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GREAT PLACES IN CANADA

AU CANADA, C’EST MA PLACE!
THE CART BEFORE THE HORSE:
POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON FARM PARCEL CREATION ON Mennonite FARMS

BY BRYCE SHARPE AND WAYNE CALDWELL, MCIP, RPP

SUMMARY Large Mennonite families within Ontario’s Anabaptist communities are considering subdividing their farm homesteads into smaller parcels to create housing and employment for a future generation of farmers who rely on horse-drawn vehicles for transportation. Family size in some communities can average 7 to 12 children. This article examines Mennonite adaptation and policy perspectives on small acreage farms, adding colour to a discussion about differences in cultural value and priority between Ontario’s Mennonite communities and land-use policy and regulation for farm parcel creation. In an age where agriculture is big business competing in a global marketplace, planning policy aims to keep farm parcels large and intact (Figure 1). Families who want to create legitimate small acreage farms for the next generation experience this as a difficulty. Our findings illustrate that planning policy is both generally right and specifically wrong. The article concludes with a reflection on the principle of equal treatment in planning.

RÉSUMÉ Les grandes familles mennonites des communautés anabaptistes de l’Ontario envisagent de subdiviser leurs fermes en parcelles pour créer des logements et de l’emploi pour une nouvelle génération d’agriculteurs comptant sur les véhicules hippomobiles. Dans certaines communautés, les familles ont une moyenne de 7 à 12 enfants. Cet article examine l’adaptation des Mennonites et les perspectives politiques des petites fermes, ajoutant de la couleur à une discussion sur les différences de valeurs culturelles et de priorités entre les communautés mennonites de l’Ontario et la réglementation des parcelles agricoles. À une époque où l’agriculture est une grosse industrie en concurrence dans un marché mondial, la politique d’aménagement vise à maintenir des parcelles agricoles de grande taille (Figure 1), ce qui contrarie les familles qui veulent créer de petites fermes pour la prochaine génération. Nos conclusions montrent que la politique de planification est généralement juste, mais erronée dans ce cas spécifique. L’article conclut par une réflexion sur le principe de l’égalité de traitement en matière de planification.
the cart before the horse
INTRODUCTION

Large families within Ontario’s Mennonite communities are considering subdividing farms into smaller parcels to create housing and employment opportunities for the next generation who rely on horse-drawn transportation. The situation is aggravated by the high price and lack of availability of farmland in southern Ontario where they are presently concentrated. Faced with zoning that places limitations on the size of new farm parcels created through the subdivision of existing farms, young families are taking extreme measures to bolster housing and employment, including moving out of the province, with inevitable impacts on their close-knit communities and culture. Complicating matters are concerns in society about the feasibility and eventual non-farm use of small farm parcels.

Among the rationales behind existing policy, it is generally argued that large parcels are comparably more efficient and that small parcels can potentially contribute to rural estate lots leading to an incremental loss of farmland. This article is about differences in cultural value and priority between Ontario’s Mennonite communities and land-use policy and regulation for farm parcel creation. It adds colour to a policy dilemma that has received very little attention in published literature.

METHODOLOGY

Our research documents Mennonite perspectives of the impacts of existing land use policy and regulation for farm parcel creation on Mennonite farming sustainability and the adaptive strategies that they are taking to adjust to traditional agricultural land use policy that favours large farm retention. Our research challenges that tenet in the context of Mennonite culture and their beliefs in land stewardship. In the fall of 2014, we interviewed 18 small acreage Mennonite farmers located in the Townships of Wellesley, Woolwich and Howick in the Region of Waterloo and the County of Huron. These rural municipalities have minimum lot size requirements of 99, 99 and 74 acres respectively.

If we value the cultural and economic contribution of Anabaptist communities to our society, we need to think more carefully and holistically about the impacts of the land use policies we create and the regulations we draft.
BENNETT ARGUES, “THE POLICY OF THE STATE TO TREAT EVERYONE THE SAME HAS BEEN OPPRESSIVE TO THE OLD ORDER AMISH: THEY ARE NOT THE SAME; THEY HAVE VERY DIFFERENT NEEDS AND GOALS.”

Participants represented three Mennonite groups: David Martin Mennonites (DMM), Old Order Mennonites (OOM), and Orthodox Mennonites of Ontario (OMO). These groups maintain a conservative, traditional lifestyle. Some aspects of modern technology have been adopted, such as tractors in the case of the OOM group and skid steers for manure handling in the case of DMM group. We sampled farms with a residence and 50 acres or less using the tax assessment rolls stored at each of the three township administrative offices. Individuals with first-hand knowledge about their communities also helped identify farmers who might be willing to participate in interviews. To account for the possibility that a single farmer might own more than one parcel, the identified farms were described as the home-farm, defined as the home parcel excluding other acreage owned and/or rented. Participants were asked to respond to a series of questions about their home-farm and acreage, additional acreage owned and/or rented and changes to the scale of their farming operation. They were also asked about secondary on-farm activities and businesses, off-farm employment, and the demand for small farm parcels within their respective communities.

RESULTS

A summary of our results is provided in Table 1. The largest cohort in the sample (N=11) was found to be home-farm focused. These participants indicated that their home-farm financially supports itself and the household without any additional acreage farmed. An important division was found to exist between participants who were found to be relatively self-sufficient in a principal farm enterprise and those who relied on off-farm inputs and other income streams to compensate for acreage farmed. One side of this division is illustrated by Farmer 13, a produce grower with 18.5 acres in production on a 21.5-acre parcel. “The farming operation pays for itself and our bills. It’s a financially viable business,” he explained. Although he has a sideline business that makes up 10 per cent of the family income, he doesn’t view that income as a necessity. The flip side is illustrated by Farmer 18, a dairy producer with 35 acres of tillable land on a 50-acre parcel. Although he grows some of the feed for the 80 dairy goats that he and his family of eleven milk by hand, he absorbs a cash outlay for feed that must be supplied from off-farm. “I would like to have 100 acres to do my thing because I could grow all my own hay and feed,” he explained.

It is evident that those participants who were found to be home-farm focused do not view farm enlargement as the only way to sustain their farms and to be successful. Specialization is one alternative strategy and this is illustrated by Farmer 13’s produce operation. Diversification is a second strategy. Every farmer in this category was found to be involved in an on-farm business or extra paid activity spanning a complete range of possibilities from a machine shop with annual production of upwards of two million automotive parts fabricated on just one of several machines, to a harness repair shop with no electricity. Nearly all of the participants in this category viewed these extra revenue streams as a necessity (N=10). Off-farm employment has become increasingly important for full-time farmers. However, a low number of participants who were found to be home-farm focused held off-farm employment (N=2). These two participants, together with a third, rent acreage off their home-farms. Still though, they continue to remain engaged in agriculture through poultry production. While it is clearly inaccurate to suggest that all Mennonite farmers are comparatively less likely to become detached from agriculture, even with small acreage, these participants are staying engaged and gave no indication that they intend to scale back.

A second group was found to be acreage-assisted (N=7). These participants – each with livestock – indicated that their home-farm does not financially support itself and the household without additional acreage farmed. An important division was found to exist between those participants who viewed their additional owned and/or rented acreage as a necessity (N=5) and those who did not (N=2). Farmer 9, a dairy producer with a home-farm of 46 acres and a milking herd of 36 to 40 cows, illustrates one side of this division. He views the 70 additional acres he owns as a necessity. Without it, he was doubtful that he could meet Ontario’s rules governing the environmental management of animal waste. He also explained that he would need to buy-in feed supplied from off-farm – a situation he is currently able to avoid. Farmer 12, a dairy producer with a milking herd of 28 dairy cows and a 48-acre home-farm, illustrates the flip side. He views his additional 27.9 acres owned as optional. He indicated that he could do without it assuming he could purchase feed.

Nine participants across the sample confirmed that they have children who want to farm. Eight other participants have children who are not at an age to have yet decided their career path. All participants confirmed that there is no accessible farmland in their general areas citing availability and affordability as major barriers faced by young people in their communities. The situation on two farms is illustrative of the demographic pinch being felt in these communities. With 21 children and two 50-acre parcels between them, two participants explained that they are concerned about how their children will find and afford farms of their own. “I’m afraid...
that one of these days we’re going to have to pack up and go elsewhere...I wish I had a more positive picture for you," one participant explained.

When asked about existing policy for farm parcel creation and how it impacts their community, participants responded with mixed feelings. Many viewed the possibility of policy for smaller parcels in a positive light if it could be paired with rules that would enable intensive vegetable production to be combined with an on-farm business. However, participants also voiced concerns. Among those concerns was the limiting effect of small parcels relative to livestock production (for example, too small a land base for crop production and manure management as well as concerns about complications with land use separation distances), the possibility that smaller parcels might drive-up the price of farmland, and the possibility that small parcels might eventually be sold to non-farmers in the future.

### DISCUSSION

Our findings illustrate that planning policy is generally right in the sense that larger farm parcels can benefit agriculture. For example, livestock farmers benefit from large parcels for pasture, crop production and manure management. Some participants incur a cash outlay for purchased feed. Others absorb an added expense of renting land. These operational costs might otherwise be avoided if their home-farms were larger. Still though, our findings illustrate that a number of participants are making a living on parcels that would otherwise be disallowed by minimum lot size requirements in local planning documents – an indication that broad and generalized policy can be specifically wrong. This is particularly true of those participants who are in the main, farming with horses and horse-drawn equipment and practicing a style of mixed farming characterized by Fretz as a “non-specialized family enterprise.” An economist might view this style of farming as comparatively less efficient on purely economic grounds than the specialized style of farming that has become fairly ubiquitous in Ontario’s agri-food sector. This, however, misses the point. Financial gain is not the only criteria by which success is measured by Mennonites on their farms. Less tangible criteria include permanency, industriousness, candor, and a deep respect for the land. We heard from participants that small parcels are well

### TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF RESULTS

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Home-Farm Focused (N=11)</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Consideration</strong></td>
<td>Home-Farm (i.e. ≤ 50 acres) financially supports itself and the household without any additional acreage farmed.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Farm Autonomy</strong></td>
<td>Farmer 13 on 21.5 acres is self-sufficient in a specialized farm enterprise.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Adaptive Strategies</strong></td>
<td>Farmer 18 on 50 acres: reliant on off-farm inputs and diversified income streams to compensate for acreage farmed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>On-Farm Businesses</strong></td>
<td>Specialization (e.g. Farmer 13: produce growing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Scaling-Back?</strong></td>
<td>Diversification (e.g. Farmer 18: dairy goats, produce growing, maple syrup, woodshop).</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Acreage-Assisted (N=7)</strong></td>
<td>A necessity for most (N=10).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Consideration</strong></td>
<td>Off-farm employment (N=2); still farming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Farm Autonomy</strong></td>
<td>Rent acreage to others (N=3); still farming.</td>
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<td><strong>Participant Perspectives from Across the Sample (N=18)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Farm Accessibility</strong></td>
<td>Affordability and availability of farmland is a barrier faced by youth.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Policy</strong></td>
<td>Possibility of pairing small parcels with vegetable production and on-farm businesses viewed positively.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Concerns about limiting effect of small parcels on livestock production.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Concerns about small parcels driving-up the price of farmland.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Concerns about the possibility that small parcels might eventually be sold to non-farmers in the future.</strong></td>
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suited to produce growing and Farmer 13’s success is a case in point: the family makes its living on 18.5 acres of vegetables. As other participants across the sample grow produce as a sideline, Farmer 13’s situation seems to be an exception. Opportunities to pair small acreage with an apparent winning combination of produce growing and other on-farm revenue streams appear to be stagnated by policy for farm parcel creation that is predicated on the type of agricultural use(s) that are common in an area.

Likewise, produce growing on small acreage does not fit in well with provincial policy that says that farms must be “sufficiently large to maintain flexibility for future changes in the type of size of agricultural operations.” If support for the culture and farming practices of Mennonites is a goal among planners, and we feel that it should be, than perhaps it is time to be sympathetic of other possibilities. We emphasize this point against a backdrop of societal values attached to local food and growing concerns about the security of Canada’s domestic food supply.

Our research points to a range of possibilities that might make the goal of life on a farm an attainable one for young Mennonites who want to have productive farm families of their own. The possibilities include consideration of tenants-in-common properties with two separate homes; so-called garden suites; consideration of rural-mixed use/agricultural cluster developments on low capability soils paired with provisions to enable produce growing and additional on-farm revenue streams; utilization of natural severances where these opportunities exist; consideration of what might be possible with revised policy on existing undersized parcels (such as former farm retirement lots); and exploring the role that agricultural easements might have in discouraging the expectation that small parcels will be used for non-agricultural use if they are created.

CONCLUSION

The reflection on the need to recognize divergent communities’ needs and goals is conceptually important to this work. Bennett argues, “The policy of the state to treat everyone the same has been oppressive to the Old Order Amish: They are not the same; they have very different needs and goals.” The same is true for Mennonite communities who rely on horse-drawn vehicles for transportation. While the principle
of treating everyone the same in planning promotes equality, it does not always translate into equitable outcomes. This approach fails to recognize our differences. Large family size, a reliance on horses for transportation and/or fieldwork, and a preference for on-farm employment are just a few of the factors that distinguish this sample of 18 Mennonite farmers. Are we as a society and community doing enough to support and sustain the unique needs of minority cultures that live and have thrived within our midst? What is our role as planners who write policy and land use regulation to consider their needs? As our research of small acreage Mennonite farms in southwestern Ontario shows, if we value the cultural and economic contribution of Anabaptist communities to our society, we need to think more carefully and holistically about the impacts of the land use policies we create and the regulations we draft (Figure 2). Friedman’s process of mutual learning is a helpful place to begin exploring the possibilities for change. In this process, a shared understanding of a situation is enabled through thoughtful dialogue between parties with different points of few and experience. This process benefits cross-cultural planning by cultivating new perspectives, awareness and transformative outcomes.

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REFERENCES


A traditional approach to agriculture on many of Ontario’s Anabaptist farms, demonstrated here by a horse-drawn grain binder at harvest time in Huron County, stands in sharp contrast to modern production methods.