government responses to the pressures generated. The comparison and compatibility of data sources, the spatial orientation adopted, and the incorporation of local and regional context are all shown to be important in the interpretation of results.

Local government concern about recreational residence conversion is widespread in Canada. But delineating spatial patterns of conversion activity is only a first step in an investigation of community change in rural amenity regions. This research suggests a range of questions for further investigation, one of which concerns the people actually

undertaking conversion. Age, income, and family structure of "converters" is of interest, as well as whether their profile changes with regional location. It may be that certain amenity areas are attractive to converters for only a limited period of their lives. Associated with these questions on converters are those concerned with the period and duration of time spent annually at their converted permanent residences. Socioeconomic status, life cycle stage, and the presence of associated infrastructure ranging from schools to hospitals may influence local or regional patterns of occupancy in converted residences.

Placing conversion activity in a broader framework of community change requires an integrative step that, first, places recreational residence conversion in the context of housing stock change in rural areas and, second, places rural housing stock change within an even larger framework that includes metropolitan and regional change. A related set of issues concerns changing functional ties between rural amenity areas and larger urban places. Implicit in these changing functional ties are the roles of long-distance commuting and changing communications technology, as well as patterns of shopping for daily needs and higher-order (usually) major household purchases. This includes attention to the local and regional economic impacts of conversion activity, recognizing that converters may not be representative of the general population but may form a specific subset with unique spending and behaviour patterns that have implications for the kinds of services and goods demanded and consumed locally. A changing demographic mix resulting from conversion may require extending some existing services or providing new services. The degree to which the more senior levels of government recognize these issues and their potential impacts—and the appropriate policy responses—requires investigation.

Recreational residence conversion is making an important contribution to local community change in a non-metropolitan context. With Canada's changing demographic structure and advances in information technology and communications, the conversion of recreational residence properties to all-season permanent residences is likely to increase throughout the country. The implications are potentially wide-ranging, and local governments and communities in rural amenity regions—as well as geographers, planners, and regional scientists—should be concerned about this issue.

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