RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT, RURAL COMMUNITIES AND RAPID GROWTH: MANAGING SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE MODERN BOOMTOWN

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ABSTRACT

Resource development in the western United States of America offers the prospect of rapid population and economic growth which may dramatically alter the traditional social bases of these rural communities. Reports from other western boomtowns suggests that such rapid growth can lead to substantial community disruption with a disproportionate increase in social problems and an eventual lowered productivity in the synthetic fuels industry. Changes related to population growth need not produce such disruptive results. Cooperation among industry, government, and community and well planned and coordinated human services and programs designed to relieve the stresses of change, to provide a sense of community, and to integrate newcomers into the community can reduce or prevent many of the negative impacts as well as reduce overall costs by building on existing resources.

INTRODUCTION

Rapid growth in western United States towns is not a new phenomenon, as it dates from the nineteenth century gold boom. Gold mining towns grew almost overnight and many disappeared nearly as quickly. More recently, rural communities in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States of America have been affected by the development of mineral and energy resources. The proposed creation of a major synthetic fuels industry in this region offers the prospect of rapid population and economic growth which may dramatically alter the traditional social bases of the established communities.

Estimates are that the United States contains enough coal and oil shale to produce fifteen million barrels per day (MBD) of synthetic fuels for 175 years, eight MBD of shale oil and seven MBD of coal synthetics. The Energy Security Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1980 establishes a goal of two MBD of synthetic fuels in 1992, of which 1.2 MBD is from shale. The EXXON Corporation has suggested that the eight MBD production level for shale oil could be reached by 2010.[1]

Northwestern Colorado has rich deposits of oil shale and vast coal reserves. Large-scale development of these energy and other mineral resources is significantly altering the region's economy. Historically, the most important industry has been agriculture. While it remains the principle land use, in recent years employment in agriculture has been declining steadily. By 1978, three of the counties in the region reported mining as the major source of personal income, reflecting the growing importance of the energy industry.[2]

Growth generated by the synthetic fuels industry will bring changes in the communities' culture, social structure, and institutions.[3,4] Reports from other western boomtowns suggest that these changes can lead to substantial community disruption, characterized by:

- high levels of individual stress
- a deterioration in sense of community
- an increase in social problems
- greater work force turnover
- lower productivity in the synthetic fuels industry.

If effective strategies for managing changes are implemented, however, resource related growth need not produce such disruptive results. The following discussion will focus on factors that lead to the human problems of rapid growth and the development of change management strategies. Specific approaches will be addressed, including techniques to reduce potential negative impacts and programs designed to strengthen the evolving community.

Disruptive Effects of Rapid Change

The disruptive effects of rapid change on the social systems of small, rural communities have been widely discussed. A study of Craig, Colorado, during its period of greatest growth (1976) noted dramatic increases in drug and alcohol abuse, family disturbances, child behavior problems, and crimes against persons.[5] This rate of increase substantially exceeded the growth rate of the community, and the data suggest that the problems were nearly evenly divided among old-timers and newcomers. An evaluation of perceptions of safety from crime in three Wyoming towns found that the residents of the rapid growth community viewed their town as more crime-ridden and carried out more behaviors associated with this belief, such as locking their doors, than did residents of the two more growth stable communities.[6] Furthermore, medical services have been reported as characterized by low doctor/patient ratio, leading to difficulty in securing service, long waits at the doctor's office, and greater use of the hospital's emergency room as an outpatient clinic.[7]

Certain groups within the community have been observed to be particularly vulnerable to rapid community change. Children show an increase in behavior problems[8] and are at greater risk to be victims of child abuse.[9] Many of the stresses which are highly correlated with child abuse, such as transiency, isolation, and rapid change, are present in boomtowns. Women may experience higher levels of isolation and depression as a result of moving to locations with few job or career opportunities.[10] The elderly, described as "the forgotten victims of energy resource development,"[11] encounter pressures from living on fixed incomes during a period of rapidly rising costs, scarce and expensive housing, less adequate health care, and a loss of the community to which they were accustomed.

Gilmore has reported that a reduction in industrial productivity and reliability has been seen to accompany the decline in "quality of life." In one example, mining productivity dropped from 25 to 40 percent over a twelve-month period. In another instance the result was a construction cost overrun of over 65 percent. In both cases employee turnover and absenteeism were common. He concludes that, "where growth is not adequately accommodated, productivity declines, projects overrun time and cost schedules, and operating outputs fall behind."[12]

RURAL COMMUNITIES IN THE WESTERN UNITED STATES

Certain characteristics of rural communities in the Western United States may influence their ability to accommodate the changes created by rapid growth. Purrington describes rural societies as being "characterized by ethnic groups with pride in history, region identity, values, and rural status."[13] Three factors appear relevant to the understanding of the phenomena of social disruption in rural boomtowns:

- geographical isolation
- the informal nature of communication and support networks, and
- the characteristics of the residents.

Most of the communities in the oil shale region are both physically and psychologically isolated from each other. The mountain ranges, severe winter weather, and long distances between towns tend to encourage a strong sense of separateness and self-reliance. Each town attempts to provide a full range of primary public facilities and services, and looks outside its own capacities only for infrequent and secondary needs, such as specialized medical care. Choice and availability of personal services are limited and residents are accustomed to living without many urban amenities such as supermarkets, discount stores, and a variety of restaurants and entertainments. They have learned to cope with this isolation as inherent to their way of life. Newcomers, however, particularly those from urban areas, find the isolation and lack of services distressful and have difficulty adjusting.

Informal social support and communications systems are created through many years of interactions and develop in communities with few formal institutions and an historic reliance on word-of-mouth communication. Newcomers are often unable to tap into these systems. As a result, they are isolated from the information which could enable them to effectively identify and use existing, informal, support networks and become more a part of the community. One will often hear the half-joking remark that you are eligible to join the Newcomers Club after living in town for twenty years.

Some characteristics of the longtime residents may affect the acceptance of newcomers. The rural "Westerner" still values the "rugged individualist," and maintains a strong belief in personal independence and self-reliance. He may be cautious about entering into new social relationships, wary of strangers, and guarded when associating with them. Some of the oldtimers chose to live in these rural communities to avoid the very issues the new urbanization poses. They may be particularly resentful of the change. The newcomers have not chosen to move because of similar values and ideals, but because of economic benefits. Unless these dynamics are recognized and compensated for in the planning process, the social accommodation of growth and change may be among the more difficult issues faced in the development of a substantial synthetic fuels industry.

STRESS IN BOOMTOWNS

Social disruption in these communities may largely result from the stress created by rapid change. Any change, whether positive or negative, leads to stress and increases an individual's susceptibility to many types of emotional, physical, or behavioral problems.[14] A study conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health of the United States concludes that rapid change or community instability may be correlated with an increased risk of mental illness.[15] During the Gilette, Wyoming, boom of the 1970's, stress was reported by the residents to be related to changes in living conditions, work, financial status, deficits in community services, and the demands of adjusting to life in a new community.[16]

Among the first specific stresses faced by residents of a boomtown are the anticipation and perceptions of the impending change. Cobb states that "anticipation of change, may, in fact, produce more severe and/or different patterns of symptomatology than change itself."[17] With the problems of other boomtowns being well publicized and with the continuing uncertainty about the actual levels of growth to be expected in the development of a synthetic fuels industry, residents may begin to feel less secure, less in control of the destiny of their community, and may behave as if the change has actually occurred.

Citing negative experiences of other boomtowns, residents of the tiny, mountain resort town of Crested Butte, Colorado, have mobilized to fight

the development of a nearby molybdenum mine by AMAX Inc. Even though construction of the mine is still several years in the future, some residents of the county feel that increases in crime, mental health problems, and increased housing costs have already resulted from AMAX's announcement of its intentions. Tempers have flared to the extent that a window was shot out of the AMAX office in Crested Butte; anti-company rhetoric abounds and the town opposes the granting of governmental approvals necessary to build the mine. Many people in the county, even those who support the development, have become concerned about the potential of drug problems in the schools and the safety of the streets for their children. They do not know where to turn for accurate information. Thus, the mere threat of rapid growth may reduce the community's tolerance of newcomers unless successful programs are developed to help people maintain realistic perceptions of change.

As society and institutions change, the roles that individuals assume also change: new roles may be created, old roles eliminated, or traditional roles broadened or redefined. Both long time residents and newcomers may find a need to deal with a new definition of expectations of themselves and of socially acceptable behaviour. To avoid the stress of these role redefinitions, people may avoid strangers.

As the number of changes in the community increases, the amount of stress experienced by residents is expected to increase, intensifying the individual's vulnerability. To continually keep up with change, he must regularly draw on his inner reserves of personal resources. If there is limited access to community-centred support structures, he has fewer opportunities to replenish these reserves. While most people have access to friends or small groups of familiar people who can support a sense of personal well being, a tie to the larger community may be necessary to keep the smaller group intact. For example, a woman accompanying her employed husband to a boom community may be able to survive isolation for several months on the strength of the marriage relationship alone. However, if she is unable to eventually develop other support within the community, she may become depressed, divorced, or may force her husband to leave his job and the community in order to save the marriage.[8]

Social support systems help reduce susceptibility to stress-related psychological problems by providing a refuge from the stressful environment and by helping to realistically interpret that environment.[18] An individual who serves as social support to another person should feel needed and experience an increase in self-esteem with an accompanying decrease in helplessness. If he helps to establish social networks, his feelings of power, control, and personal worth should increase.[5]

One model of social disruption under rapid growth conditions is a downward spiral, beginning with stress caused by isolation from the community and leading to feelings of powerlessness. The person experiences lowered self-esteem which increases the amount of stress and can lead to problem behavior. This, in turn, increases the feelings of isolation, stress, and powerlessness and further reduces coping abilities, etc. Thus, the person is caught in a cumulative downward spiral resulting in less and less effective behavior. (Figure 1) In this model, the most accessible and effective point of intervention is the initial stage of isolation. A focus on the development of support systems within the community, coupled with an increased emphasis on training individuals using such systems should reverse the direction of the spiral. (Figure 2) The positive sequence then opens communication channels, develops a sense of belonging, increases feelings of personal potential, and leads to a positive sense of community.

Policy Issues

As there are few precedents in rapid growth communities for government, industry, and the community to cooperatively plan for social change, such planning apparently has not been a significant factor in policy deliberations. In considering proposed change management programs, it becomes apparent that the development and eventual success of these strategies is largely dependent on policy decisions. Several key issues are as follows:

- Planning the location of growth around the core of an existing community or the development of a new town. Each approach requires different considerations in the development of a sense of community.

- The use of lead time. The amount of lead time and degree of commitment to social planning will determine the extent to which change management programs are in place by the time they are needed.

- A focus on preventive or reactive programs. Advance planning can allow the implementation of preventive programming. However, boomtown experiences indicate that unless funding stipulations emphasize prevention efforts, available resources will be used almost exclusively for reactive programming.

- The selection of a human impact planning organization. Should planning and advisory authority be vested in an organization external to government and industry? If so, how should that organization be comprised and its authority supported and/or limited?

- The allocation of resources for change mangement. Who bears the cost of coping with human impacts; who determines appropriate expenditures; what is the process for negotiating responsibility?

New Towns

While the focus of this discussion is on managing changes experienced by existing communities undergoing rapid growth, the concept of new town development deserves some comment. The building of new towns offers an alternative to the problems faced in developing existing communities. At times, new towns may be the only reasonable option where no nearby town exists. However, as William Freudenburg observes, "People aren't much like lumps of coal. You can't just pick them up and move them to the most convenient place."[19]
For a new town to succeed in being an attractive place to live, it needs to rapidly develop a positive sense of community through the identification and achievement of common objectives, the building of social support networks, and the eventual creation of a shared sense of history and tradition.

CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Human Resources Planning

Few rural areas presently have capacities adequate to meet current human service needs. For example, law enforcement officers are often required to work long hours because of understaffing. Public health services are limited to a visiting nurse who covers a large territory, and mental health centers do not have facilities to care for clients with the most acute needs such as alcohol detoxification or inpatient treatment. Agency administrators tend to view rapid growth as creating more need for their services than their historically under-resourced programs can provide. As a result, agency efforts are often concentrated on securing resources to expand and improve traditional services rather than on the developing of community based prevention efforts.

Industry is often seen as a logical and legitimate source for program funding and may find itself asked to fund long standing deficits in addition to needs related to its impact. Many of the formal health and human service needs of employees and their families, including medical care, family counselling, alcoholism treatment, and rehabilitation services, can be funded through company benefit policies. By assuring that these services are covered, industry can support their availability over the life of the project and provide indirect long-term funding via that mechanism. Prior to construction, industry and government should cooperatively plan for human service program expansion. As the tax base grows, local government may become better able to fund needs not covered through employee benefits. A broad-based, local human resources planning organization, composed of representatives of human services agencies and of other community caregivers, such as clergy and volunteers, can provide industry and government valuable assistance in this process by identifying existing resources, defining current and future problem areas, and making program support recommendations based on these factors.
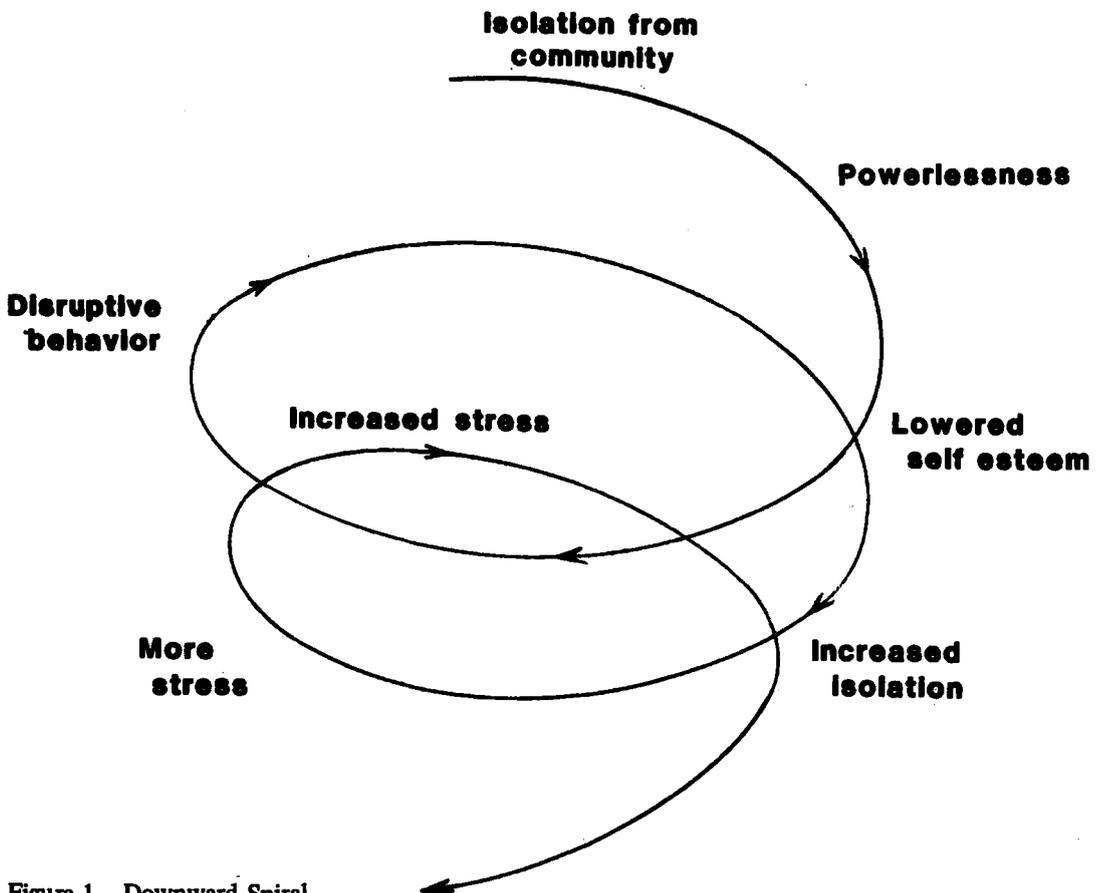

Figure 1   Downward Spiral

Advance community planning should encourage the development of preventive programs and the upgrading of traditional agency services. While adequate, traditional, human services are essential to the continuing welfare of the community, the experiences of modern boomtowns suggest that the mere expansion of these services is not sufficient to reduce social impact. Most agency programs are designed to react to problems. However, a major objective in planning for boomtowns is not only to react to problems but to reduce their disproportionate increase in the community. The development of an approach centering on managing the stressful elements of change will more substantially affect the causes of social disruption.

Although there has been much discussion of the potential for negative social impacts, resource related growth need not produce such disruptive results. The crucial human challenge facing rapid growth communities is the stimulation of an environment which reduces stress created or exacerbated by change. While it has often been proposed that a decrease in the rate of change can be the most effective intervention mechanism, this approach has not been successfully implemented, and may not be economically realistic or completely controllable by the community.

Since the primary human impact of rapid growth may be a disturbance in the network of support systems and the presence of barriers to the establishment of such systems, the most important variable in change management is the promotion and development of a positive sense of community. Two key approaches in this development process are the implementation of programs designed to promote community integration, and techniques to reduce specific stress factors which accompany rapid change.

Community Integration

Community integration programs are designed to promote the development and utilization of informal support systems. Their primary goal is to alleviate the stress of change by reducing isolation from the community and increasing a sense of belonging. This is accomplished through the development of attitudes favoring reaching out to newcomers and engaging a cross section of residents in cooperative tasks which help the community manage change more effectively. Working under the leadership of a human resources planning organization is a volunteer corps comprised of both current residents and newcomers. The volunteers are trained in communication skills and in the recognition of common problems faced in moving to a new community. They are responsible for the two primary tasks of the program: preparing a community information handbook, and identifying and contacting newcomers.

Because knowledge of support systems is often transmitted by word-of-mouth, newcomers have difficulty finding the information they need about the community. Providing a hand book which includes not only general information, (maps, loca-
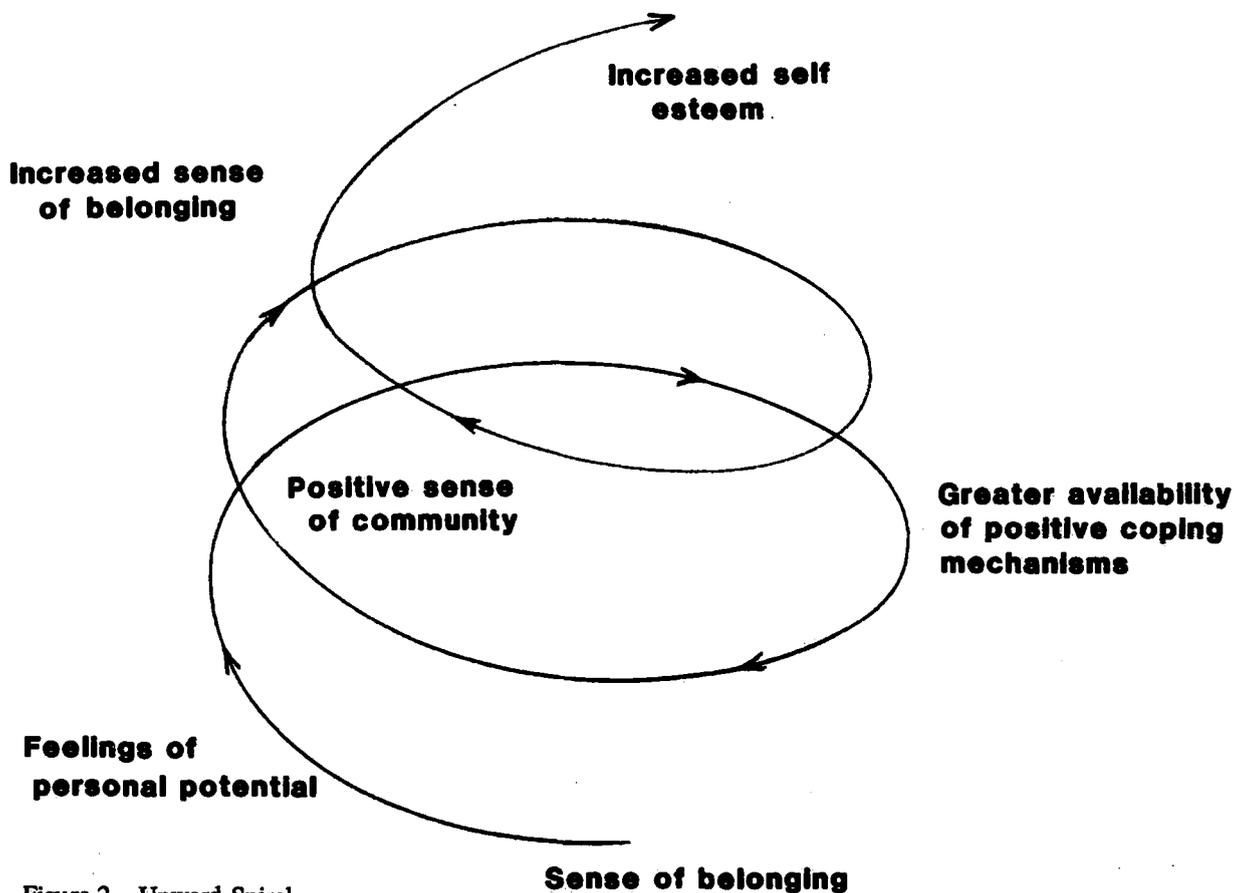

Figure 2 Upward Spiral

tion, and telephone numbers of governmental and agency services, etc.), but which also heavily emphasizes resources which meet personal needs (lists of residents with special skills, such as the name and location of violin teachers; lists of interest, hobby, and volunteer groups such as the volunteer fire department), can make this knowledge more immediately available. Also presented is information uniquely useful to people living in the particular geographic area. For northwest Colorado, a discussion on appropriate winter wardrobe and high altitude cooking techniques is especially helpful. In addition, the manual includes highlights of local history which have been described by the town's senior citizens.

A major function of the volunteer corps is to make a personal contact with each newcomer within a month of his arrival in the community. Newcomers are identified through information supplied by employers, school districts, utility companies, churches, and responses to announcements about the program. The volunteer provides a copy of the handbook, offers the new resident an opportunity to talk about living in the area, asks him about contacts he would like to make, and helps him make those contacts. The most important prevention components of this activity are the timeliness of the initial contact, and the active, on-going personal interaction between the newcomer and the volunteer.

Such a project was implemented by the authors in association with the Colorado West Regional Mental Health Center. The population in the target community was characterized by transiency and by many newcomers. The Center staff began to see a high incidence of cases diagnosed as situational depression, particularly among female newcomers, due to isolation and loneliness. To counteract this problem, an organization of volunteers was developed which, with leadership from the Center, organized a variety of projects, two of which were aimed at reducing situational depression by integrating new residents more rapidly into the community.

One group, which called itself the Grand County Greeters, implemented the community integration program described above. Additionally, they created support groups within several communities. Many women with young children were unable to overcome their isolation because of lack of money or availability of babysitters. The volunteers helped these women form small discussion groups and cooperative babysitting arrangements. As a result, the women not only had someone to talk to but had more freedom to explore other activities.

Six months after the development of these programs, the percentage of clinical cases of situational depression seen at the Center was half of the original level. Moreover, the volunteer group became a support system as many newcomers joined it and worked together with the longtime residents toward the shared goal of integrating people into the community.

While the rapid influx of newcomers stresses communities and their support networks, these people also represent new resources to those communities. Several major corporations, including EXXON and AMAX, have created their own internal volunteer programs as a way of developing those human resources and making them available to meet local needs. The AMAX Volunteer Program in Gunnison County, Colorado, in existence less than a year, has been remarkably successful in demonstrating to residents that newcomers can be important contributors to the community. AMAX volunteers have taught swimming to underprivileged children, provided a variety of services to the local nursing home (including planting a flower and vegetable garden), participated in the social service department's foster home program, and organized a community-wide "Totfinders" service which helps locate small children in case of a fire. Such programs help community integration as they provide a sanctioned and ready link between the traditional community and the new industry.

Industry, with the assistance of the human resources planning organization, can initiate other programs which are designed to reduce stereotyping of industry employees and to ease their transition into the community. Orientation programs for employees and their families, covering practical considerations of living in the new location (such as availability of services, recreation resources, transportation options) help reduce the stress of adjusting to the area. Public presentations, describing the development and including discussions of the work roles and tasks of the employees help reduce the potential for negative stereotyping. Company policy which encourages employees to participate in community organizations and activities can enhance these goals. For example, the disruptive components of change may be especially felt by law enforcement, social services, and mental health agencies, and the schools. Appointment of company employees to the boards of directors or to the volunteer services of these agencies increases communication and promotes a cooperative approach to planning and problem resolution.

Employment Policies

In addition to focusing on the concept of integration, a number of strategies can be adopted to reduce the overall level and impact of growth. Certain employment policies may lower the total number of newcomers and attract employees who have easier access to existing support networks and are more likely to remain in the community. Company policies which permit or even encourage hiring more than one person from the same family can reduce the number of families moving into the area, create career alternatives for non-working spouses, and increase the family living standards. The hiring of residents, when possible, and a "locals come home" program, where former residents are actively recruited to fill available jobs, increase the number of employees with ties to local

support systems. Gilmore notes that a coal mining firm in Southwest Colorado reported extremely high productivity rates after hiring inexperienced local people, both men and women, and training them on the job.[20] Industry, the local job service office, and local colleges, can cooperatively provide training in industrial and support job skills. This encourages the employment of an existing labor pool of non-working spouses and unskilled laborers. If successful, these efforts reduce the number of newcomers needed to support the development, and permit wider career options for community residents.

A major stress faced by a growth community is that of uncertainty about the development and its actual effects on the community. Some residents tend to be skeptical about industry-released information as being self-serving or incomplete, and have trouble distinguishing valid information from speculation. An information service which is seen as neutral can provide members of the community with access to reliable and nonpolitical data. Examples of such neutral sources in the United States may be the League of Women Voters or the Human Resources Planning Organization.

The construction phase of the project may influence the community's tolerance of growth. If this stage is seen as socially disruptive, programs to integrate operations personnel and their families with the community could be less effective and more difficult to implement. The hiring of as many long term construction workers as possible increases the number of people with a personal investment in becoming a part of the community. However, for those workers who are short term, integration with the community may not be a realistic or desirable goal. Their impact can be reduced by a work schedule which permits them to return frequently to their hometowns. This may be accomplished through the availability of low cost housing, longer work days with a shorter work week, and provision of end-of-week travel back to their permanent homes.

The effectiveness of prevention programs is dependent not only on their success during each phase, but also on the outcome expected by the public. The most optimistic expectation is that the increase in identified problems will be no greater than the actual rate of growth. At best, though, there will appear to be a disproportionate increase during the early stages of development. The initial increase is based in several realities of a community seeking equilibrium. Newcomers have not yet developed reliable, trusted support systems, and may tend to seek help through formal resources until those systems are in place. Because the caregiver, the client, or both, are new to the community, no historical relationship exists and the problem is less likely to be handled informally, thus producing a "case statistic." Additionally, the initial publicity of industrial development may attract a transient population of the hard core unemployed, drawn to the community by rumors

of available work. This is a population which traditionally relies on public services.

Over the long run, the outlook can be more favorable, as the rate of occurrence of social problems may fall below that of the predevelopment era. Through the process of community integration, newcomers and longtime residents can develop new support systems and experience a reduced sense of isolation. There are eventually likely to be more community amenities available. An enhanced economy and more favorable cost-benefit ratios may provide commercial, educational, recreational, cultural, and social resources that have not been readily available in the past.

SUMMARY

Social pressures associated with rapid population growth are well documented. Several groups of people are particularly vulnerable and case studies have indicated that the increases have been accompanied by rising crime rates, alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, child and spouse abuse, and a rise in civil disorder. In addition, industry faces greater costs for resource development due to worker turnover and absenteeism.

Nevertheless, rapid growth need not produce such disruptive results. Well planned and coordinated human services and programs designed to relieve the stresses of change, to provide a sense of community, and to integrate newcomers into the community can reduce or prevent many of the negative impacts as well as reduce overall costs by building on existing resources. Critical variables in successfully managing rapid growth are cooperation among industry, government, and community in accepting roles of responsibility, policy decisions which include planning for social change, adequate lead time for program implementation and infrastructure development, and adequate financing for the necessary services. The resources of a stabilized, cohesive community may largely meet the individual needs of old-timer and newcomer alike.

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