

Perceptions of the cultural climate in the Avon Hills area—rapid changes Allan Davisson

Understanding the culture and social fabric of the Avon hills area today begins, for me, with memories of this area in the 1960's and 1970's when I first came to central Minnesota. A battle over the establishment of a Minnesota State Park in the area had taken place and residents had stopped the planning for the project. There was suspicion of outsiders and of people whose educational background or personal background set them too far outside the established norms of the area.

Three or four decades ago, this area was partly the gentle and insulated part of America made famous by Garrison Keillor. But it was also an area described with the distinctive and not complimentary term, "Stearns County Syndrome." Culturally conservative, predominantly Catholic, or conservative Lutheran, marginal farms, large families, many people with no more than an eighth grade education, and land values that reflected agricultural ambition made these hills seem remote. Other than the main highway, there were no paved roads beyond the St. John's campus. Land was cheap—in 1972 we passed up an opportunity to buy a hilly and wooded 80 acre parcel with a large pond for \$8,000. Such land now sells for \$10,000 per acre.

Lakeshore was valued real estate at the time, but most of the development was for summer/seasonal cabins. Twenty or thirty dollars per foot would buy a 50 foot lakeshore lot and a mobile home or frame building with no insulation. This allowed someone to have a lakeshore getaway for a few thousand dollars. Land use planning and zoning was opposed fiercely by many as the introduction of "socialism" or "communism" progressed into the area.

It was an area hovering between poverty and an emerging middle class. Many of the characteristics of the "generational poor"—limited money, extended family, a culture of poverty—were major factors in the lives of many of the residents. The worst effects were softened by rural or small town living, family, and the support that people could draw from their churches.

The middle class values of hard work, material achievement, and conventional viewpoints were emerging. Employment in construction and manufacturing in St. Cloud or Cold Spring or in some of the small specialist manufacturing businesses building farm equipment, mink processing technology or granite finishing helped many families to experience upward mobility.

The mid to late 1970's were the time of turn-around in the area. This was the era of hyper inflation and a dramatic growth in land values. Demand for rural land and lakeshore boomed in this area and rapidly rising real estate prices reflected this new awareness. Farming became less and less important in terms of land use as property was purchased for recreation or speculation. Mid level managers and professionals began establishing homes as more and more people became aware of the appeal of this area. The transition from land viewed as marginal farmland to desirable for living and recreation was particularly fast. Though other central Minnesota areas had counter-culture and artistic settlement in rural sites, land values in this immediate area jumped too quickly for such development.

The changes in the past two decades or so have been dramatic. Real estate has become extremely valuable and high income professionals and business executives now routinely build mid-six figure homes on the lakes and in the hills. The cabins of thirty years ago have been most purchased and torn down to make way for these new year round homes.

Homes and families generally reflect the prosperity of a strong and diverse central Minnesota economy. There is still a high level of religious commitment but it is as apt to be directed toward one of the many evangelical churches in the area as to one of the Catholic or Lutheran parishes. People here are still socially conservative, strongly concerned about family values and are hard working and

achievement oriented members of a comfortable middle class. There is great pride in schools, strong involvement in community programs and activities and an appreciation of the natural amenities of the area. Though there were some objections, public programs like the Wobegone Trail have been general endorsed by the community, a turnaround in attitudes from the resistance to a state park four decades ago.

People appreciate their surroundings and those who live in this area now can be expected to protest as vigorously against anything they perceive as a threat to the environment as the population once did against zoning and planning efforts. Detailed and forward looking land use planning ordinances are relatively new for many parts of the area and the laws that are now in place are particularly comprehensive and detailed.

It is still a community that is overwhelmingly white, middle class and largely dominated by males. There are few women with political leadership positions in the area. The lack of minorities in the Avon Hills area probably reflects the fact that the influx of minorities into the St. Cloud area is relatively recent. Land values and restrictions on subdivision are such that the costs of moving into the area are prohibitive. Most of the owners of large blocks of land have owned their property for along time. The few large transactions that have taken place most recently have been for sums well beyond the reach of anyone but the most wealthy.

We can expect development pressure to continue. If we want to see a mixture of people coming to the area other than those wealthy enough to buy into this high-demand and high-amenity area— young families, minorities—we are going to have to devise some creative requirements for developers. In many respects, maintaining a diverse and vital population may be a bigger challenge in the Avon Hills area than maintaining the natural environment.