

# Local Government as a Promoter and Regulator of the Dispersing Settlement Structure in the City's Countryside: A Case Study of Joensuu, Eastern Finland

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Perttu Vartiainen  
University of Joensuu\*

*One main feature of recent change in the Finnish settlement system outside the national metropolitan area in the south has been the growth of a few strong but internally decentralizing city regions. The first part of this paper refers to the different settlement forms and socio-economic mechanisms of this partial decentralization in one of these growing city regions (Joensuu). The local redistribution of population from the city itself to the surrounding rural municipalities has been mediated mainly by the new construction of single-family houses, first in planned satellite agglomerations (commuter villages), but today even more in*

*The prime aim of this paper is to evaluate the dual role of local government both in promoting and regulating dispersal of residential development in the city's countryside. The limited support for effective environmental policy in the urban-adjacent rural municipalities reflects the myth of a 'green' Finnish countryside, on the one hand, and the decisive role of the landed interests in Finnish policy-making, on the other. Only recently have we been able to identify some expressions of a growing environmental awareness in these areas, too. This seems inevitable, since the same municipalities see, ideally at least, favorable environmental qualities as the main attraction for new affluent residents.*

According to Thomas (1990) mainstream urban—and obviously rural—geography has primarily approached the rural-urban fringe as a *problem area*. Throughout the world we find numerous minute descriptions of the problems connected with urban expansion into the surrounding areas. The main focus has been the apparent physical and social changes in the fringe areas, defined most conventionally as a zone of mixed 'urban' and 'rural' land uses. This regionally-descriptive tradition has, however, developed quite poorly in locating the observed problems in a wider social context. In this paper I try to make a small advance in this direction through a case study which points out the decisive role of public intervention in the rural-urban interface.

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\* Department of Geography and Regional Planning, University of Joensuu, P.O. Box 111, SF-80101, Joensuu, Finland.

One of the most exhaustive expressions of the 'zone of problems approach' comes from three Canadian geographers, Bryant, Russwurm and McLellan (1982). I prefer their conceptual basis, *the city's countryside*, to the conventional *fringe* concept on two methodological grounds. Firstly, the conventional reference to the rural-urban continuum emphasizes the local-horizontal relations between the center and fringe areas, though the development of the fringe localities are basically conditioned by the supralocal, i.e., societal-vertical ties, too. They are, in turn, mediated mainly by the situation of the whole city region in the (inter)national urban system. So the city's countryside refers primarily to *city regions* or regional cities as the prime local (daily) environments both for the residents and the economic organizations of an urban-capitalist society. Secondly, the rural-urban interface refers here to the complex social and environmental structures which form a multilayered 'local context' with no uniform physico-spatial form (cf. Massey, 1991; Vartiainen, 1989a).<sup>1</sup> Thus the innermost nature of the city's countryside does not lie in any areal figuration ('fringe area'), but more in a particular kind of localized social structures and locality-specific actors (cf. Cox and Mair 1991).

My own area of concern, middle-sized city regions in more peripheral parts of Finland, is apparently an object of minor importance as perceived from the 'problem' approach because the *problems* of the rural fringe area in the study area are small on a world scale. Still, it refers to certain basic socio-geographical changes in the Finnish context. The key feature of the recent change in the Finnish settlement system has been the growth of a few strong but internally decentralizing city regions (Vartiainen, 1991b). Two basic nodes of this evolving system have been the rather extensive national metropolitan area in the south, on the one hand, and some island-like regional centers outside this area, on the other. The present case illustrates the latter type.

The prime aim of this paper is to evaluate the dual role of local government both in promoting and regulating dispersing residential development in the city's countryside. By promoting I mean the initial strategy of the *urban-adjacent municipalities* to attract new residents at any cost, which subsequently causes these municipalities to regulate the ensuing land use conflicts, as well as evaluate the long-term costs of the dispersive settlement structure.

Goal-oriented public intervention challenges the argument that the changing position of the city's countryside could be interpreted in this case merely as 'natural' growth of a city behind its administrative borders. It is not only a statistical illusion. The active settlement strategy is actually one version, typical of the urban-adjacent municipalities, of the entrepreneurial turn in local governance and the consequent inter-municipal competition evaluated, for instance, by Harvey (1989).

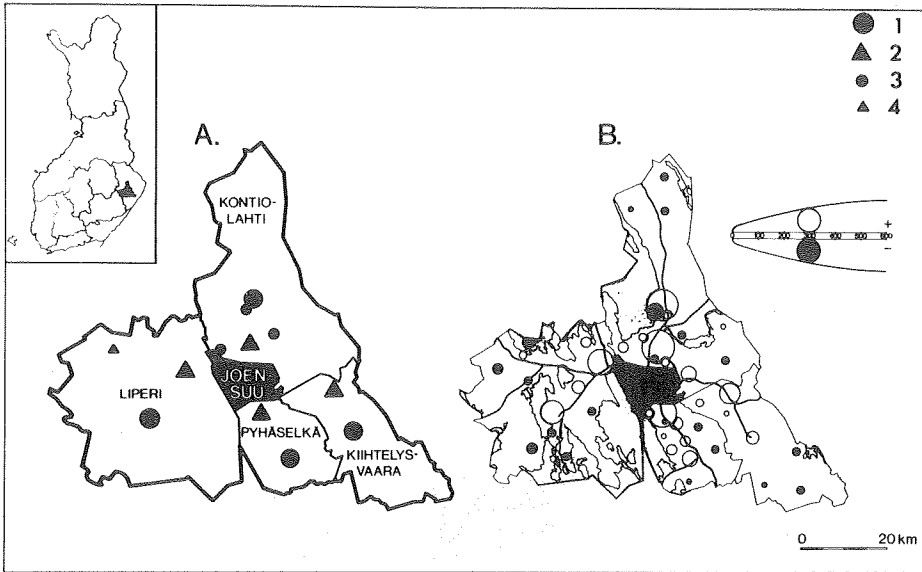
## THE EVOLVING SETTLEMENT STRUCTURE OF THE CITY'S COUNTRYSIDE: THE CASE OF JOENSUU

Within the Finnish context, Joensuu is a typical growing middle-sized city, with a population of 47,500, and an additional 31,000 residents in the nearest four rural municipalities. These five municipalities form the closely-functioning entity referred to in public policy analysis as the Joensuu city region. The population density of this area is only 33 persons per km<sup>2</sup> and in 1985, 23 percent of the residents still lived outside the densely populated localities ('statistical agglomerations'), according to the extremely low limit of 200 inhabitants used as the Nordic statistical standard.<sup>2</sup> Thus, there should be no actual shortage of building lots, even at the nearest edge of Joensuu.

The migration balance between Joensuu and the urban-adjacent municipalities turned round in the mid-1970s (Paasi and Vartiainen, 1981; Vartiainen, 1992a). New growth started almost simultaneously in the most accessible areas in three municipalities surrounding Joensuu. The continued net gain of the fringe area reached its climax at the end of the 1980s. All four municipalities in close proximity to Joensuu now have their own growing satellite agglomerations or 'commuter villages' (cf. Pahl, 1965) near the city border (Fig. 1). The growth of the municipal centers, in turn, is primarily generated by the job-creating service economy and the intramunicipal movement from remoter villages, but in accessible places they also attract an increasing number of migrants from Joensuu.

A considerable proportion of recent residential growth has, however, been directed to the scattered settlements outside the built-up areas (Table 1). At the end of the 1980s the scattered share had already reached 70 percent of the single-family housing construction in the urban-adjacent municipalities. The new scattered buildings are mainly located by the roadsides outside the village cores as urban-like residential spots in the gravitational field of a city (Fig. 2; Vartiainen, 1992a). On the other hand, many basic settlements in the Joensuu city region (defined by municipal units) still suffer from population loss. There are two basic types of settlements which experience population loss. The first kind refers to those agglomerations which focus on resource mobilization and processing in the periphery (mining, forestry and allied industries, construction work, etc.) or some public establishments (specialized hospital or garrison). The second refers to the scattered settlements in the more remote areas, which are founded on agriculture and forestry or simply on the immobility of retired and unemployed villagers.

Figure 1: Settlement structure and population change in the Joensuu city region. A: Agglomerations according to the Nordic statistical standard 1985. B: Population change by small areas, 1980–87.



Source: Population Census and Small Area Statistics.

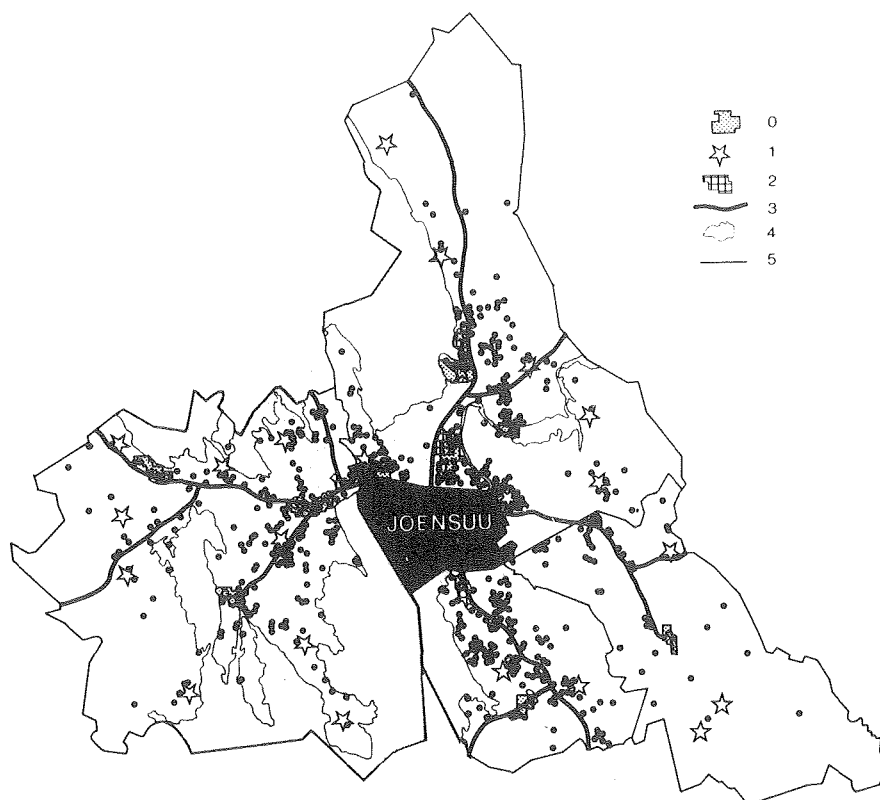
Key: 1 = municipal center, 2 = satellite agglomeration, 3 = public establishment locality, 4 = resource mobilization/traffic node.

Table 1: Permits for new residential buildings in the Joensuu city region 1987–89: Number of houses and floor space of dwellings.

	<i>Blocks &amp; terraced houses</i>		<i>Single-family houses</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	No.	1,000 m <sup>2</sup>	No.	1,000 m <sup>2</sup>	No.	1,000 m <sup>2</sup>
<i>Joensuu</i>						
Built-up areas	182	128.5	458	69.6	640	198.1
Scattered settlements	—	—	25	2.7	25	2.7
<i>Urban-adjacent municipalities</i>						
Built-up areas	168	47.1	342	54.0	510	101.2
Scattered settlements	8	2.1	618	91.8	626	93.9

Source: Municipal statistics.

Figure 2: Single-family housebuilding permits in scattered settlements of the Joensuu city region, 1987–89.



Source: Maps provided by the housing and planning office in North Karelian Administrative Board.

Key: 0 = statistical agglomeration, 1 = village center, 2 = built-up area, 3 = main roads, 4 = main lakes and rivers, 5 = municipal boundary.

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT AS A PROMOTER OF RESIDENTIAL DISPERSION

The development idea of urban-adjacent municipalities is founded primarily on a settlement strategy, i.e., support for new residential growth, which is basically conditioned by growth-oriented land policy and planning (cf. Vartiainen, 1992a). The main vehicle of the settlement policy has been the supply of building lots, first in planned (built-up) areas and then increasingly in scattered settlements without any detailed plans.

The initial factor in attracting new residents was the possibility of obtaining a large, cheap and usually owned lot in a planned satellite agglomeration in contrast to the small rented lots in the city area. This has been made possible through large public subsidies to land purchasing and municipal engineering. Today the original settlement strategy has lost much of its bite, mainly because it ties up a substantial amount of municipal financial resources. The recent shift towards scattered settlements is linked to increasing land purchase by settlers themselves. In the unplanned areas the immediate costs of municipal engineering are also low.

The favoring of scattered settlements (the 'real' countryside) and skepticism towards planning ('unfitted for the countryside') is also based on some ideological grounds. This ideology, in turn, reflects the decisive role of landed interests in Finnish policy-making and the consequent views of the governing political group in the Finnish countryside, i.e., the Center Party. Building outside the planned areas is therefore still founded on the principle of the 'illimitable' basic right of construction in the countryside.<sup>3</sup> So every landowner is allowed, in principle, to build a scattered residence.

The act of defining a limit between the scattered and densely populated areas is ever more in the hands of the local government itself (cf. note 2). The growth of the local government's power in the building control system in relation to regional and national government coincides, rather paradoxically, with the dispersive residential development phase. The main vehicle for managing scattered settlements is the local building code, occasionally supported by directive master plans. This code refers only to some restrictive instruments which direct new residential development. These instruments reinforce, in turn, either the local dispersion of the settlement structure (by raising the minimum size of the building lot) or regional dispersion towards the outer fringe belt (by building prohibitions in densely populating areas near main agglomerations).

In any case, new clusters of scattered settlements actually form densely populating areas which meet, in principle, the demand for detailed planning and the provision of technical infrastructure. The urban-adjacent local governments are, however, rather lax in defining the limit of a densely populated area and, simultaneously, are hesitant to start detailed planning outside the main agglomerations. Even if construction is prohibited in an individual non-planned densely populated area, it is still possible by means of a special building permit. According to the 'basic right of construction' the rejection of an application for a special building permit is exceptional.

Nevertheless, the local government has very few, or is reluctant to use any, instruments to direct new residences to small densely populated areas—villages, in effect. The original villagers themselves are also often hesitant to sell building lots in the village cores. This reinforces the tendency to build outside existing settlements.

## EMERGING SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICTS: A CHALLENGE TO REGULATION

Since the urban-adjacent municipalities still suffered from rather drastic depopulation at the beginning of the 1970s (Vartiainen, 1989b), their population growth was originally received by the public, both at the national and local level, very positively as a sign of a revival of rural areas in general. Recent public discussion, at both levels, however, casts doubts on this assumption.

In terms of the municipal economy, there are growing doubts about the long-term economic costs of the dispersive settlement structure, especially insofar as the growth of the scattered settlements is concerned. Exceptional costs are related to the provision of municipal services in a dispersive settlement structure (see Kopra, 1992).

On the other hand, unregulated growth threatens to break down the rural idyll (a peaceful, natural and healthy countryside; cf. Cloke and Little, 1990), which is, simultaneously, supposed to be the main factor attracting the urban-to-rural migrants. There is a growing consensus that unregulated growth in non-planned areas has also produced rather unauthentic building styles which adapt very poorly to the original rural landscape. Firstly, modernized industrial practices have mainly replaced the more traditional forms of rural building. Secondly, while the original scattered settlements surrounded by fields had a functional relation to the environment and jointly formed more or less functional village settlements, the new residences are detached from the prevailing village structure and do not effectively support the maintenance of local services. Thus, the village centers lose their remaining services in spite of the residential growth nearby. At the end of the 1980s a village center had, by definition, as shown in Figure 2, a primary school, one or two shops and in most cases a post office. In recent years most of the villages have lost the post office and in many cases the last shop, too. Now a strong thinning out of the school network is foreseen because of the fiscal crisis of the Finnish municipalities.

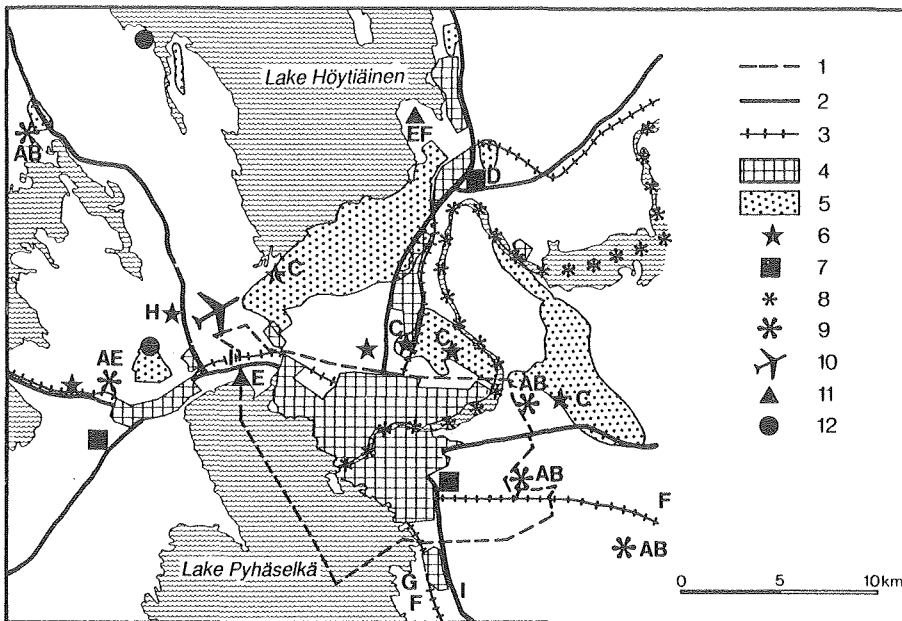
Even the degree to which the anticipated urban-to-rural movement is a sign of intentional behavior is rather debatable (cf. the complex picture of the urban-to-rural migrants in the case area portrayed by Kumpulainen, 1992). Quite obviously, for many migrants the basic reason for moving is to gain a single-family house of their own, rather than living in the rural environment as such. Both the availability of municipal building lots and the high prices of privately-purchased lots form an effective barrier to many lower and middle-income families attempting to realize this goal in the city of Joensuu itself. Most of the new houses are not placed in valued environments, but rather in places accessible to Joensuu and, quite simply, where reasonably-priced lots are available.

A good environment is, however, an attraction for more affluent migrants. Therefore, the policy of some inner-belt municipalities with certain favorable environmental features (especially lake shores) attempts increasingly to attract

'good taxpayers'. This also opens the possibility of a new socio-spatial segregation as 'less-suitable' families are forced to move to even more remote areas.

Expressions of a growing environmental awareness are thus, first, a product of new strategic thinking in the urban-adjacent municipalities, and second, awareness by the residents of the changing physical and built environment. Some essential environmental problems and conflicts evolving in the case area are illustrated in Figure 3 as follows (letters denote some examples to be cited in the text).

Figure 3: Evolving environmental problems in close proximity to Joensuu.



Key: 1 = boundary of Joensuu, 2 = main roads, 3 = railways, 4 = built-up area, 5 = ground-water reservoirs, 6 = gravel pits, 7 = dumping areas, 8 = industrial waste water, 9 = densely populating areas with no detailed plan, 10 = expanding regional airport, 11 = multifunctional residential and leisure-time resort area, 12 = tourism-based construction.

- \* The *ecological* problems in the strict sense of the word look rather slight in the global comparison. Still, they are real for the local people. The two most vulnerable ecosystems are connected with water. First, the prime regional ground-water resources are located in esker areas which simultaneously have great economic value as gravel resources. They are threatened most directly by residential growth through the gradual formation of some densely populating areas which lack a detailed plan (A). Poor treatment of waste water in scattered settlements has, in particular, led to some local conflicts between new



and old residents as well as between the city of Joensuu and one of the neighboring municipalities (B). Moreover, the ground-water areas are threatened, e.g., by gravel digging (C), dumping areas (D) and salting of the main roads in winter-time, which all are obvious results of regional growth. Second, ecologically vulnerable shores of lakes and rivers are today dwelling places of special value. As illustrated above, this gives a special starting point for the main municipal, and partially private, projects to attract 'good' residents to prized locations (E). At the same time, they form sites for more and more permanent forms of leisure-time settlements as well as for tourist resorts.

- \* Thus far, the new residential growth has moved primarily into non-cultivated land (basically forests). New urban-like satellite agglomerations and scattered buildings along the main roads usually have no immediate contact with the traditional rural building forms and the more intensive forms of rural land use. Conflicts over *built environment* or *cultural landscape* are, however, becoming apparent now in some areas where new growth meets old village structures (F). Furthermore, there are some conflicts arising that involve new growth-motivated communication network plans with rather serious environmental effects: new motorways (I), expansion of the regional airport and the new railway yard (G).
- \* A fundamental change in policy formulation by the urban-adjacent municipalities towards lighter land uses meets the environmental values of the new service-class residents. In one municipality, for example, the earlier designated site for a new railway yard has been cancelled, apparently because of expected residential use on this valued site near the shore of a major lake (G). Originally, this site was proposed as an alternative to a city area because the city government consistently opposed the plan of the national railway company to build this yard there near the same shore. Near this place (F) the same municipality is now opposing one private residential project because of the recreation needs of local people. These people are awaiting the institution of a master plan for regulating residential growth in their village area. At the same time, more generally, the urban-adjacent municipalities realize that they need to seek alternatives to both the poor copies of town planning practices and the wild freedom of rural building. The preferred models seem to be some kind of more densely populated rural village.<sup>4</sup>
- \* As examined here, environmental conflicts in the study region depend primarily on the new settlement formation. The main environmental conflict caused by industry as such derives from forestry outside the inner fringe area. The industry is located at the upper reaches of the Pielisjoki River, which empties into Lake Pyhäselkä at Joensuu (No. 8 in Fig. 3). Its polluting effect has been growing steadily since the start of a new extension now under construction. This extension, which involves the main industrial project in the sphere of

influence of Joensuu, has been supported heavily by the provincial administrative boards. It has led to the rise of a truly city-region-based environmental movement, which has initiated a discussion about the difference between prime local (environmental) and the supralocal provincial (economic) interests.

Finally, we must note that environmental problems are intertwined with the functional settlement structure as such. Some new surveys, e.g., in Norway, conflict with the common belief which prevails in Finland that a dispersed settlement structure based on single-family housing is an environmentally sound alternative to urban concentration (e.g., Naess, 1991). The main argument against it is, obviously, the dependence of scattered residences upon the automobile.

#### AN EVALUATION: LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN A 'LOCAL CONTEXT'

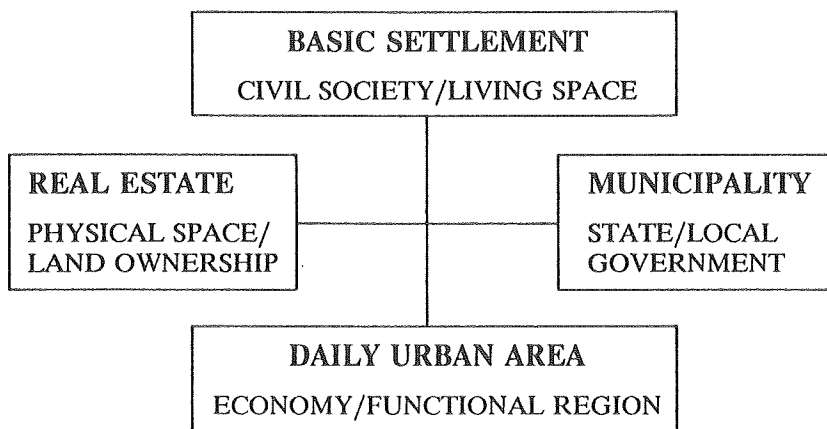
As stated here, dispersing residential development raises many conflicting interests in which local government is involved. To what extent then is local government itself a representative of local interests? Growing local autonomy is a widely-accepted idea in the current reform of Finnish planning legislation. But it is not at all clear that municipalities in their present form represent the local interests on the scale of a functional urban region. On the other hand, the interests of real estate agents easily take precedence over those of the prime community interests, especially in the rural municipalities where local decision-makers are typically landowners themselves.

In evaluating the special role of *local* government we can portray the various territorial dimensions of local interests only in the special context of the study area in hand (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup> In addition to the administrative structures of 'local government' (in the Finnish case, in effect, the *municipality*) other basic territorial spheres are the *functional urban region* (causing inter-municipal co-operation and competition, for example), the prime socio-cultural, i.e., residential, foundation of locality formation (denoting the *residential structures* of municipal areas) and the real estate system, reflecting the *landed interests* of the municipal area (being the main reference to local interests in civil law). All these spheres are, simultaneously, intertwined with certain *supralocal* forces.

Both main challenges evaluated in the previous section, the intensifying local building control system in scattered settlements and the growing environmental awareness, lead to several differences of opinion in respect to local government: (1) inside local government itself (reflecting the different environmental interests of the decision-makers), (2) relations between the local and supralocal governments, (3) between neighboring municipalities, (4) between the residents and

local government, and (5) between local government and the developers (cf. Pacione, 1990).

Figure 4: Different dimensions of 'the local'.



The breaking away from the supposed local decision-making appears most strikingly in land development. Initially the land markets in the study area were chiefly in the hands of local farmers. The situation has been changing since the late 1980s; for example, new non-local actors mainly include bank-owned real estate agencies, construction companies and public companies building a massive technical infrastructure. Furthermore, some farmers with large holdings are now managing their own commercial projects (e.g., in the attractive shore area near Lake Höytiäinen).

At the same time, municipal planning practices are also taking on some features of the market-led style (cf. Brindley et al., 1989; Cloke and Little, 1990): a construction company in the satellite agglomeration of Kontiolahti has made a planning agreement for its own land and a project 'for a new (non-agglomerated) style of rurban village' to be carried out through a public-private partnership (one real estate agent as a prime actor). Construction has begun close to the satellite agglomeration in Liperi. This trend also includes the main ongoing project in Kontiolahti, though on municipally-owned land. It intends to join together 'high-technology' industries, amenities (chiefly a golf course) and good housing (supposedly for golfers and professionals) on an attractive site near the shore of Lake Höytiäinen, close to Joensuu. This development clearly articulates the new urban-to-rural movement of more affluent people characterized by Thrift (1987) in terms of 'service class' (see also Cloke et al., 1991).

Likewise, the search for environmentally sound alternatives has been generated, partially at least, by some supralocal actors, especially by the Ministry of Environment as the prime planning authority. Environmental evaluation was

previously considered to be a kind of harmful central-state pressure,<sup>6</sup> but is now the main image-maker in the communal marketing of at least two municipalities (Kontiolahti, Pyhäselkä).

The growing environmental issues reflect the municipality's double role as an active agent of residential growth and as the manager of this development in a concrete, fundamentally *environmental* setting. This could be evaluated against *the growth machine thesis* introduced by Harvey Molotch and later developed by him and John R. Logan (see Logan and Molotch, 1987). Though we cannot draw a simple parallel between our study area and the U.S. cities, this thesis gives the most advanced conceptual framework for understanding why growth is a matter of such concern to local government and the kinds of antigrowth issues to which this will lead (cf. also a more critical use of this thesis, e.g., by Vogel and Swanson, 1989).

The opposition towards intensifying local building control illustrates, in turn, a quite different kind of confrontation between 'locals' and 'bureaucrats'. It finds its expression, for example, in the ongoing reform of one of the main instruments for controlling dispersed residential development, i.e., local building codes. This reform is caused primarily by changing national legislation. Its local aim was, at the same time, to provide more effective policy instruments in regulating the settlement formation outside planned areas embracing the whole functional urban region. Consequently, it started in the Joensuu city region as inter-municipal co-operation between civil servants in land-use planning. They made a common proposal for municipal codes inside the whole city region. In the final municipal decision-making, however, the stronger rein over regulating scattered settlements has led to opposition from elected officials.

This opposition of elected officials (as representatives of residents, in effect) can be seen *either* as a reflection of the landed interests (because many elected officials are landowners themselves) *or* as an opposition of residents towards the technocrats. This brings us to the final question of this paper: how far do the 'locals' (in reference to civil society in this case) themselves really reflect the use value (or more fundamentally, human meanings) viewpoint—as supposed by Logan and Molotch (1987)—in environmental and residential change? In principle, anti-growth coalitions can be interpreted as the main barrier to market forces. On the other hand, neighborhood politics is in many cases very conservative. It is based on the interests of the old residents and their scattered land use, which form an effective barrier to tightening the village structures, thus causing sprawl in the wider region as well.

In the study area, for example, there has recently been some local criticism of certain new residential projects, which *apparently* reflects the growing public concern about new market-led styles in planning. However, in the opinion of civil servants the criticism is based on certain narrow private interests. This affects, for example, the two major projects which call for building attractive lake-side residential areas near Joensuu (regarding Liperi, see *Karjalainen*

16.12.1990, and Kontiolahti, see *Karjalainen* 21.12.1990). These 'narrow' interests could be reflections of real dangers in the residents' living space—the disappearance of public beaches, for example, in both cases. But how are these dangers to be evaluated: as major problems for residents or as minor ones (barriers, in effect) in the light of municipal growth strategy?

## NOTES

1. As I have specified in an earlier article (Vartiainen, 1989a), rurality still has a certain significance in interpreting social change in Finland both in the general expressive as well as in the dwelling-based sense with particular reference to the city's countryside.
2. *Densely populated locality* ('taajama' in Finnish; 'tätort' in Swedish) takes two different, but often undifferentiated meanings in the Finnish discussion. The population statistics ('statistical agglomeration') directly reflect the actual physical settlement pattern while the statute relating to building and physical planning defines densely populated locality as an area made by a detailed plan and the corresponding technical infrastructure ('built-up area'). The built-up areas correspond in the study region to the core areas of the main statistical agglomerations (see Figure 2). Still some parts of these agglomerations, as well as the whole agglomeration in two minor cases, have grown without any detailed plan.
3. Contrary to Finland, the Swedish building control system, for example, does not recognize the 'basic right of construction' (Nordberg, 1988). Likewise in Sweden, building near the waterfront is forbidden in principle, while in Finland it is one of the forces attracting affluent migrants to the countryside.
4. The author himself has been one actor in these new planning endeavors; in the case of Pyhäselkä see Vartiainen (1992b).
5. Different theoretical horizons of 'municipality' as a territorial unit has been evaluated more thoroughly in an earlier paper (Vartiainen, 1991a).
6. This limited support for environmental policy in the urban-adjacent municipalities can be illustrated by the clash between certain nation-wide conservation programs and local decision-making. Kontturi (1990) has described in detail a recent conflict in Liperi, one of the municipalities, between the local permission given to gravel digging and the national esker protection program (case H in Fig. 3).

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