

Letters/Opinions

300 millionth American coming soon

THINKING
OUT LOUD

By THAD BOX

POPULATION experts predict that in October the 300 millionth potential American will enter our country. We don't know if she will be a blue-eyed baby girl born in Idaho, a Chinese engineer on the path to naturalization, an illiterate refugee from the genocide in Sudan or a Latino farmworker who walks across the desert.

But whatever her origin, she will be part of the third-largest country in the world — one of the few industrialized nations whose population continues to grow. Regardless of the position we may personally hold on birth control or immigration, each new arrival puts pressure on our land. Each changes our country. Each enters a culture with a track record of wasteful use of land for housing.

I recently attended two separate presentations by land-use experts from Utah State University's College of

Natural Resources that examined possible futures of Cache Valley, Utah. One was by Rob Lillieholm, an economist; the other was by Richard Toth, a landscape architect and regional planner.

Both predicted the valley's population will double in the next quarter century. Using readily available statistics, satellite maps, GPS data and computer models, each indicated that if we continue business as usual, our valley will be chock-full of houses, each sitting on its own lot by 2030.

Open space turns into sprawl

Cache Valley's problems are shared by hundreds of communities throughout the West. A growing number of the 300 million Americans choose to live in our mountains. The natural beauty and rural settings attract people from more crowded states. They soon turn the open space they sought into exurban sprawl.

When economics alone directs growth, Lillieholm explained, houses move onto land most easily developed,

thus yielding the greatest profit to the builder. Development spreads from existing roads and available utilities like spilled milk on the kitchen floor. Continuing to move to the next easiest place to develop, builders will eventually fill all sites that will support a house.

Toth and his graduate students developed "what-if" models that allow planners to choose from several different scenarios to predict and analyze growth. Their "business as usual" scenario ends with a land-use mess similar to the economic model. Neither is sustainable. Surprisingly, when new growth is restricted to existing town or city limits, no new land development is needed for the next 30 years. There is no immediate need to encroach on prime farmland or open space — two amenities that a majority of residents rate highly valuable on opinion surveys.

Land base must be kept suitable

Westerners resist restrictions, and it is highly unlikely that lawmakers will enact strict zoning requirements that limit residential growth to existing towns, or that towns themselves will cease annexing land to increase their tax revenue. However, less objectionable incentives can aid a more sustainable development policy.

Most towns are limited in their rev-

enue sources. Many states depend heavily on sales tax. Some distribute a portion of the sales tax to the point of sale, rather than the hometown of the consumer. Towns compete to get high-volume retail outlets in their jurisdiction. Sharing sales tax with towns where people live would help alleviate undesirable competition for retail development.

Much of the land most easily developed is now in farms and ranches. Any restriction on building quickly becomes a property rights issue. Property owners consider the development potential as part of their stored wealth. Tools can be made available for farmers who want to capture the development value but continue to use the land for agricultural purposes. Communities that use creative ways to fund conservation easements, sale of development rights or transfer of rights can have their cake and eat it, too.

We owe it to the 300 millionth American, whether she is newborn Mary Ann Smith or 40-year-old Guadalupe Hernandez, to keep our land base suitable for whatever America will be like a 100 years from now. None of us can afford business as usual.

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Help victims based on loss, not location

GUEST
EDITORIAL

By PAM GOLDEN

DID you get a \$1,500 credit card from the Federal Emergency Management Agency after the last hurricane hit your community? How about another \$1,500 from the American Red Cross? If you didn't have home insurance, did you get a check for \$150,000?

Me neither. My community hasn't been hit by one hurricane in the past three years. It's been slammed by two and damaged by several more.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I listened to people holler and moan about the government not doing enough to help the victims. First, I cared. I've been there. Then, I was a bit disgusted with people who didn't even bring food and water to the shelter. That's been drilled into our heads since before I moved to Florida 30 years ago. When they complained about long lines to get their debit cards, I suggested everyone of working age on the monthly dole when the hurricane hit be dropped from the line. That would make it a lot shorter. That's about the time I turned absolutely indifferent to the squalling.

Where is it written that victims of a hurricane — or any other natural disaster — should be compensated to a greater extent than victims of another disaster? Why does an employee of a big company receive more help than a small-business owner? Where is it written that if you don't have insurance, the rest of us who paid insurance premiums now have to ante up tax money to compensate your loss?

The final straw came with this note from the U.S. Department of Agriculture in regard to the Emergency Conservation Program: "The ESP provides cost-share assistance up to 75%.

However, producers may receive up to 100% cost-share assistance for these activities for damages caused by hurricanes Katrina and Rita only."

Excuse me?

The government response to hurricanes Katrina and Rita is the best argument in favor of a disaster provision in the 2007 Farm Bill. The issue is parity.

First, victims of a hurricane suffer at varying levels depending on the damage to their homes and their communities. Geographic location, however, lends no distinction. That means victims should be compensated based on their loss, not their ZIP code. Further, if insurance is available and someone chooses not to purchase it, that's a risk he or she chooses to take.

However, if insurance isn't available or is inadequate, as is the situation with most agricultural enterprises, then we must step up to the plate to compensate victims. The way to do that is to prepare for such disasters with a written plan for responding, documenting and compensating those who were in the path of the hurricane, under the rays of the drought or twisted by the tornado.

Otherwise, our response is dictated by our emotions and tempered only by the size of the purse available in the wake of the disaster.

Fewer people were impacted by Hurricane Ivan than by Katrina, but those who lost their houses, lost their homes; those who lost pine stands no longer have a retirement crop; those who watched their cotton bolls blanket the ground had nothing to take to the gin — regardless of whether they lived in Louisiana or lower Alabama.

A disaster provision ensures they're compensated equally. Write it now.

Golden is a Farm Progress editor.

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