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Disclaimer: The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the City-Region Studies Centre, Faculty of Extension or the University of Alberta.
Our societal preoccupation with growing city populations has largely overlooked how the geographical expansion of cities has affected existing rural communities surrounding these growth poles. Nowhere is this more clear than in the Calgary metropolitan region, where Calgary experienced Canada’s highest percentage growth of any major city between 1996 and 2006, pushing its population past 1 million residents. This population milestone brought repeated attention to the transformation of the inner core and expanding suburbs. What has received much less attention is how the area around the city limits has experienced new pressures. Rocky View County, which surrounds the city on three sides (north, east and west), has been strongly impacted by the growth of the City of Calgary. With an area roughly the size of Prince Edward Island, Rocky View County is an intriguing mix of land uses and population types. Originally an agricultural region composed of small towns, farms and ranches (some of which continue to exist), the existing communities have experienced major intrusions largely due to spillover effects from urban growth. Rocky View is unique in that it is not urban itself but is deeply affected by urbanization on its borders. In addition to the city of Calgary, the county envelops the Town of Cochrane, with a population of 15,000, and the City of Airdrie, which doubled its population to 40,000 between 2000 and 2010. Thus, it is not just Calgary itself that is growing, but other urban spaces in the metro region are also experiencing rapid growth.

Rocky View County has been labelled “rural” by default because the larger communities in the region are autonomous urban entities. Does this label of “rural” realistically apply to all parts of the county? On the one hand, it contains two provincial parks — Big Hill Springs and Bragg Creek. It has fourteen hamlets, such as Balzac, Conrich and Langdon. It also has some natural gas processing plants, which stand as sentinels on the prairie, figuratively replacing the grain elevators of yesteryear. On the other hand, Rocky View County has at least four prestigious country residential areas — Elbow Valley, Bearspaw, Artist View Park and Springbank — where large, custom-built homes and high incomes are typical. Most of these residents are commuters into the city of Calgary, along with the residents of the growing communities of Cochrane and Airdrie. The county’s population of 35,000, then, is a mixture of rural residents with agricultural interests and urbanites seeking alternative residential locations to city living.

Two major transportation arteries also run through the county. The Trans-Canada Highway (Highway 1) runs east-west through Calgary, and the Queen Elizabeth Highway (Highway 2) runs north-south to Edmonton. These arteries serve as major commuting routes, but they also contribute to developmental pressures. Along Highway 1 to the west of Calgary...
is an amusement park, Calaway Park, essentially serving recreation purposes for big-city residents. Further west, Bragg Creek, with its forests and unique village atmosphere, has also become a leisure and recreation destination for Calgarians.

The new CrossIron Mills shopping and entertainment complex is situated on what was once agricultural land, virtually at the junction of high-speed Highway 2 and the new Stoney Trail ring road. A free-standing retail power centre on adjacent land, called CrossIron Commons, with megastores such as Costco and Lowe’s and further planned developments, is visibly creating an emergent edge city with its own highway access interchange.

Rocky View’s previous function as rural or agricultural space is being transformed radically by this new form of “shopertainment,” which draws primarily from urban areas. A vivid example of this new dual role is the huge Bass Pro Shops Outdoor World store, which has become a tourist attraction in its own right with elaborate displays of wildlife and wilderness pursuits. Blending first-in-Alberta stores such as Tommy Bahama with outlet concepts such as Coach, CrossIron Mills drew over 7 million visitors in its first year of operation. The end result is that the busy Edmonton-Calgary corridor, which runs through Rocky View County, is increasingly being densified through new commercial operations between Calgary and Airdrie, and residential communities apparently will soon follow.

Another illustration of the urban invasion of Rocky View County is a suburb-style cottage community recently created to provide seasonal secondary homes for residents of the metro region as an alternative to city living, primarily for summer use. Cottage Club began offering lots in 2009 for a gated recreation community now under construction that has introduced a new kind of owner who is not a permanent resident.

Rocky View County, then, is a rapidly changing jurisdiction with a diverse constituency. While at one time it may have been appropriate to speak of it as a rural community, that designation is being continuously contested by urban pressures. Calgary is the third-largest city in Canada in total population, at least partially because it has no autonomous cities directly on its borders; autonomous municipalities such as Bowness and Forest Lawn were amalgamated into the city long ago. In contrast, Edmonton, with a smaller city population, has communities like St. Albert, Fort Saskatchewan and Spruce Grove, with significant populations that are part of the census metropolitan area (CMA) but with little or no rural space between them. Rocky View County

represented by the polarity between those who support new development as either inevitable or as a means of generating additional tax revenue, and those who want to retain the idyllic country heritage of the county based on nostalgia or an imagined vision of what the rural lifestyle should entail. How Rocky View chooses to respond to these conflicting pressures is a question of keen public interest.

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