

Rhode Island Rural Survey
August 2003

Conducted for



***The Rhode Island Rural
Development Council***

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Methodology

In August 2003 the Rhode Island Rural Development Council authorized a survey of influencers, government officials and individuals potentially concerned with development in rural Rhode Island. The sample included individuals from:

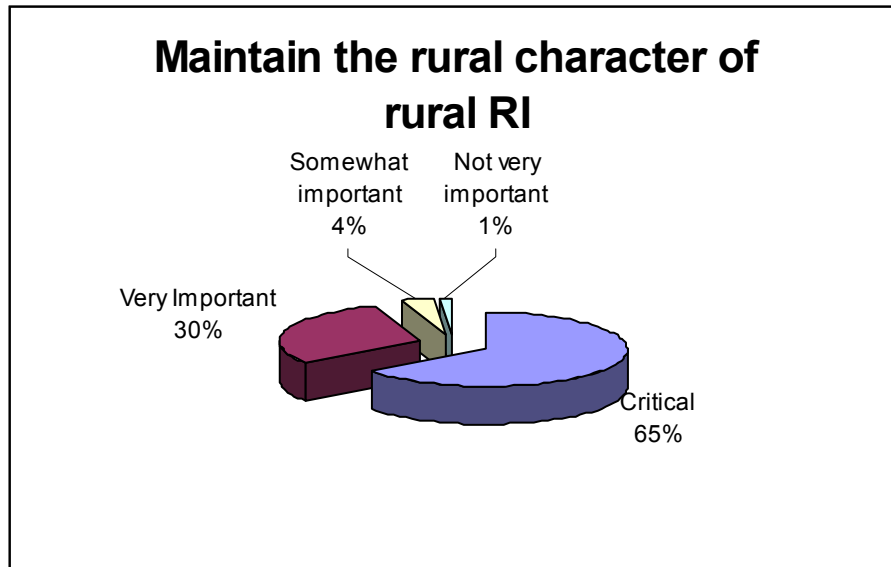
- Government
- Trade associations
- Land preservation groups
- Individuals concerned with economic development.

The sample was provided by the RI Rural Development Council and included 176 names and addresses. Each potential respondent was mailed two copies of the questionnaire and received a phone call between mailings asking them to participate in the study. Eighty respondents completed the survey, representing *an excellent 45.4% response rate*.

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Findings

The vast majority of the respondents believe that maintaining the rural character of Rhode Island is a very significant issue. Programs designed to enhance rural development may want to keep this strongly held point of view in mind.



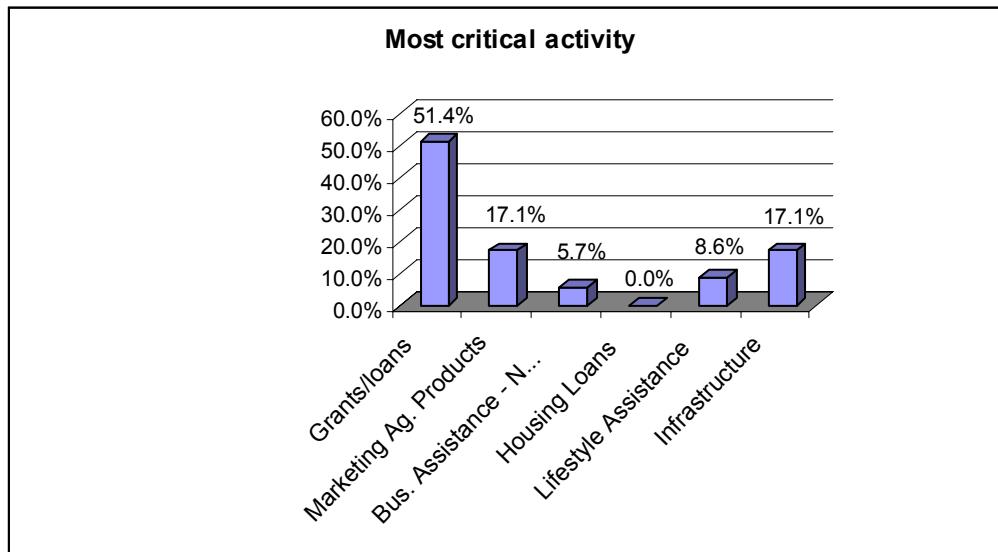
Not one respondent indicated that preservation was bad policy – nor were any unsure.

The respondents were also asked what priorities they would assign RI Rural Development. Grants and agricultural marketing assistance were considered critical by the most respondents – followed by infrastructure funding projects.

	CRITICAL	VERY IMPORTANT	SOMEWHAT IMPORTANT	NOT VERY IMPORTANT	ACTIVITY SHOULD NOT BE CONSIDERED/ NO RESPONSE
Agricultural assistance – grants and loans for seafood, wood & farm products (a)	37.5%	36.3%	23.8%	2.5%	0.0%
Agricultural assistance – marketing RI agricultural products (b)	36.3%	42.5%	11.3%	7.5%	2.5%
Business development – non farm based industries in rural areas (c)	5.0%	26.3%	38.8%	13.8%	16.3%
Home loans for very low and low income rural residents (d)	6.3%	27.5%	42.5%	15.0%	8.8%
Home lifestyle assistance – assist low and very low inc. rural residents in remaining in their homes (e)	16.3%	38.8%	26.3%	10.0%	8.8%
Infrastructure funding – water, sewer, fire protection, etc. (f)	22.5%	32.5%	25.0%	8.8%	11.3%

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Many of the respondents cited more than one activity as being critical. When this happened, respondents were asked which activity is most critical. The priority assigned to various activities now becomes very clear.



When asked in an open-ended way what alternative priority respondents would assign to the RI Rural Development Council, a variety of suggestions were offered – some of which are quite similar to the priorities the Council has already focused on. In the respondents' own words, their priorities include:

- A. Family farm preservation and marketing farm life as a viable way to live.
- B. Development of a statewide/local tax policy that reduces pressure to sell rural lands for development.
- C. Keeping the RI Legislature informed of the value of open space and farmland on the tax structure and economy of Rhode Island.
- D. Grant writing assistance and helping towns become aware of funds available to enhance their rural community.
- E. Influencing the public's opinion on the value of natural and agricultural landscapes/ sustainable use.
- F. Business development and technical assistance for agricultural operations.
- G. Protection of freshwater and saltwater resources.
- H. Funding to help new farms buy land and equipment.
- I. Alternative ways to fund schools.
- J. Rural development planning assistance to the towns. Advocating, designing and helping towns to implement and enforce growth plans that are sustainable and that maintain the small, rural character.
- K. Business development that fits in with small-scale rural areas.

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- L. Legislation for “current use” property tax, such as Vermont. Without 10 year restrictions as FFOS program.
- M. Training and development of local land trusts.
- N. Education: provide grant opportunities for educators. The grants would help rural youth in career opportunities for agriculture/environment.
- O. Agricultural grant assistance for youth; 4 H, FFA, Grange, etc.
- P. Statewide quality of life and tourism value of rural lands.
- Q. Alternative forest-based businesses along with technical assistance.
- R. Renewable energy development.
- S. Agricultural assistance – loosen up the laws on selling farm products – dairy and meat production.
- T. I feel protecting our rural character as relates to our maritime areas; bay and ocean should have been included as a priority.
- U. Land preservation.
- V. Involving rural communities in greater tourism & working so that communities can keep more tourist dollars.
- W. Agricultural assistance – marketing
- X. Promote tourism based on rural landscape.
- Y. Best target for spending is purchasing development rights, not government subsidies for unprofitable businesses.
- Z. See how we can keep populations from spreading out. Villages not suburbs.
- A. Keep industrial and residential/commercial growth centered around urban areas. This promotes responsible and sustainable growth statewide.
- B. Protective buying – development rights.
- C. Aquaculture assistance: help develop industry in Rhode Island.

The study asked what respondents are concerned about with respect to potential threats facing rural Rhode Island. A review of the table shows that, in fact, respondents are somewhat to very concerned about a variety of pressures facing our rural areas.

As defined by very concerned, the top concerns include:

- Environmental degradation
- Development and changing population density
- Resource constraints (water, etc.)
- Infrastructure
- Taxes

More specifically:

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How concerned is your organization about the following issues as each relates “Rural Rhode Island?”

	VERY CONCERNED	SOMEWHAT CONCERNED	NOT VERY CONCERNED	THIS IS NOT A CONCERN, THIS IS AN OPPORTUNITY/ NO RESPONSE
Development – architectural impacts and community appearance	45.0%	40.0%	10.0%	5.0%
Development – changing density	63.8%	25.0%	6.3%	5.0%
Development – new resident complaints regarding agriculture	33.8%	26.3%	28.8%	11.3%
Development – outside of traditional town centers	40.0%	35.0%	15.0%	10.0%
Education – agricultural marketing and product development for farmers, etc.	35.0%	37.5%	16.3%	11.3%
Education – opportunities for youth [for example, bio-science programs]	35.0%	42.5%	12.5%	10.3%
Employment – quality of jobs available	31.3%	45.0%	16.3%	7.5%
Employment – quantity of jobs available	23.8%	46.3%	23.8%	6.3%
Environmental degradation	70.0%	18.8%	6.3%	5.0%
Housing – availability of affordable housing	30.0%	40.0%	22.5%	7.6%
Housing – ability of seniors to remain in their own homes	32.5%	43.8%	17.5%	6.3%
Housing – prices	27.5%	41.3%	23.8%	7.5%
Infrastructure – ability to handle increased demands	48.8%	36.3%	8.8%	6.3%
Infrastructure – general condition	40.0%	45.0%	8.8%	6.3%
Real estate – available land	35.0%	33.8%	20.0%	11.3%
Real estate – increasing taxes	48.8%	30.0%	12.5%	8.8%
Real estate – land prices	43.8%	23.8%	22.5%	10.0%
Recreational opportunities	31.3%	40.0%	18.8%	10.0%
Resource constraints (for example, water)	60.0%	31.3%	3.8%	5.0%
Traffic congestion	40.0%	42.5%	8.8%	8.8%

When asked if they had any other concerns (other than those listed above), the respondents mentioned:

- Farm preservation
- Over regulation of agriculture and forestry
- Sprawl
- Water conservation

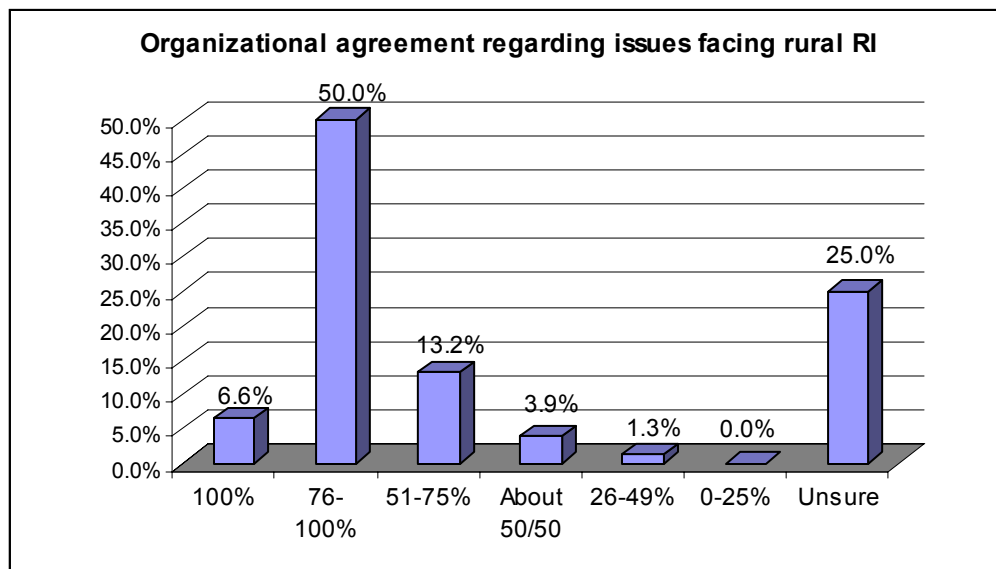
When asked what the top threats to rural Rhode Island were, the most frequently cited responses include:

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- 29.5% changing population density
- 10.5% development outside town centers
- 9% environmental degradation
- 7.7% negative architectural impacts
- 7.7% increasing taxes
- 7.7% resource constraints
- 3.8% new resident complaints about agriculture
- 3.8% infrastructure

A variety of other comments were made in small numbers including product development for farmers, opportunities for youth, quality and quantity of jobs, house prices, and traffic congestion.

The study asked the respondents for their personal opinions. In an effort to gauge how representative the respondent's opinion is for their organization overall, each was asked how much agreement there is within their organization/community as to the level of concern about the threats facing rural Rhode Island. The respondents' comments suggest that they took this question seriously, considered their responses, and answered honestly.



The study participants were a mix of governmental (48.1%), environmental (15.6%), agricultural groups (20.8%) and a mixture of other organizations (15.6%) interested in the issues facing rural Rhode Island. In most, but not all cases, there is a tendency for these groups to have slightly different priorities. For example, governmental, agricultural, and environmental groups are equally concerned about development's impact on community appearance. But only agricultural respondents are concerned with new resident complaints

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about agriculture and it is primarily government that is concerned about population density.

Table totals to 100% from left to right

For example, of those who are concerned about architectural impacts and community appearance, 33.3% are from government, 33.3% are from environmental groups. 33.3% were from agricultural groups, and none were from other groups.

	GOVERNMENT	ENVIRONMENTAL	AGRICULTURAL	OTHER
Development – architectural impacts and community appearance	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	0.0%
Development – changing density	77.3%	9.1%	4.5%	9.1%
Development – new resident complaints regarding agriculture	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Development – outside of traditional town centers	25.0%	37.5%	12.5%	25.0%
Education – agricultural marketing and product development for farmers, etc.	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%
Education – opportunities for youth [for example, bio-science programs]	00.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Employment – quality of jobs available	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Employment – quantity of jobs available	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Environmental degradation	33.3%	33.3%	16.7%	16.7%
Housing – availability of affordable housing	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Housing – ability of seniors to remain in their own homes	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Housing – prices	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Infrastructure – ability to handle increased demands	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Infrastructure – general condition	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%
Real estate – available land	50.0%	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%
Real estate – increasing taxes	83.3%	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%
Real estate – land prices	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Recreational opportunities	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Resource constraints (for example, water)	16.7%	16.7%	33.3%	33.3%
Traffic congestion	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%	0.0%

Note: This is a small sample divided into a large number of cells. The data should be viewed as indicative only.

It is interesting to note that, for the most part, RI Rural Development Council objectives did not vary in a statistically significant way by the organizational affiliation of the respondent.

The respondents represented organizations and communities of all sizes. While many of the respondents voluntarily gave their names, the data in this report is not identified by person or organization.