

No Room In Paradise: Seeking Alternatives For A Brighter Future

Coastal regions of the nation have gained immense popularity over the last two decades. In the sixties, U.S. population grew twelve percent while the number of residents in the Atlantic and Gulf Coast states increased forty percent. The 1970 census reveals that more than half of the nation's population is within an hour's drive of the beach (Funk, 1977). This accessibility and increased leisure has escalated demand for waterfront property.

North Carolina has also had growing demands placed on its coastal resources by recreational activities. Between 1958 and 1970, the tourist trade in coastal North Carolina increased by 168 percent (East Carolina, 1971). In 1970 the state ranked ninth in the United States in terms of the number of second homes (66,811) within its borders. By 1976, the coastal region alone had attracted an estimated 83,690 recreational properties (Burby, 1979).

Tourism and second home development provide many benefits for coastal communities -- increased tax revenues, recreational opportunities, jobs, and an improved market for marginal farmland. If not properly managed, however, such rapid development may eventually destroy the very qualities of the local environment that attracted visitors in the first place. Residents of Ocracoke Village, a coastal community in North Carolina, are currently facing this threat. Their experiences, which have been documented by several surveys and numerous interviews, provide valuable insights into some of the tough planning problems that leisure industries pose for coastal communities (Miller, 1977).

THE COMMUNITY

Across the inlet from Ocracoke Village is the abandoned town of Portsmouth. Settled in the early 1700s, Portsmouth today is a ghost town with its few remaining houses, a church, post office, and Coast Guard Station, reminders of the once bustling seaport of 600 inhabitants.

The Civil War's disruption of the local economy, combined with devastating hurricanes which destroyed warehouses and docks and caused drastic shoaling of channels to the port, forced the population to gradually disperse. The empty buildings, recently acquired by the Cape Lookout National Seashore, are being preserved for future generations to visit.

Ocracoke might have suffered a similar fate had it not been for tourism. Situated 30 miles out at sea on the south end of a narrow 19-mile stretch of the Outer Banks, its 775 acres are the only property in the vicinity not owned by the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. The village is the sole traffic route for vehicles transported by the Cedar Island, Swan Quarter, and Hatteras Ferries. Its unique and historic setting attracts sightseers from many places throughout the nation.

Local people state that in the 1800s Ocracoke was a transfer center for goods coming from overseas, with smaller vessels then carrying the freight to inland ports such as New Bern. Blackbeard and other pirates made a good living, as did more honest citizens engaged in raising cattle and fishing. Most fondly remembered is the ability of the islanders to work together and to help each other. "If a man had a boat or house to build," said one lifetime resident, "the men got together and did it. No one paid labor. In the winter, each family raised a pig, then they killed, as needed, to have fresh meat." This bond remained strong until the early 1960s. "Then everyone got busy making a living and now they don't have time for their neighbors." However, "in comparison with the rest of the world, it's

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still a good place to live." Almost all the people surveyed on the island considered the population "just right" or "too big."

The advent of state-supported ferries in 1957 caused immediate demand for activities relating to tourism. Limited personal services available at the time could not handle the thousands of people who were now "discovering" the island. Commercial fishing declined as local residents took advantage of more dependable employment opportunities provided by the ferries, park service, and tourist businesses. Increasingly, others left their families to join a branch of the military such as the Coast Guard or the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers or some other government service. Current employment options offer wages which have risen little since the days of fishing. Economic benefits derived from motels, restaurants, and stores are mostly being enjoyed by newcomers. The jobs they provide are seasonal and usually offer minimum wage.

Many tourists return repeatedly to the island, some eventually buying land and houses. Heavy demand for property has caused prices to skyrocket. For example, in 1967 one particular house and lot was valued at \$5,000; the following year it was sold for \$50,000. The likelihood of similar transactions could not help but tempt residents earning less than five to ten thousand dollars a year. Increasingly, property which families have owned for generations is being sold for high profits. Approximately three-quarters of the privately owned land is now in the hands of people from other places, i.e., developers, retired year-round residents, absentee owners, and those running most of the local commercial enterprises.

Looking for large profits, developers pumped sand into marshes behind the village in the early 1960s to open new housing areas. These new lots have replaced the natural tidal buffers between Pamlico Sound and the community. New and expensive homes now stand in locations which once were submerged by violent storm surges. With dredging and filling changing the paths that flood waters will take on the island, islanders fear the unpredictable effects of severe hurricanes.

Many of the new housing areas in the village are poorly designed. Although the homes being constructed are expensive and substantial, the roads and bridges that provide access are only temporary. No provisions have been made to provide for their maintenance. Any effort to get landowners to share the costs of repairs will be frustrated by the fact that many are hard to find since they do not visit the island on a regular basis. Dense housing patterns elsewhere in the village have contaminated nearby estuarine waters with runoff from septic tanks.

As a result of the influx of people, all the island's residents are benefiting from new community services. Garbage is no longer dumped on the back side of the island, but is collected and trucked to Manteo. A water system using deep-well water and desalinization equipment is replacing the use of rainwater for drinking and individual wells for washing. In addition, well-equipped volunteer fire and rescue squads are also now on call when needed.

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Because property is so valuable, most residents find it difficult or impossible to buy land. Young people put mobile homes in their parents' back yards. Even this solution may be eliminated as North Carolina's septic tank regulations place limits on crowding.

Although native residents are concerned about land shortages, they are in fact left with few options for improving the situation. Most of those surveyed own only enough for immediate needs. Those who have retained larger holdings intend to keep them in the family, or sell to neighbors. Since inheritances frequently necessitate the sale of property to the highest bidder, such loyalties are not likely to prevail. Also, individuals may be forced to sell property for economic reasons which do not allow for price-cutting. Such circumstances combined continue the trend away from ownership by the original families.

Many who buy for investment purposes are not going to sell houses at prices affordable to Ocracoke's youth who wish to remain in the village. Even some of the newcomers who cherish Ocracoke's location and scenery are not particularly taken by its traditional ways. Some are openly annoyed with locals, not wanting them as neighbors. One expressed the opinion that *this* kind of people support the island, and "it would be better to get the leech-like residents off my back."

Social conflict is a reality in the village of Ocracoke. Different backgrounds and economic status keep various groups at odds. Frequent complaints are that nobody wants to work, that there is no communication in the village, and that the islanders are lazy and apathetic. Local factions accuse outsiders of trying to run the island. "When they first came here," one resident said, "they had to live with us. Now we've got to live with them." Scornfully stated by another was that "they'll come here to get away from where they were, and then first thing, they're trying to make it like the place they left."

Survey results show great differences of opinion as to how the native population and outsiders think the island should be run. The majority of the islanders oppose any type of zoning or local government, maintaining they did without it in the past, and distrust it for the future. Outsiders want to preserve the appearance of the village, and consider local government a means to assure orderly growth. Proposals to form a town government have been hotly debated at local civic club meetings; these discussions include arguments that the community must preserve traditional scenery to protect its tourist industry. The majority of tourists visiting the island tend to agree with this statement. Usually not admitted in the debates is the fact that zoning and other development regulations only brush the surface of the problem, failing to recognize the overriding need for sincere community efforts to improve the overall economy.

Islanders say a storm "like we had in '44" will get rid of the outsiders. This hurricane moved slowly up the coast, creating a storm surge that backed eight foot tides into Pamlico Sound. As the storm passed, its winds piled up the surge, pushing it towards the sea. In those days, Ocracoke Island had a lower elevation, which allowed the water to pass over it. Today, through government stabilization projects, more extensive vegetation and higher dunes run the length of the island. Some speculate that future storm surges may now be channeled through the village instead of flowing freely across the island. If damage is extensive, everyone will suffer, but outsiders have better financial resources to rebuild.



Photo by Ocracoke Photographer, Ann Ehringhaus

If present trends continue, the islanders will lose additional land, their living conditions will become more crowded and their wages more depressed. As happened in Portsmouth, Ocracoke's local residents will fade away. Only this time instead of being pushed out by the forces of nature, their plight will result from the attractiveness of their community to wealthy people who are able to out-bid them for their land. Newcomers will eventually gain control of the community, and what remains of the traditional structures will be zoned and preserved.

One can conclude that divisiveness in classifying citizens as "islanders" and "outsiders" is the root of the problem at Ocracoke. The immediate need is for one group to accept the other and to establish common goals. The village must operate as one unit rather than as two or more competing camps.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEMS

In an attempt to develop mutual understanding of community needs, a planning committee has recently been formed. Comprised of business leaders, the clergy, and other local people, it represents the first formal effort on the island to consider development controls. The group has approached the East Carolina Regional Development Institute in Greenville, North Carolina, for assistance. Several of its planners are currently preparing a list of alternative development controls which will enumerate the pros and cons of each and detail steps needed to implement each alternative.

What are the alternatives for Ocracoke? The sea, the sound, and the National Seashores constitute magnificent resources. They can be promoted in future growth management strategies that are designed to enhance the economic well-being of local residents, thereby allowing them to compete with outsiders for land and houses.

Commercial fishing can potentially provide income not presently being realized. Trawlers travel from far and near to fish waters close to Ocracoke since these ocean and sound fishing grounds are extremely prolific. Several new seafood handling establishments have opened in recent years, enabling residents to derive income from fishing and crabbing. Approximately seven percent of the population is now fishing full time. Such incomes are severely limited by lack of large boats and sufficient gear. The Federal government offers loan guarantees and tax credits on money needed to buy or maintain fishing vessels. Counseling programs might serve to convince fishermen to expand their operations.

Although the Park Service operates a marina on Silver Lake, it may be forced to prevent

commercial fishing boats from tying up if too many start using the facility. Currently, boats are still free to anchor in the harbor for unlimited stays. Eventually the community will need additional docks for fishermen. An overall plan for constructing these piers is essential. For example, a dock was recently built too close to one used by the biggest trawler working out of Ocracoke. As a result it can no longer safely use its berth. A railway for hauling boats out of the water for repairs would also be a tremendous asset. Ex-post mistress Mrs. Wahab Howard recalls when she "could jump from cabin to cabin on fishing boats from the post office to where the ferries now dock." Return to commercial fishing as it was before would undoubtedly help the local people and improve the economy.

Any effort to manage future development in Ocracoke needs to be complimented by an educational campaign that recognizes the community's small size and traditional nature. Distrust of government combined with a general dislike of development regulations will make efforts to address growth problems a difficult undertaking. A formal education drive with public meetings and hearings will not work at Ocracoke. Past experience with such meetings conducted by the Park Service have been failures. A more appropriate way to gain public support for a growth management program is through informal communications.

Conversations with local residents about growth problems in the village almost always lead to an outpouring of complaints about current conditions. Most recognize that there are bad side effects to uncontrolled growth, but do not realize that there are alternatives to having to cope with the problems. Remedies suggested by friends and neighbors stand the best chance of being accepted. In particular, local merchants, ministers, schoolteachers, and other individuals in frequent contact with the community should be encouraged to talk about the planning process. These discussions will serve two purposes. First, they will inform and increase the interest of the community with respect to growth management. In addition, they will serve to educate the planning committee about the needs of the future.

Another facet of the problems facing Ocracoke is that Ocracoke lacks an institutional framework for pursuing land-use planning objectives. In this regard the community has two options: it can incorporate and form its own town government, or it can attempt to strengthen its working relationship with county government.

North Carolina has adopted specific criteria by which localities can form their own governments. Given its present state of development, size, and isolated location,

Ocracoke meets all of these qualifications. Incorporation would provide the village with freedom to initiate new programs, an independent source of revenues, and the ability to adopt development regulations without having to go through the county government. However, given the current political climate in Ocracoke, it appears that support for local government is slim. In addition, incorporation may not be the best way to address Ocracoke's problems. There are currently 450 municipal governments in North Carolina, most of which are small. The 100 counties in the state have better leverage than these towns to attract the type of assistance Ocracoke needs.

Until recently, Ocracoke has not been well represented by Hyde County. Governing officials have openly admitted that the county board seldom considers the needs of Ocracoke because it is too far away and distinct in character. However, the first county commissioner from Ocracoke has just been elected and this may encourage the board to pay more attention to the island. The community could exert more pressure; for example, representatives of the village could go to county meetings with petitions and letters of support to request specific actions to help Ocracoke address its planning needs.

In proposing regulatory controls for Ocracoke, the planning committee has the delicate task of tailoring them to the independent nature of the villagers. Opposition to government controls will have to be overcome through education, and not by attempting to implement a regulatory scheme that is too radical, ambitious, and all-encompassing. Above all,



Photo by Ocracoke Photographer, Ann Ehringhaus

compliance with development controls can not require large outlays of capital because the people of Ocracoke are not in a position to afford such expenditures.

One place to start in developing a growth management program for Ocracoke is to determine how existing regulations and programs can be better used. For example, current enforcement of septic tank regulations is lax; even minimum setback requirements from estuarine waters are not being enforced. If the existing regulations were properly implemented, new development would be pushed into the outer fringe of the village, away from the densely populated shoreline of Silver Lake.

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New development controls are also needed for the village to come to grips with its growth problems. Some form of simple zoning which encourages new residential and commercial development in less populated sections of the community would serve to relieve the pressure on Silver Lake. Zoning would also stop a new trend in land development in the village -- the removal of older homes to provide locations for new commercial structures.

Hyde County has not adopted subdivision regulations. New housing areas in Ocracoke, especially on the sound side of the island, are not provided with permanent roads or bridges. An ordinance that makes provisions for the proper design and installation of such structures would avoid many headaches and expenses for residents in the future.

Other alternatives are also being explored. One suggestion has been to nominate the entire village as an Area of Environmental Concern under the authority of the Coastal Area Management Act. This would allow the state to adopt a set of specific development controls in order to maintain the cultural characteristics of the community. However, most local residents are not likely to support state intervention.

The possibility of designating the village as an historic district is also being pursued. While limited regulations designed to protect the unique scenic qualities of the community might be acceptable to the villagers, many of the development controls that are traditionally

associated with historic preservation would be hotly contested. Their resistance would stem from the fact that they could not afford to comply with many of the expensive building practices that would be required.

TOWARD GROWTH MANAGEMENT CONTROLS

The impetus to study growth management needs of Ocracoke comes from an emerging awareness of social and environmental problems attributable to present development patterns. Islanders, new property owners, and frequent visitors have all played a role in this process. With the press of population to coastal areas, growth will continue in the village. Eventually, some form of local government will be formed on the island. Whether it will be structured to meet the needs of the present populations, or of future, more transient, property owners, has not yet been decided. State agencies and technical assistance groups may provide guidance, but the final decision rests with the people of the village who have the power to either determine or accept their fate.

Those who value Ocracoke as a uniquely situated community requiring a new identity to justify its historical setting and resources should be able to work together for its protection, improvement, and well-being. In order to avoid the gradual displacement of the native population of the island, steps need to be taken to preserve the "best of the old" in Ocracoke while attempting to improve the economy of the community.

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