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2013
Where Do We Go From Here? Rural Development and Gentrification in the Almaguin Highlands, Ontario

BY

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THESIS

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This thesis is dedicated to my late cat, Apina Papu Suomalainen Smith-Michels

2002-2012
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Fieldwork is a fascinating endeavor. While attempting to conduct our primary research, we, as anthropologists, often not only engage in meaningful in-depth conversations and activities with our participants, we also become deeply connected to them. There are literally hundreds of individuals in the Almaguin Highlands to whom I owe thanks for their friendship, time, kindness, warm meals, and laughs. In particular, many thanks go to my dear friends Sherry Milford, Yan Roberts, Tim Hainsworth, and Martha Jacobs. This process would not have been nearly as pleasant or entertaining without my “Canadian parents” Bob and Anne Desjardines and their entire group of friends. Many thanks to Roger George and Laurel Campbell; in addition to the many hours spent at your home, you for took me to every meeting, historical site, and local place of interest you could think of. I also give many thanks go to the following individuals for their thoughtfulness and assistance over the last five years: Lewis Hodgson, Rob Learn, Melanie Alkins, Jamie Murton, Bill Devries, Elgin Schneider, Doug Maeck and everyone else at CAEDA, Jeremy St. Onge, Lucy Emmott, Derek Miller, Garry Jenneraux, Tara Alexander, Bruce Campbell, John Finley, Gord Rennie, and everyone at the Village Pub in Burk’s Falls.

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JFM
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AHED</td>
<td>Almaguin Highlands Economic Development Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATV</td>
<td>All-terrain vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIA</td>
<td>Business improvement association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAEDA</td>
<td>Central Almaguin Economic Development Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCF</td>
<td>Co-operative Commonwealth Federation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFDC</td>
<td>Community Futures Development Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHP</td>
<td>Combined heat and power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMB</td>
<td>Community message board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSA</td>
<td>Community supported agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDC</td>
<td>Economic development committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDCO</td>
<td>Economic Developers Council of Ontario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDO</td>
<td>Economic development officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELCA</td>
<td>Eagle Lake Conservation Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FedNor</td>
<td>Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FHT</td>
<td>Family Health Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FICE</td>
<td>First Impressions Community Exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSC</td>
<td>Forest Stewardship Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GTA</td>
<td>Greater Toronto Area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MNDM</td>
<td>Ministry of Northern Development and Mines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoPED</td>
<td>Municipality of Powassan Economic Development Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>Member of Parliament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPP</td>
<td>Member of Provincial Parliament</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS (continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MTO</td>
<td>Ministry of Transportation Ontario</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAFTA</td>
<td>North American Free Trade Agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCIR</td>
<td>Northern Communities Investment Readiness program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NDP</td>
<td>New Democratic Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIMBY</td>
<td>Not in my backyard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOFHC</td>
<td>Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFA</td>
<td>Ontario Federation of Agriculture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OMAFRA</td>
<td>Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTF</td>
<td>Ontario Trillium Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OTMP</td>
<td>Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RED</td>
<td>Rural Economic Development program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTO</td>
<td>Regional Tourism Organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAHED</td>
<td>Southern Almaguin Highlands Economic Development Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCS</td>
<td>Second Career Strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SME</td>
<td>Small and medium-sized enterprise</td>
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<tr>
<td>TODS</td>
<td>Tourism Oriented Directional Signs</td>
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PREFACE

My interest in the changing countryside stems from my childhood memories of rural Wisconsin. As a young boy our family would spend a week each summer at my Aunt Julie and Uncle Dick’s small cottage on Little Green Lake in Markesan, Wisconsin (population 1500). The cottage was small, had an outhouse, and the only running water was in the kitchen. It was a “traditional” cottage, as you will read more about in Chapter 2. In addition to spending time at the cottage, we also spent a lot of time in the town of Markesan. My aunt and uncle owned a four-lane bowling alley/bar called the Sport Bowl. At this time, in the early 1980s, downtown Markesan was a relatively active place. In addition to the Sport Bowl, there were a few other bars, a dime store, banks, a large hardware store, a drugstore, and a small newspaper. The vibrancy of the town was, in part, due to the large number of farmers and farms in the area. In fact, my most vivid memories of our time in Markesan are of the annual Dairy Days festival. This festival, which celebrated the area’s agricultural past and present, was held in the downtown. The streets were blocked off and the festival hosted a carnival, with food, beer, singing, and dancing.

As we grew older, our family spent less time in Markesan, but on those occasions when we did return, I noticed that Markesan was changing. The downtown was now home to empty storefronts, and it felt more like a ghost town or an abandoned movie set. My father recalls a visit in the early 2000s where an actual tumbleweed blew down the empty main street. At the same time, the cottages in Markesan were also changing. No longer were small seasonal homes the norm, instead, there was a growing trend of larger year-round lakefront homes. All of these changes fascinated me, and, as you will soon read, are quite similar to what I have witnessed in the Almaguin Highlands in recent years.
PREFACE (continued)

Upon entering graduate school, like many graduate students, I had many disparate ideas of what and where I wanted to study. However, midway through my first semester, after reading a few articles regarding the changing face of the North American countryside, I found myself reflecting back to Markesan, and contemplating the incredible shifts that I had observed in such a short amount of time. Soon after, I made the decision to anthropologically examine such changes. After expressing this desire to my advisor, Dr. Molly Doane, she agreed that this was a topic worthy of study, but she wondered, as did I, where I would conduct this research. Apparently the stars were aligned, because nearly a week after our meeting she called me into her office. She had recently met with a colleague, and while they met, Molly mentioned her new graduate student who had an idea of what he wanted to study, but did not know where. Her colleague happened to know of an area that was currently undergoing the types of changes I was interested in studying – the Almaguin Highlands in Ontario, Canada. Just a few months later, after nearly 14 hours on the road, I found myself slowly driving my trusty Hyundai down Highway 11, mid-snowstorm, making my way to the Almaguin Highlands for the first of many times (see Figure 1). The rest, as they say, is history. By the end of that first trip I was certain that I had found an important and special place.
What follows is the result of fieldwork conducted between 2008 and 2012. All of the individuals mentioned in this dissertation have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity with the exception of two select public officials. In some cases I have altered an individual’s occupation or the village or township in which that person resides to further protect anonymity. My work with these gracious participants has been approved by the University of
PREFACE (continued)

SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the gentrification of space in the Almaguin Highlands in rural Ontario, Canada. Although the Almaguin Highlands has long been home to small vacation cabins and cottages, it has recently begun to attract wealthy urban weekenders who build summer homes on a grander scale. As former farms and logging operations are transformed into newly accessible recreational, vacation, and residential destinations, both tensions and alliances arise between new residents, long-term residents, tourists, loggers, farmers, developers, and governmental officials over proper uses and meanings of rural space. My research examines the ways in which these different groups of people regard these changes and demonstrates how their views vary according to class or occupational position, but not always in predictable ways. In this dissertation I pursue the following four theoretical claims.

First, rather than interpreting former farming and forestry sectors of the 21st century North American countryside as post-productive, they must be understood as spaces that encompass new kinds of production, including recreational, touristic, and residential development. Proponents of the post-productive thesis argue that as forestry and agriculture provide a smaller number of jobs, the countryside transitions from being a space of production to space of consumption. This conclusion fails to take into account how incredibly productive the recommodified countryside is, often overlooking the residential, touristic, and general service-oriented productivity that has emerged. The implications of this new service-oriented countryside include increased youth outmigration, decreasing full-time employment opportunities, and an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor in rural areas.

Second, part of what drives rural gentrification in 21st century North America is a middle- and upper-class romanticized interpretation of nature. This romanticism of the countryside is
SUMMARY (continued)

directly linked to class position, and is a response to the well-documented stress and unhappiness that many North Americans face in the context of urban living and industrial/post-industrial development. The result has been an increase in urban middle- and upper-class residents spending leisure time, or moving permanently, to the countryside. These residents often seek to enjoy their time in the outdoors, but this enjoyment is predicated on the prior domination of nature. For example, modern cottagers often require massive amounts of infrastructural investment and labor to provide them the services that allow them to experience the rural idyll, yet this development and labor often remains hidden from them. The end result often involves seasonal residents being at odds with developers and with new cottagers who are seeking to further commodify “nature.” Oftentimes these conflicts are intra-class, where, although from the same class, differing groups possess different ideologies. Furthermore, a cottager who opposes development in proximity to his or her cottage may feel differently about development in other areas.

Third, rural gentrification, rather than mirroring urban lifestyle preferences, is a reflection of the class transformation of space related to cycles of capitalist investment. Many of the same processes involved in the gentrification of urban space apply to rural space and vice versa. For example, literature on gentrification traces development initiatives like business improvement districts and tax incremental financing programs that subsidize business investment, redistribute tax money to the wealthy, and affect neighborhood class transformation. This corporatization of the city, where cities act as marketers and behave like businesses is proceeding in rural areas through the creation of economic development committees, business improvement associations, and other provincially and federally funded programs.
SUMMARY (continued)

Finally, neoliberalism, although often described as deregulatory, must also be understood as a re-regulatory process. Oftentimes, these new regulations work in the interests of large corporations and the elite. As a result, federal and provincial governments are still incredibly active in the neoliberal era; however, their activities often focus on attracting investment from large developers and corporations. Furthermore, contrary to some reports, rural municipalities are not autonomous in 21st century North America; rather, instead of responding to the state they now must respond to private enterprise.

I collected data for this project via archival research, participant observation, and in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Overall I conducted hundreds of interviews, 150 of which I audio-recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted between one and four hours. Interviews were conducted in a wide variety of settings including the participants’ homes, places of employment, restaurants, and municipal offices. I conducted archival research at local libraries, municipal and provincial offices, newspaper offices, and online. Participant observation included, among other things, regular attendance at a wide variety of governmental and volunteer organization meetings, including those of local economic development committees, steering committees, and arts councils.
1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 – Recent Changes in the Countryside

On an unseasonably chilly June morning in 2011, I hopped into my trusty Hyundai Elantra and made my way to the Royal Canadian Legion in Sundridge, Ontario for a 7:00am “business breakfast.” Municipal councilors in surrounding villages and townships had invited local business owners, concerned citizens, volunteers, provincial and federal representatives, and a lone cultural anthropologist, yours truly, to discuss the impending completion of the massive Highway 11 development project in the Almaguin Highlands. A local mayor began the breakfast with a brief address, emphasizing the need to improve communications between municipal councils and local businesses in order for the area to survive. For the next two hours, over orange juice, coffee, donuts, and butter tarts, the attendees expressed their concerns, fears, and frustrations regarding the massive changes occurring in the area, including the Highway 11 development project. While promising development and job creation, the road has reshaped the landscape and bypassed several small towns dependent on income from travelers passing through on the old rural highway. In addition to the highway project, former farms and logging operations in the Almaguin Highlands have been transformed into newly accessible vacation and residential destinations, re-producing and re-commodifying the countryside as a recreational, residential, and touristic space.

This new vision of the countryside has been made possible by years of neoliberal policies that have displaced agriculture and logging as principle employment activities in rural Ontario. Neoliberalism refers broadly to economic policies that promote free trade, privatization, and deregulation. These changes generate both tensions and unexpected alliances between tourists, loggers, farmers, developers, governmental officials, new residents, and long-term
residents over proper uses and meanings of rural space. Over the course of this dissertation I examine the consequences of neoliberal policies on rural North America, and the ways in which they have, and continue to, reshape the social, political, and economic lives of rural residents.

The Almaguin Highlands is located approximately 300km north of Toronto. The region covers nearly 8000 square kilometers, and consists of roughly 15 townships and villages. The total year-round population of the Almaguin Highlands is approximately 18,000 residents (Almaguin Highlands Region 2012), and the average township or village has less than 1000 residents. Although the numbers of “visible minorities”¹ in the Almaguin Highlands are increasing, according to census data, the majority of residents in the area identify themselves as “white” (Statistics Canada 2012).

Like many other rural areas in North America, the Almaguin Highlands has historically been connected through development policy to global markets in agricultural and timber commodities. Beginning in the 1980s, Canadian agricultural, timber, and mining policy came under attack because of its high costs and its incompatibility with international free trade (Knuttila 2003). Price collapses, environmental degradation, technological innovations, and changes in regulations have transformed these extractive industries (Robbins et al. 2009). Although the North American countryside has never been culturally homogeneous (Hoggart and Paniagua 2000), these recent changes have affected all rural residents, regardless of social class. As in other regions of rural North America (Adams 2003; Cloke 1992; Darling 2005; Ghose 2004; Hines 2012; Magnusson 2003; Sheridan 2004, 2007; Sider 2003; Walker 2006; Whitson 2001) the residents in the Almaguin Highlands have actively responded to these transformations in production. This often requires the repackaging of old logging, mining, and farming towns as

¹ “Visible minority” is a classification used by the Canadian federal government referring to individuals who are “non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (Statistics Canada 2012). The classification is controversial and is frequently rejected by the individuals that it supposedly describes.
retirement communities, tourism destinations, and locations for seasonal second homes (Cronon 1996; Epp and Whitson 2001; George, Mair, and Reid 2009; Griffith 1999; Luke 2003; Mawhiney and Pitblado 1999; Milne 2001; Walker 2006; Wilson 1992). These new rural landscapes are often referred to as “post-productive,” corresponding to land-use changes and the social transformations related to the loss of production-based jobs (Ilbery and Bowler 1998; Lowe et al. 1993; Marsden 1998; Shucksmith 1993; Ward 1993). That is, although many parts of the North American countryside remain incredibly productive in terms of agriculture and timber, they no longer employ a large portion of the rural population as mechanization and corporatization increase (Darling 2005; Griffith 1999; Paolisso and Maloney 2000; Wilson 1992; Walker 2006). As forestry manager Scott Muller told me, although efficient and useful, mechanization has “slaughtered the availability of people to work in careers in forestry” (2011, interview). However, as some scholars have noted (Darling 2005; Mather, Hill, and Nijnik 2006; Phillips 2004; Wilson 2001) the term “post-productive” is not particularly helpful in understanding the complex changes occurring across the countryside. Therefore, rather than understanding the countryside as “post-productive” or “unproductive,” it is more useful to interpret these changes as a shift to new kinds of production – ones that often focus on recreational, real estate, and tourism based development.

Although the Almaguin Highlands has long been a weekend destination for residents from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) who own small cottages on the area’s many lakes and forests, it does not have a highly developed tourist infrastructure, such as water parks, large resorts, or specialty gift shops; however, many people in the area suspect that this will soon change. These individuals argue that the road to this proposed new future is being paved literally by the new four-lane highway and figuratively by the goals and aspirations of private developers
as well as the provincial and federal governments. Although some residents welcome these changes, believing that they are for the best, or at the very least inevitable in the 21st century, my research demonstrates that these changes have already led to the change from relatively well-paid full-time work to part-time service sector work, rising property values, financially strapped municipalities, and the displacement of rural residents – resulting in an eventual gentrification of the countryside. To better understand these changes, I want to begin with a brief history of the Almaguin Highlands, followed by an examination of the emergence of neoliberal policy in Canada. A familiarity with the history of both the Almaguin Highlands and of neoliberalism in Canada is essential to understanding the current state of the area.

1.2 – A Brief History of the Almaguin Highlands

Technically, the area I refer to as the “Almaguin Highlands” refers to a loosely organized collection of villages, townships, and municipalities in the East Parry Sound District in Northern Ontario. There is not exact agreement regarding the borders of the Almaguin Highlands, but generally it includes all villages and townships along Highway 11, with Novar being the southernmost point and Powassan being northernmost point, as well as many of the villages and

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2 The Parry Sound District is a census division that is currently designated as part of Northern Ontario. Over the years there have been attempts to re-designate the area as part of Southern Ontario, continuing to present day. Although some feel that the area geographically belongs in Southern Ontario, the Almaguin Highlands remains part of Northern Ontario because it does not have an incorporated county, regional municipality, or district municipality level of government; instead, it serves as a strictly territorial division, much like most other Northern Ontario districts. Importantly, as becomes clear over the course of this dissertation, because the Parry Sound District is considered part of Northern Ontario, its municipalities are eligible for funding initiatives from specific governmental funding agencies, including FedNor (the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario), the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines, and a handful of other governmental funding agencies designated for Northern Ontario. It is not just a governmental classification that makes the Almaguin Highlands part of Northern Ontario. Many people who live in Southern Ontario, for example tourists from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), also recognize the Almaguin Highlands as belonging to “the North.” However, many people in North Bay, a city of 53,000 just north of the Almaguin Highlands, would not consider the Almaguin Highlands as part of Northern Ontario. As Brian Harrison from the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership (OTMP) told me, “If I say Northern Ontario to five different people, I’ll get five different answers” (2011, interview). Regardless, nearly all residents in the Almaguin Highlands consider their home to be part of Northern Ontario, and for the sake of continuity, that is where it resides for the purpose of this dissertation.
townships to the east and west (see Figure 2). Interestingly, based on many conversations I have had with residents over the years, a resident in Novar may be unaware that Powassan is considered to be part of the Almaguin Highlands and vice versa.

Figure 2. Map of the Almaguin Highlands (Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2012)
If you were to look on most maps, you would be hard pressed to find any reference to the Almaguin Highlands. So, why do many people refer to the East Parry Sound District as the Almaguin Highlands? In the summer of 1958 some local businesspeople held a regional naming contest for the area. These entrepreneurs were attempting to brand the region in the hopes of competing for tourist dollars with others areas, including the West Parry Sound District and, to the south, Muskoka. Furthermore, because the town of Parry Sound anchors the western portion of the Parry Sound District, some residents in the east felt a need to break away and create a new identity. The prize for naming the area was $50, and more than 100 people entered. Eight businesspeople on a local chamber of commerce chose the winner, Jean Sutherland of Toronto. She submitted: “Almaguin – Algonquin-Magnetawan Highlands.” The Al in the name represented Algonquin Provincial Park to the east as well as the Algonquin Indians, whose former hunting grounds were now part of the East Parry Sound District. The mag in the name represented the Magnetawan River, which runs through the area. Finally, the uin was added to create “aboriginal flavor” (Taim 2008). A local newspaper, The Burk's Falls Arrow, who sponsored the contest, reported, somewhat sarcastically, “WIN, it was a ‘good old Indian name’ – the same as Muskoka and Algoma – manufactured by the white man” (cited in Taim 2008: 150-151) [to avoid confusion, I will refer to the area as the Almaguin Highlands even when referencing pre-1958 events].

Around the same time, school board amalgamations were occurring in the East Parry Sound District. The most noticeable was the amalgamation of local high schools. In 1957 the Sundridge and South River high schools amalgamated, and in 1965 the Burk's Falls and Powassan high schools joined this group. Shortly after, the new high school, which brought
together these villages, was named the Almaguin Highlands Secondary School (Robinson 2011, interview). This naming brought further credibility to the Almaguin Highlands “brand.”

To bring additional authority to the name, in 1966 the local newspaper took on the name *The Almaguin News*. The owner of the paper had previously ran two newspapers, *The Powassan News* and *The Burk's Falls Herald*, and for financial reasons he amalgamated them, making *The Almaguin News* the sole regional newspaper. Interestingly, even prior to being named the Almaguin Highlands, the area was still known to some as “Highland Ontario.” One such source was the 1954 text *Canadian Regions: A Geography of Canada*, which describes Highland Ontario as “hardly elevated enough to deserve its name, this is a region of rocky hills, forests, and scenic lakes which makes it a natural resort area for the people of the cities to the south” (Putnam 1954: 276).

This history of the naming of the Almaguin Highlands demonstrates how even in the mid-20th century the branding and marketing of rural regions was important; this has become increasingly important and consequential in the 21st century. With a decline in extractive industries, increasing competition between small communities, decreasing employment opportunities and escalating financial woes and, particularly as a result of the downloading of services by higher levels of government, rural areas in North America, including the Almaguin Highlands, are constantly searching to find their role in the new rural economy.

Today, the Almaguin Highlands “brand” is relatively contentious. Gerry Robinson is a local newspaper reporter who was born and raised in the area, and in March 2008 he became one of the first individuals I interviewed. After making the initial “cold call,” he invited me to meet with him at the *Almaguin News* office in Burk’s Falls. The office is actually in an old house, and I still recall my first walk up the creaky stairs to Gerry’s office. I have interviewed Gerry every
year since, sometimes on multiple occasions, and when it comes to local history or current
events, Gerry is a wealth of knowledge and opinions. Regarding the Almaguin Highlands
moniker, Gerry told me, “There has been some success with the Almaguin brand. Between the
newspaper and the high school, the name has stuck around, but there have been studies that
suggest that it is not the strongest name in the world, and that it doesn’t just roll off the tongue”
(2011, interview). Carly Grant, an economic development consultant who was recently hired by
a local economic development committee to assist in marketing the area, told me, “The name
‘Almaguin Highlands’ is horrible…I never knew where it was, and I live around here. I have
never met a program, business, or venture that I have not renamed, because most names suck”
(2009, interview). Brian Harrison from OTMP agrees, suggesting that the name is “not exciting”
(2011, interview). In order to remain competitive and “marketable,” some residents, as well as
outside consultants like Carly, feel that the area may once again need to re-brand itself. However,
before exploring future options for the marketing of the Almaguin Highlands, I would like to
examine what it was that brought white settlers to this rocky region on the Canadian Shield
beginning in the mid-1800s.

We can understand historical periods as “regimes of accumulation” which support
particular state visions. These state visions then shape development projects and policy, alter the
landscape, and modify the everyday lives of individuals. For example, in the mid-1800s the state
encouraged extractive “frontier capitalism.” This regime focused on state-supported extraction in
the forms of mining, forestry, and agriculture and industrial production.³ A brief explanation of
this period in the Almaguin Highlands follows.

³ Today, the state often promotes a regime of “primitive accumulation through neoliberalism.” This model
encourages the privatization of formerly public lands, materials and services, free trade, and an increased
dependency on private enterprise.
Prior to the arrival of white settlers, the Almaguin Highlands served as a communal hunting ground for various First Nations tribes, including the Algonquin, Huron, and Ojibwa (Taim 1998). A survey expedition in 1835 by the Royal Engineers describes the area as “unsettled” and traveled only by nomadic Indian trappers (Howell, Caldwell, and Douglas 1996). By 1850, however, the first treaty in the area, the Huron Robinson Treaty, was signed between the province and 43 chiefs of the Ojibwa. Per the agreements in the treaty, the British Crown purchased lands, including what is today the Almaguin Highlands, for 2000 pounds, plus an additional 600 pounds “for the further perpetual annuity” (Duhamel 1964; Howell, Caldwell, and Douglas 1996; Machesney 2010). As late as the early 1900s there were still First Nations tribes traveling through the area; however, today, as mentioned above, very few First Nations families remain (Howell, Caldwell, and Douglas 1996). For example, as of the 2006 census, when combining five municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands (Sundridge, South River, Burk’s Falls, Powassan, and Armour), out of the total of 7218 residents, only 120 identified as “aboriginal” (1.6%) (Statistics Canada 2012).

In 1853, three years following the signing of the Huron Robinson Treaty, the first land grants became available for the area; however, it was not until the Ontario Free Grants and Homestead Act of 1868 that large numbers of white settlers from southern Ontario arrived in the Almaguin Highlands (Taim 2008). Through this act, free land was available to males and females over the age of 18. The Act required that the claimed land needed to be suitable for cultivation (emphasis mine), because the Crown did not want individuals to use claimed land for mineral resource extraction or logging (Machesney 2010). All minerals and pine trees on the land were considered Crown property for the initial five years. Per the Act, each applicant was allotted 100 acres at no charge, with the option to purchase additional acres. The homesteader
was required to build a permanent residence, live there for five years, and clear at least two acres per year. Following the five-year period, the land was officially granted to the homesteader, and at that time the individual was free to use it as he or she chose. Even after the free grants were suspended in the late 1800s people continued to move to the area, paying between $.50 and $1 per acre.

An early catalyst to the northward movement of settlers was the construction of the Muskoka Road, one of many Colonization Roads throughout Ontario (Shragge and Bagnato 1984; Taim 1998). At this time the Crown initiated Colonization Roads throughout Ontario with the goal of increasing agricultural development and settlement (Shragge and Bagnato 1984). Construction of the Muskoka Road began in 1866 near Rosseau, and eight years later it was completed, having gone through 110km of forest (Taim 1998). Much of today’s Highway 11 follows the route of this road. Following the completion of the road, between the 1870s and 1890s many small villages appeared in the area. Yet life was not easy for early settlers. Early on, individuals required multiple jobs to survive. For example, river drivers, loggers, and farmers would often supplement their income by serving as guides for hunting parties (Taim 2008). This next section explores some of the early professions in greater detail.

Although at this time the Almaguin Highlands was heavily forested, many early settlers assumed that once they cleared the land it would be suitable for farming. As it turned out, the soil quality itself varied; some was so poor that settlers had to leave the area, whereas other areas proved fertile and suitable for farmers to survive, and still does today (Machesney 2010). For some, the first years were productive, but, being on the Canadian Shield, the soil was often shallow, and after a few years all that remained was sand and rocks (Taim 2008). The Canadian Shield is an expansive geological shield of mostly igneous rock that is covered by a thin layer of
soil. As Berton states, the area is “harsh country, enticing for painters, grim for farmers” (1977: 13). Historian Hillary Peth told me, “Settlers came in because they were enticed with the Ontario Free Grants and the Homestead Act for the land. They soon found that it was all rock…With settling here, there was a lot of shady information coming through. There were some areas where you could grow things, but not most of it. This area is not, for the most part, conducive to farming” (2008, interview). According to Lee Carling, a local historian and newspaper columnist, a significant number of early settlers were U.S. Civil War veterans. He stated, “The Canada Land Company, who was the government agency for getting settlers, they advertised in the Ohio Valley in the late 1860s, and they got a hell of a lot of people out of the Ohio Valley. Probably lied to them, told ‘em it was just fantastic farm land here [laughter]!” (2008, interview). Adding to less than ideal soil, many of the settlers did not know how to farm (Taim 2008).

Regardless of these challenges, by the late 19th century the Almaguin Highlands was home to a large number of farms (Taim 1998). To supplement their income and survive, however, many farmers took on extra work. One consistent option was to spend the fall working with lumber companies. Farmers would often bring their horses to lumber camps to skid logs. Furthermore, if an entire family was unable to support itself on a single farm, which was quite common, family members would find employment in the lumber industry. The lumber industry, in fact, is what led to the eventual growth of the area.

In the 1860s, prior to the popularity of the Homesteading Act, government officials suggested that the Almaguin Highlands could serve as a First Nations reservation. This suggestion was put to the wayside with the arrival of lumbermen who immediately recognized the resources available to them (Taim 1998). Trees covered the area, attracting laborers to work in the forests. Lumbering became one of the first dependable jobs available to early settlers, and
was a lifesaver for many unsuccessful farmers. Through most of the 1800s Ontario had an imperial role as a timber supplier, and forest products were Ontario’s greatest export (Wood 2000). As stated earlier, Crown policy stipulated that all pine trees on homesteaded land belonged to the Crown. The Crown then leased these lands to lumber companies via timber licenses. Homesteaders were only allowed to use trees on their land to build a home, barn, and to heat their domiciles. This ensured that the Homestead Act did not interfere with profit potential for lumber companies.

With so many people working in the forests, other logging related industries soon arrived. For example, water from the falls in Burk’s Falls was used to power a sawmill; this mill became the largest employer in the area and largest manufacturer of tongue and groove flooring for the British Empire (Taim 2008). As the late 1800s progressed, there were increasing numbers of lumber mills. One reason for this boom was that by the 1870s standing pine in eastern Ontario was depleted, and there was a need for materials to outfit the rapid Canadian westward expansion. At this time, work was plentiful, and it was not uncommon for mills in the area to operate ten hours a day for six days a week.

Early on, lumber was transported by river networks, slowly making its way to the Great Lakes. Steamboats became an essential tool for transportation, and steamers would tow log booms to bush mills and railway sidings. As a result, the area also saw the arrival of a number of shipbuilders in the late 1800s. However, by the early 1900s as companies went further and further into the forest, and as the waterways became harder to reach, logging companies began building “tote” roads. The construction of these rough roads to access camps and clearings provided additional employment opportunities for people in the area. These roads, which were followed by a steady increase in trunk roads and the arrival of the railways, were a major factor
in the decline of the steamship trade, eventually making the towns on the steamboat routes ghost towns (Taim 2008).

By 1915, after a strong 50 year run, supplies of standing pine in the area were nearing depletion (Taim 2008). At this time some companies switched their focus to birch and hemlock. However, with many communities in the area being one-industry towns, the next few decades, particularly the “Hungry Thirties,” were challenging. By the 1950s, although lumbering in the Almaguin Highlands had slowed down, it was still a major industry in the area; Putnam stated: “Once the scene of a great lumbering industry, its second growth forest still provides considerable amounts of both softwood and hardwood lumber” (Putnam 1954: 276).

In addition to logging and agriculture, by the early 20th century a number of small factories were also established in the Almaguin Highlands. The most significant was the Standard Chemical Company, which was founded in South River in 1904. Standard Chemical manufactured wood alcohol and charcoal, using the plentiful scrap wood in the area. Like the logging industry, it provided jobs for many homesteaders who were unsuccessful farmers. As a result, South River became known as “Charcoal Town.” The job opportunities available at Standard Chemical, the largest employer in South River for decades, were essential in helping the village remain afloat during Great Depression, particularly because Canada was one of the hardest hit countries by the depression (Berton 1977). The company closed in the 1960s, and in 2007 the former site became Tom Thompson Park (Taim 2008). Beyond extraction and industry, this period also saw the beginnings of a tourism industry.

The earliest known forms of tourism in the Almaguin Highlands were “hunt camps.” These were extremely popular with relatively well-to-do sportsmen from Southern Ontario and nearby parts of the United States. Men would travel to the area, hire guides, stay in small cabins,
and spend their trips fishing and hunting local animals, including deer, moose, bear, and fowl. The aforementioned riverboats were a popular form of transportation for sport fishermen, and a handful of these boats had ice-breaking equipment, allowing hunters to venture into the bush in the winter (Machesney 2010). By the early 20th century, sportsmen were able to take the Canadian National Railway's “colonist” cars to the area. Around this same time tourism in the area expanded beyond “men’s only” hunt camps.

American cottager Claude Whitney shared this story with me regarding the early rise of tourism in the area. In particular, he takes note of the misleading advertising campaigns that attempted to attract homesteaders to the area. Advertisements at this time painted a picture of pristine farmland; in reality, much of the land in the area was rocky and unsuitable for agriculture:

Around 1905 my grandfather and two other men who were in the banking business in the U.S. were up here on a hunting trip one fall, and they came across this lake, looked at it and said, “This would be a glorious place to come and spend summers with our families.” So they went and talked with some of the local people who were trying to eke out a living from a really nasty advertising campaign of the government to get these people to come up here [referring to the Homestead Act and similar governmental attempts to settle the area with agriculture]…and those folks said they’d be glad to sell them some land and build cabins. So what that did was brought my grandfather and these two other families from the U.S. up here to these summer cabins. (2011, interview)

Doris Atkins, a retiree in South River, adds:

When people came up and tried to farm and realized the land wasn’t that great, they found they really did enjoy the fishing, so most of them went back to the States and said they would just come here to fish and forget about the farming. This led to the building of cottages and tourism began… Families would come for a week or two every summer, and they kept coming back, summer after summer. (2008, interview)

By the early 1900s local entrepreneurs established small family-oriented cottage resorts and campgrounds in the Almaguin Highlands. Families from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA)
and other areas would rent cabins and cottages, spending weeks at a time during the summer months (Machesney 2010). A major factor in bringing people to the area was the philosophy that being away from the city and relaxing in nature was beneficial to one’s health. Polio epidemics fueled this thought, and as polio outbreaks increased, physicians recommended that patients and their families spend time away from urban areas. It was generally accepted that urban life was bad for the body and that by spending time in nature one could be restored and exhilarated. However, early on, only the privileged classes could afford these getaways.

Tourism continued to increase and change throughout the 1900s. The trend toward family oriented vacation increased following WWII. From this period onward, summer camping and cottaging have been extremely popular in the area, and a significant source of local seasonal income. Whether one worked in timber, agriculture, or industry, many individuals had many part-time jobs in tourism. Lee Carling told me, “This whole country was built on part-time work, and the part-time work is that everybody and his brother was a [tourism] guide” (2011, interview).

One large spark for tourism in the area was the birth of the Dionne Quintuplets in 1934. They were born in Callander, just north of the Almaguin Highlands. They were the first known quintuplets to survive infancy. Four months after their birth, the Ontario government intervened and declared them wards of the Crown, suggesting that their parents would be unable to ensure their survival. Today, most people agree that the intervention was due to the Ontario government’s realization of the potential in tourism dollars (Berton 1977). For nine years the Dionne Quintuplets were on display, resulting in significant profit for the government and others around them. By 1936 “Quintland” was equal to Niagara Falls as the most visited Canadian tourist attraction. According to Berton (1977), they are almost singlehandedly responsible for the
launching of the Northern Ontario tourist industry; he suggests that they were as valuable to the northern economy as timber or gold. After their birth, Highway 11 became the most traveled highway in Canada, and millions of visitors drove through the Almaguin Highlands on their way to see the quintuplets. Between 1934 and 1943 around three million people made the trek to Quintland (Berton 1977). During that time many people from the GTA made their way north of Barrie for the first time in their lives, where they “first witnessed the shattered rock of the Precambrian Shield, somber with white pine and paper birch” (Berton 1977: 12). This massive influx of cars passing through the area led to an increase in tourist cabins along the highway, as well as snack stands, miniature golf, and other tourist attractions. Visitors to the area, most of whom were upper-class, could afford automobiles and had disposable income (at this time in Canada fewer than 40% of families had a car). A number of these tourists were drawn to the sparsely populated, heavily wooded area with its many small lakes. Some of these passersby bought property, and eventually built cottages.

Another attraction in the region is Algonquin Provincial Park. The park was established in 1893, and is currently 7653 square kilometers in area. Residents from throughout Canada were, and continue to be, attracted to the natural surroundings of the area, and come to the park for hiking, fishing, hunting, canoeing, and other outdoor activities.

Early on, outfitters began to see promise in the droves of people coming not just to Algonquin Park, but to the area in general, and came up with various ways to profit from their presence. One attempt was known as the “American Plan.” Under the American Plan, tourists were provided with an “all inclusive” vacation, including meals, laundry, and a guide. As the numbers of tourists grew, outfitting and catering to tourists became a major employer in the area. General stores also profited from the arrival of seasonal residents and tourists. These stores
provided meat, ice, and other necessary provisions for seasonal families. Riverboats in the Almaguin Highlands also served as markets in summer months for tourists and cottagers, selling groceries and other necessities (Taim 2008). Many non-local outfitters were also able to profit from early tourism. Two well-known examples are the T. Eaton Company, which was Canada’s largest department store retailer, and Simpson Sears (later to become Sears Canada). Many upper-middle class urban families who spent their summers in the area ordered supplies from these retailers, which were then packed in crates and delivered to their cabins and cottages.

As one can see, from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s, an era of extractive frontier capitalism, forestry, industry, agriculture, and tourism all played a major role in shaping the social, economic, and physical environment. In the next section I more broadly examine economic history in Canada, particularly outlining the events that led to the eventual neoliberalization of Canada. Canada, like many other countries, has undergone neoliberal transitions in recent years, and a clear understanding of these changes is necessary to comprehend the current state of the Canadian countryside.

1.3 – There and Back Again: Liberalism, Keynesianism, and Neoliberalism

In Canada, as in many others places around the world, prior to the Great Depression, unemployment, bankruptcy, foreclosure, and poverty were all considered individual matters, which is reflective of the classic liberalism/laissez-faire philosophy that was dominant at the time (Bradford 2004). The Great Depression, however, ushered in a more centralized regime that protected its citizens from unemployment, poverty, and insecurity (Stevenson 2004). As in other places, Canada pursued a Keynesian economic direction following the crisis of the Great Depression. Keynesian economists critiqued the previously prevailing economic ideas of a self-correcting market (Bradford 2004).
Keynesianism, named after economist John Maynard Keynes, proposes that the capitalist economy is inherently subject to wild fluctuations, and, because of this, its proponents prescribe a redistributive state approach (Keynes 1936). Under Keynesianism “aggregate demand became a variable that was subject to conscious manipulation by governments through fiscal policy. Maintaining stability in investment and employment required adjusting expenditures over the full business cycle of boom and bust” (Bradford 2004). Keynesianism was dominant in Canada from WWII until the 1980s. There were four main objectives of the Keynesian revolution as it unfolded in Canada during the 1940s: economic growth, full employment, price stability, and balance-of-payments/equilibrium (Bradford 2004). For the first 30 years after WWII, Keynesian goals were met, and Keynesianism was generally accepted across political parties. During the Keynesian era a strong centralized federal government emerged. The federal government provided unemployment insurance, family allowances, universal retirement pensions, and hospital insurance (Stevenson 2004). This was an era of massive economic growth, and during this time the Canadian welfare state was at its largest (Williams 2004). Politically, with the exception of a few brief Conservative periods, the Liberals dominated the federal government during this era (Whitaker 2004).

At this time there was also an increased foreign presence, consisting mainly of American corporations. Slowly, Canada became increasingly dependent on, and vulnerable to, foreign investment. Throughout the 20th century, although Canada was stable and prosperous, independently it possessed very little industry, having the highest percentage of foreign ownership (mostly American) of any Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) country (George, Mair, and Reid 2009). In the 1960s as the goal of maintaining full employment became challenging, Canada increased both foreign direct investment and the
exportation of natural resources. These changes, intersected with increased inflation and unemployment in the 1970s, led to a period of stagflation (a combination of high inflation and high unemployment) (Bradford 2004). Soon after, with Social Liberals and Red Tories on the defensive, factions of neoliberals emerged.

Under Keynesianism, the principle goal was to regulate the economy in the service of full employment. Under neoliberalism the goal is to regulate the economy in the service of maximum capital gains. As stated earlier, neoliberalism refers broadly to economic policies that promote free trade, privatization, and de- and re-regulation. The role of the neoliberal state is to create a “good business climate” and to disembend capital from state constraints (Harvey 2005; 1990). Importantly, and often ignored by proponents of neoliberalism, is that neoliberalism also uses the power of the state to impose financial rules upon the market. Peluso (2007) explains that neoliberal policies of privatization and deregulation do not signify the eradication of the role of the state in economy, as many have been led to believe, but rather state power and interests change, with their focus no longer on the collective good. With this understanding, reregulation is a more appropriate term than deregulation in understanding neoliberal economic policy. For example, in the early 1980s neoliberals claimed that their processes were “rolling back the state,” but instead the state was simply being rolled out in a different fashion. Redistributive projects that were won by labor unions were rolled back, and projects that institutionalized property rights and favored individual investors were rolled out (Glassman 2007; Peck and Tickell 2002). In neoliberalism’s goal of reregulating the labor market, minimum wages have fallen, citizen’s rights have decreased, unions have been undermined, and employment security has decreased – increasing the income gap between the rich and the poor (Palley 2005; Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005). Under neoliberalism, weakened unions have lead to a push for more flexible labor
contracts – including an increase in part-time, temporary, and subcontracted work (Harvey 1990). Neoliberalism is accompanied by an increasing amount of decision-making done by the economic and political elite (e.g. the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) who are mostly unaccountable to anyone (Inda and Rosaldo 2008). Neoliberalism is also a discourse; it breaks down older understandings of the state as redistributionist (Doukas 2003). Engelmann (2009) explains that one of the accomplishments of neoliberalism was “convincing policymakers and a broad public that economic fairness is not efficient” (391).

By the 1970s, business elites in Canada began pushing for neoliberal changes, including the abandonment of the national policy of protection, subsidization, and state regulation (Lawrence, Knuttila, and Gray 2001). Previously, state involvement had brought roads, schools, and other facilities and services, with an overall goal of social equity. Now, with unemployment and high inflation, Canada slowly entered an era of free markets and the “self help” doctrine of neoliberalism. At this time all levels of Canadian government began facilitating neoliberalism through the creation of free trade agreements, dropping controls on currency flows, privatization and deregulation, cutting public services for debt reduction, and increased tax reductions for corporations (Epp and Whitson 2001). Also at this time provincial rights and power grew stronger (Williams 2004). As Bradford notes, “The provinces increasingly contested Ottawa’s macroeconomic dominance in both its fiscal and social policy dimensions,” and provincial premiers began demanding more control over regional economic development (2004: 240). Today Canada is one of most decentralized countries in industrialized world. Of the 34 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, only six have a lower share of tax revenue going to their central government than Canada (Hurtig 2008).
Neoliberal changes were initiated by the Trudeau (Liberal) government’s 1982 Macdonald Commission, which endorsed the supposed superiority of free markets (Bradford 2004). The election of the Brain Mulroney Conservative government in 1984 began implementing these changes; however, it would not be until the Liberal return to power under Chretien in 1993 that neoliberal policy was fully implemented. Prior to examining the Chretien era, I want to further examine the Mulroney era.

Canadian neoliberalism during the Brian Mulroney era (Prime Minister from 1984-1993) went hand in hand with that of the U.S. under Reagan and Great Britain under Thatcher. Like the British Tories and U.S. Republicans, the Canadian Conservatives enacted increasing privatization programs, reducing intervention in the private sector, and programs aimed at downsizing government (which, paradoxically, required significant bureaucracy) (Whitaker 2004). As Peck and Tickell note: “[W]hile rhetorically antistatist, neoliberals have proved adept at the (mis)use of state power in the pursuit of these goals” (2002: 381). Whitaker argues that under Mulroney, “From an active force in shaping Canadian society, the bureaucrats [had] been reduced to glorified suppliers of nuts and bolts” (2004: 71). During this time Canada saw the rolling back of union rights, unemployment insurance, government assistance, and welfare benefits (Bradford 2004). Mulroney also brought with him strong ties to the business community, and he opposed the interventionism and nationalism of the Trudeau era (1968-1984). Bradford adds that during this time “the mistaken perception that deficits and debt problems were caused by excessive and rising social spending hardened into received wisdom, reinforcing calls in the media and among politicians and business interests for more cuts” (Bradford 2004: 244). With the neoliberal rise throughout the 1980s, taxes were reduced to match with the lower rates in contiguous U.S. regions, and there was less redistributive spending by the federal
government (Williams 2004). In extractive areas where industry declined as a result of these neoliberal reforms, the Canadian government withdrew services from villages and strongly encouraged residents of certain areas to relocate to other parts of Canada that could provide jobs (Sider 2003). These changes were implemented even more intensely during the Liberal Jean Chrétien era (1993-2002).

The Conservatives were swept in the 1993 federal election, losing force in Parliament. After the Liberals came back into power in 1993 with Jean Chrétien as Prime Minister, however, they did not reverse the downsizing of the Conservatives under Mulroney (Whitaker 2004). Instead, the Liberals increased the neoliberalization of Canada. In previous eras, the Liberals would occasionally borrow ideas from the left-of-center New Democratic Party; now, in 1993, they borrowed ideas from the right-of-center Reform Party. Whitaker (2004: 75) explains, “Having assumed deficit elimination as the commanding priority of their first term, the Liberals did within four years what their Conservative predecessors had only talked about for nine years.” These cuts, not surprisingly, had serious impacts on federal public service. Between 1993 and 1998 nearly 56,000 federal public service jobs were cut (Whitaker 2004). The political culture in Canada now focused on cutting costs and eradicating wasteful spending. The neoliberal policies of the Liberals, according to Whitaker, should not be a surprise: “In an era of globalization, all governments, whether of the right, the centre, or the moderate left, are expected to conform to common standards of a neoliberalism that demands less government and greater international competitiveness” (2004: 80).

Today it is harder to distinguish between Canadian parties than in the past. Canada used to be seen as a three party system – Liberals, Conservatives, and the New Democratic Party (NDP). It is now a multiparty system, and has been in a period of rapid change. On the left, as
mentioned above, the Liberals have rapidly shifted ideologically. The party that brought Keynesianism to Canada became neoliberal, and “a once middle-ground party leapt nimbly onto the neoliberal bandwagon” (Dobrowolsky 2004: 173). On the right, during 1990s, the Progressive Conservatives often felt that the conservative Canadian Alliance party was too extreme. At the same time, members of the Canadian Alliance party argued that the Progressive Conservatives were beginning to sound too liberal. This eventually caused a brief split. In 2000, the Reform Party, founded in 1987, allied with the Canadian Alliance party to become the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance, in opposition to the Progressive Conservative Party. However, three years later in 2003 the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance and the Progressive Conservative Party united and became the Conservative Party of Canada. The two parties united, essentially, because the right wing vote had been splitting between the two. In order to have a strong opposition to the Liberals, many felt they had no choice but to unite. This plan eventually succeeded with the 2006 election of Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Today, however, all parties in Canada preach a neoliberal rhetoric, leading some to suggest that neoliberalism has been naturalized (Peck and Tickell 2002). Even the NDP, formerly the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), shifted to the right. When the CCF was founded in 1933 its goal was to eradicate capitalism. Renamed the New Democratic Party in 1961, it lightened its stance somewhat, but it still promoted social equity. Typically the NDP was seen as representing the ideological left, the Liberals were in center, and Progressive Conservative party was on right; today it is often difficult to distinguish between the three. Dobrowolsky explains: “[P]olicy convergence has translated into less room for political alternatives and political choice. Although Canada has more parties, we are not witnesses to an
increase in policy differentiation,” she continues, “globalization has encouraged a disturbing
degree of policy convergence across parties” (Dobrowolsky 2004: 193). What have these
changes meant for the Canadian countryside?

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, rural capital accumulation has changed in
the neoliberal era, with employment opportunities in agriculture, forestry, and industry often
being replaced by service sector work supporting recreational, residential, and touristic
development (Darling 2005; Griffith 1999; Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008; Walker and Fortmann
2003; Walker 2006). These new rural landscapes have meant massive social transformations and
land-use changes (Lowe et al. 1993; Marsden 1998; Shucksmith 1993; Ward 1993). In the
context of these changes, re-commodified rural landscapes are often redeveloped to attract urban
dwellers (Darling 2005; Sheridan 2007; Walker 2006). Landscapes are utilized differently in
different eras (Cronon 1983; Hackworth 2007; Smith 2008; Williams 1973), and in the neoliberal
era commodified rurality claims to offer a natural, nostalgic, and picturesque step back in time
(Hinrichs 1996; Walker and Fortmann 2003; Wilson 1992). For example, in Timothy Luke’s
study of the Clayoquot Sound, he notes that although the world economy remains connected to
post-Keynesian/neoliberal rural areas, the goods and services are now part of significantly
different commodity chains: “More people come to the [Clayoquot] Sound to whale-watch, surf,
and buy locally made pottery, and...fewer stay to cut trees, harpoon whales, and mine minerals”
(2003: 109). He refers to these changes as a shift from a Fordist industrialized countryside to a

In this new climate, conflicts as well as coalitions emerge among businesses,
communities, long-term residents, “ex-urban” migrants, and developers (Barrett 1994; Cloke and
Sheridan 2007; Walker 2006). Debates may pertain to divisions regarding zoning, property taxes, and the funding of particular municipal services. For instance, Walker and Fortmann’s (2003) work in Nevada County, California demonstrates how a rise in ex-urban migrants has led to tensions between new residents and long-term residents in regards to land-use. The ex-urbanites often seek “untouched” scenic rural landscapes, which is in conflict with farmers and ranchers who see the land as a place of productivity and extraction. Hoggart and Paniagua (2000) and Sheridan (2007), however, emphasize that these conflicts are typically not as simple as “locals” versus “outsiders.” Conflicts between “new” and “traditional” values are often steeped in intra-rural divisions just as much as they local versus outsider. In Sheridan’s work in the American West, conflicts and alliances emerge both within and between various interest groups, including ranchers, farmers, developers, ex-urbanites, and environmentalists. Additionally, although socioeconomic status certainly plays a role in conflicts over the landscape, Walker and Fortmann (2003) note that within each of the abovementioned groups multiple levels of wealth are represented. For example, it is not necessarily wealthy ex-urbanites versus impoverished farmers.

With this brief understanding of the neoliberal countryside in 21st century North America, I want to further examine these transformations in the context of rural gentrification.

1.4 – Rural Gentrification

Many observers of neoliberalism have noted that globalization fails to create uniformity and equality both among and within countries and regions (Ferguson 2006; Ong 2006; Tsing 2000). One illustration of this process, which helps to better understand the abovementioned changes occurring in the Canadian countryside, is Neil Smith’s (1982, 1996) “rent gap” thesis. The rent gap, originally applied to urban areas to improve understandings of the gentrification process, examines how cycles of disinvestment and stagnation eventually lead to reinvestment
and the creation of value. When an area begins to stagnate or decline, such as former farmland, the gap between the current land value and the potential value for that land if the property was revalorized increases. Eventually, as the prices of properties bottom out, investors can purchase them for very little, recommitify them, and sell them for a profit.

Scholars like Eliza Darling (2005) and Martin Phillips (2004; 2005) have applied the rent gap thesis to rural areas. As the prices of formerly productive farmland and timber forest are devalued, developers purchase the land and revalorize it via the production of housing developments, recreational nature, or tourist attractions (Walker and Fortmann 2003). Certain rural areas, of course, are more likely to be recommitified than others. Rural areas that possess the “natural” amenities that vacationers, retirees, and others desire, such as lakefront property and large tracts of “pristine” forest or farmland, may be developed to attract, for instance, urban dwellers searching for the rural idyll (Darling 2005; Hines 2012; Hoggart and Paniagua 2000; Nelson et al. 2010; Robbins et al. 2009; Sheridan 2007; Walker 2006).

It is in the context of these larger shifts that scholars (Darling 2005; Epp and Whitson 2001; Ghose 2004; Hines 2012; Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008; Phillips 2005; Whitson 2001) are looking at both changing rural land use patterns and changing demographics as a gentrification of the countryside, where former working class productive land is sold and recommitified as upper class residential developments, recreational retreats, and touristic attractions. According to Lees, Slater, and Wyly, the core elements of gentrification are: “(1) the reinvestment of capital, (2) the social upgrading of a locale by incoming high-income groups, (3) landscape change, and (4) direct or indirect displacement of low-income groups” (2008: 158). Gentrification is perhaps best understood in the context of neoliberal reforms; as Hackworth observes: “[Gentrification] marks the replacement of the publicly regulated Keynesian inner city – replete with physical and
institutional remnants of a system designed to ameliorate the inequality of capitalism – with privately regulated neoliberalized spaces of exclusion” (2007: 120-121).

Neil Smith further describes gentrification as part of the larger process of uneven development which is rooted in capitalist production (1982; 2008). Uneven geographical development provides an overarching theoretical framework through which to examine and understand events unfolding in rural North America. Uneven geographical development is also the essential underpinning of capital accumulation; it helps to make sense of the inability of economic globalization to create economic equity (Harvey 2006). In the rural gentrification process, through an intensification of economic competition, a rising cost of living, and decreases in real wages, working-class rural residents are increasingly displaced. As a result there is a turnover in population in this process because many new jobs in the rural economy are lower end service sector jobs (George, Mair, and Reid 2009; Ghose 2004; Robbins et al. 2009). In the context of these changes, rural enclaves come to be seen as the loci of a vanishing rural culture (Dudley 1997; Griffith 1999; Paolisso and Maloney 2000; Walker and Fortmann 2003). With this understanding, Smith (1982) argues that although gentrification is often portrayed as “revitalizing” neighborhoods, the process, from the perspective of the dispossessed, de-vitalizes working class neighborhoods.

Gentrification can be seen as both a response and contributor to larger global transformations; however, it has not always been understood in this larger context, and to some theorists it still remains a local issue (Smith 1996). As Darling argues, however, “the phenomenon typically associated with gentrification…is merely the tip of the iceberg: it is the most conspicuous manifestation of broad shifts in the process of capital accumulation” (2005: 1016).
Unlike critical gentrification theorists, some urban theorists tend to paint “urban renewal” in an ahistorical and positive light (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008). For example, in his filtering model of urban development, Brian Berry argued that when new housing is occupied by wealthier residents, the property that they vacate filters down to the next income bracket, eventually leading to better homes for everyone (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008; Smith 1982). Theories like these made it appear “that suburban wealth and growth juxtaposed with inner-city poverty and decline were all natural, logical, and inevitable” (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008: 46). Proponents of gentrification also tend to see the process as having the ability to emancipate the inner city (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008: 195; Smith 1996). Those who favor the emancipatory thesis see gentrification as improving economic life for the poor, reducing poverty, and providing better schools in depressed areas (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008). In his book The Rise of the Creative Class (2004), Richard Florida argues that cities need to recruit the “creative class” (gays, youth, academics, artists, entrepreneurs) to bring these emancipatory aspects of urban renewal to the inner city. I have heard similar arguments regarding what is needed in the Almaguin Highlands, and I discuss them in Chapter 4. Well before that, however, it is important to ask why gentrification occurs in the first place.

The two major theories regarding the reason for gentrification are the consumption and production theories. Consumption explanations of gentrification focus heavily on consumer preference. Consumption theorist Jon Caulfield (1994; Caulfield and Peake 1996) examined the acceleration of gentrification throughout Canadian cities during the “reform era” in the 1970s. He suggests that the increase in gentrification in Canada was a response to the conformity and monotony of the suburbs. Consumption accounts tend to sideline real estate developers, mortgage financiers, global capitalists, and local, provincial, and federal governments. For
consumption theorists, gentrification is often interpreted as a process of “saving neighborhoods” and helping them to “progress.”

Much of the British literature on rural gentrification (with the notable exception of Martin Phillips) tends to take the consumption side (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008; Phillips 2005). Phillips observes: “There has been little explicit exploration of the [production] approach within rural contexts, where the emphasis has generally been on the movement of people rather than capital” (2005: 478). Lowe et al., for example, describe rural gentrification as “a substantial growth in demand for rural space for amenity, recreation, conservation, and residential purposes” (1993: 205, emphasis mine). Interestingly, D.P. Smith and D.A. Philips (2001), consumption side theorists, use the term “greentrification,” when discussing rural gentrification. Martin Phillips (2005) disapproves of this terminology, believing it lacks the class associations which come with the term gentrification. He argues that alternate terminology portrays the process in a more positive light. Lees, Slater and Wyly agree, arguing that it is important to use the blanket term “gentrification” for all processes of gentrification because of the political implications. They argue that terming these processes “beautification” or “revitalization” removes the negative aspects of the process (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008: 155). Most of these scholars who critique the consumption theorists are approaching gentrification from a production side approach.

The production side explanation looks at capital disinvestment as creating the opportunity for gentrification, and it locates gentrification in a larger theory of uneven development (Smith 1996). The gentrifier as consumer is only one of many actors in the process, which also includes builders, developers, landlords, lenders, government agencies, and investors (Smith 1996). Much like how development projects in the Third World are first and foremost about expanding capital and investments (Benjamin 2007), so too, according to production explanations, is gentrification.
Gotham states: “Consumer taste for gentrified spaces is…created and marketed, and depends on the alternatives offered by powerful capitalists who are primarily interested in producing the built environment from which they can extract the highest profit” (Gotham quoted in Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008: 132). Local and municipal authorities can also play a large role in the gentrification process, for instance, through the rezoning of formerly extractive land (Darling 2005; Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008: 133). Federal, provincial, and municipal governments also play a role by providing funding incentives to developers and municipalities in the development process (Harvey 2006; Vandergeest and DuPuis 1996).

It should be noted that, to some degree, both consumption and production theorists are right – individual choices and larger processes play a role in gentrification. Neil Smith agrees that individual preference undoubtedly plays a role in the process, suggesting that a “broader theory of gentrification must take the role of the producers as well as the consumers into account,” (Smith 1996: 57). He also argues, however, that those with capital are better able to realize their preferences in a capitalist society, and that the need to earn profits “is a more decisive initiative behind gentrification than consumer preference” (1996: 57). These arguments will be further explored throughout the dissertation, as I examine the changing countryside in the 21st century.

1.5 – Methodology, Thesis Overview, and Significance

My fieldwork for this project began in Spring 2008 and concluded in Winter 2012. All together I spent approximately 12 months conducting fieldwork in the Almaguin Highlands. I collected data via archival research, participant observation, and a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews.
I conducted archival research at local libraries, municipal and provincial offices, newspaper offices, and online. In particular I examined newspaper articles, strategic plans, and notes from village council meetings.

Participant observation included, among other things, regular attendance at a wide variety of governmental and volunteer organization meetings, including those of local economic development committees, steering committees, and arts councils. I was also a frequent visitor to local coffee shops, restaurants, farmers’ markets, legion halls, parks, shops, museums, and bars. The conversations and observations in these settings provided me with insight into many of the issues which I discuss over the course of this dissertation. I also attended many local events, including Canada Day celebrations, fall fairs, birthday parties, trillium shows, dances, and jamborees.

Importantly, during my time in the Almaguin Highlands I also conducted hundreds of interviews, 150 of which I audio-recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted between one and four hours. I conducted interviews in a wide variety of settings including the participants’ homes, places of employment, restaurants, municipal offices, and occasionally on-foot through hikes in the woods, across construction sites, and in farmers’ fields. Initially I selected participants by reading the local newspaper and contacting active community members. As it turned out, nearly every interviewee who agreed to meet with me recommended at least five individuals to whom I should talk. I also selected participants through visiting and attending public community meetings, community social events, tourist information centers, libraries, and other public spaces. I divided my research sample into 10 sub-groups, each with a distinct set of interests and objectives in the local context: 1. Development professionals, including lawyers, developers, investors, economic development consultants, and real estate agents. 2. Owners of
tourism and recreational enterprises and other small businesses. 3. Federal, provincial, and municipal governmental employees and officials. 4. Farmers and loggers. 5. Reporters and other members of the media. 6. Tourists. 7. Cottagers. 8. Retirees and other new full-time residents. 9. Long-term residents or “locals.” 10. Job, career, and family counselors. These categories reflect how residents perceive that their interests, uses of rural space, and social patterns are distinct from others.

I analyzed fieldnotes, archival notes, and interview transcriptions with the assistance of ATLAS.ti 6.2 qualitative data analysis software. In particular, I used the software to assist me in the coding process. I entered all documents into the program, and as I read each document, I coded particular sections appropriately. Examples of codes include “cottager conflict,” “economic development committees,” and “retirees.” I created a total of 71 codes. When it came time to write a particular section, for example, one on tourism, I would use the query tool to access all of the data that I had coded with a tourism-relevant code.

Throughout this dissertation, all chapters are interrelated and address the larger discussion of the ways in which rural areas in North America survive in the neoliberal era. In particular, I pay attention to the conflicts and alliances that have emerged in recent years in the Almaguin Highlands in the context of these dramatic changes occurring across the countryside. The purpose here is not to vilify or glorify any particular group of individuals, but rather to examine the various ways in which individuals and particular groups/social classes make sense of and endure in the ever-changing countryside.

In Chapter 2, I discuss the history and allure of nature in the Almaguin Highlands. In particular, I examine the role of the seasonal second home, or “cottage,” and its social implications. Importantly, I compare and contrast the earliest cottagers with the 21st century
cottager. The final section of this chapter examines the role of seasonal residents in social, political, and economic life in the Almaguin Highlands, and the occasional conflicts that emerge between seasonal and full-time residents.

In Chapter 3 I further explore understandings of nature, leisure, and the attraction of the Almaguin Highlands by examining the arrival of tourists. I begin by investigating what it is that attracts people to the area and how the area is marketed. Next, I discuss 21st century tourists, and how they differ from tourists of previous generations. I also examine the role of tourism as an economic development tool, and the debates that emerge regarding the role of the touristic economy. Next I explore the role the federal and provincial governments play in tourism, specifically examining their marketing campaigns and funding opportunities. Finally, I discuss the “pros and cons” of a tourism based economy.

In Chapter 4, I use theoretical concepts laid out in Chapter 1 to analyze the potential incoming gentrification of the Almaguin Highlands. To better understand this process, I use the Almaguin Highlands’s neighbor to the south, Muskoka, as a way of understanding future development for the area. Many residents are confident that “Muskoka style” development is making its way into the Almaguin Highlands, leading to a “Muskokafication” of the area. The possibility of Muskokafication is a highly debated topic. The early stages of these changes have already brought forth new commerce, residents (including retirees, bedroom community residents and remote workers/telecommuters), ideas, challenges, and expectations. One recent trend has been the encouragement of “beautification” projects for many of the villages in the area. I explore the implications of such projects along with the implications of increasing stratification and rising prices.
In Chapter 5 I examine the current state of agriculture, forestry, and industry in the Almaguin Highlands. In particular I explore changes in legislation beginning in the late 1970s and how these changes have affected these sectors today. By exploring the effects of free trade agreements, mechanization, re-regulation, rezoning of land, corporatization, increased competition, and ever increasing costs, I provide an understanding of the ways in which neoliberal legislation directly affects rural residents. In particular, I explore the social impacts of these changes including new forms of opposing interests, employment challenges and opportunities, and changing village dynamics. Finally, I describe the ways in which farmers and loggers have attempted to overcome these recent challenges.

In Chapters 6 and 7 I broadly explore the changes discussed in the previous chapters in the larger context of “economic development.” Throughout Chapter 6 I discuss the ways in which municipalities throughout the Almaguin Highlands are attempting to improve their economies. I specifically examine the roles of economic development committees, strategic plans, and outside consultants. I also discuss the role of federal and provincial funding in the economic development process. As becomes immediately clear, there are intense debates concerning what constitutes “proper” economic development for the Almaguin Highlands – particularly regarding to the role of the private sector. This chapter concludes by exploring the ways in which municipalities throughout the Almaguin Highlands are attempting to work together, oftentimes at the encouragement of the federal and provincial governments. I particularly discuss the possibility of the future amalgamation of multiple municipalities in the area, and the consequences of such a change. In Chapter 7 I specifically look at the Highway 11 development project as one of the province’s major economic development strategies for Northern Ontario. In this chapter I investigate the highway as an economic development tool,
exploring the positives and negatives of the project. I further discuss the role of the bypass, debates over highway signage, the expropriation process, and the role of “expert knowledge” from the state in regards to “proper” development. Taken together, these chapters holistically analyze recent changes in the neoliberal 21st century countryside.

At all scales, a theory of uneven geographical development proposes that geographical inequalities in income, property values, and livelihood are ever-present, and are, in fact, required for the capitalist system to continue (Harvey 2006). In this dissertation, I demonstrate the ways in which uneven development manifests itself in the North American countryside; in particular, I examine these manifestations in the context of inter- and intra-class conflict. Although class tensions have always been present in rural areas, in the neoliberal era, as new residents move to the Almaguin Highlands, new forms of conflict occur as a result of differing ideas regarding the proper uses and meanings of rural space in the 21st century. In many cases there is a power-differential in these conflicts, where new residents, because of their class position, have louder voices and larger influence than long-term local residents. In this dissertation I pursue the following four theoretical claims.

First, rather than interpreting former farming and forestry sectors of the 21st century North American countryside as post-productive, we must understand them as spaces that encompass new kinds of production, including recreational, touristic, and residential development. Proponents of the post-productive thesis argue that as forestry and agriculture provide a smaller number of jobs, the countryside transitions from being a space of production to space of consumption (Lowe et al. 1993; Marsden 1998; Shucksmith 1993; Ward 1993; Walker 2003). This conclusion fails to take into account how incredibly productive the recommodified countryside is, overlooking the residential, touristic, and general service-oriented productivity
that has emerged. The implications of this new service-oriented countryside include increased youth outmigration, decreasing full-time employment opportunities, and an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor in rural areas. Although other scholars have noted the problems associated with the post-productive thesis (Darling 2005; Hines 2012; Mather, Hill, and Nijnik 2006), this dissertation thoroughly examines and responds to these flaws via an in-depth examination that has resulted from long-term ethnographic fieldwork.

Second, part of what drives rural gentrification in 21st century North America is a middle- and upper-class romanticized interpretation of nature – what Neil Smith calls a bourgeois ideology of nature (2008). This romanticism of the countryside is directly linked to class position, and is a response to the well-documented stress and unhappiness that many North Americans face in the context of urban living and industrial/post-industrial development (Smith 2008). The result has been an increase in urban middle- and upper-class residents spending leisure time, or moving permanently, to the countryside. These residents often seek to enjoy their time in the outdoors, but this enjoyment is predicated on the prior domination of nature. For example, although modern cottagers often require massive amounts of infrastructural investment and labor to provide them the services that allow them to experience the rural idyll, these individuals, also find these factors objectionable – particularly when it detracts from their nature experience. In this sense, cottagers experience false consciousness, whereby their need for the domination and development of nature, as well as their requirement for labor to allow them to experience “unpopulated” and “pristine” landscapes, remains hidden from them. Put another way, seeing nature as idyll obscures the capital processes that created that cottage and the development and infrastructure that underlie it. The end result often involves seasonal residents being at odds with developers and with new cottagers who are seeking to further commodify
“nature.” Oftentimes these conflicts are *intra*-class, where, although from the same class, differing groups possess different ideologies. Furthermore, a cottager who opposes development in proximity to his or her cottage may feel differently about development in other areas. I discuss these issues in detail in Chapters 2, 3, and 4.

Third, rural gentrification, rather than mirroring urban lifestyle preferences, is a reflection of the class transformation of space related to cycles of capitalist investment (Butler 2007; Lees 2007; Smith 2002). Many of the same processes involved in the gentrification of urban space apply to rural space and vice versa (Harvey 2006). For example, literature on gentrification traces development initiatives like business improvement districts and tax incremental financing programs that subsidize business investment, redistribute tax money to the wealthy, and affect neighborhood class transformation (Griffith 1999; Hackworth 2007; Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008; Smith 1996; Walker and Fortmann 2003). This corporatization of the city, where cities act as marketers and behave like businesses in what Harvey (1989) refers to as the “entrepreneurial city,” is proceeding in rural areas through the creation of economic development committees, business improvement associations, and other provincially and federally funded programs (Sheridan 2004; Walker 2006). I examine these transformations throughout the dissertation.

Finally, neoliberalism, although often described as deregulatory, must also be understood as a re-regulatory process. Oftentimes, these new regulations work in the interests of large corporations and the elite. As a result, federal and provincial governments are still incredibly active in the neoliberal era; however, their activities often focus on attracting investment from large developers and corporations. Furthermore, contrary to some reports, rural municipalities are not autonomous in 21st century North America; rather, instead of responding to the state they
now must respond to private enterprise. I thoroughly examine these claims throughout the
dissertation. I do so particularly in Chapter 6 in the context of economic development initiatives.

Smith (2002) and Phillips (2004) stress that most studies of gentrification focus on areas
that have already been gentrified, neglecting those areas that are in the process. This project
documents and analyzes the process of rural development and gentrification as they unfold,
providing a much needed understanding of the social and physical transformations of rural
development projects prior to, during, and following their completion.
2 – COTTAGING IN THE ALMAGUIN HIGHLANDS

Escaping the “birdcage existence of condo living”

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight’s all a-glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

– From “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” by William Butler Yeats

2.1 – Introduction

In May of 2008, I was sitting in Lee Carling’s backyard on Ahmic Lake. As his dog and an army of black flies were doing their best to devour my flesh, Lee described to me the significance of the summer cottage. In Canada, the summer “cottage,” or “camp,” is a family vacation home that is almost always located on a lake or in the woods. Since the late 1800s, seasonal residents, or “cottagers,” have frequented the many lakes throughout the Almaguin Highlands, spending their summers in these lakefront abodes. Lee, a local historian and newspaper columnist, spent much of his life living in the area, and has had decades of interactions with summer cottagers. Regarding the importance of the summer cottage, Lee explained, “Most of those people, their most enjoyable childhood memories were at that cottage. Any meaningful family interaction they had was at that cottage. Their first teenage love affair

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4 In Northern Ontario, local residents distinguish cottages from camps. A camp becomes a cottage when infrastructural additions including running water, an indoor toilet, a shower, and other items are added. Most Southerners would classify both as cottages (Personal communication, 2013).
was at that cottage...because this is their special place” (2008, interview). In this chapter I will discuss what it is that brings summer residents to the Almaguin Highlands, how the summer cottage has changed in recent years, and the conflicts that have emerged between cottagers and local residents.

2.3 – Nature and the Cottage in the Almaguin Highlands

The appeal of the rejuvenating weekend or summer retreat “back to nature” is dominant throughout North America (Around 8% of Canadian households own a leisure property) and across the globe (Caldwell 2011; Foot and Stoffman 2004). Caldwell’s examination of dachas (summer cottages) in Russia explores, in part, the therapeutic and rejuvenating aspects of cottage life (2011). Caldwell notes the ways in which Russian cottagers express a longing for the cottage when they are away, and how the cottage serves as a place of “refuge” and “escapism” (2011). Many Canadians I have spoken with express similar sentiments. The Almaguin Highlands is located on the northernmost edge of what any Ontarian knows as “Cottage Country” (see figure 3). Broadly, Cottage Country refers to a number of areas in Eastern Canada that are popular for summer homes. Specifically for the purpose of this research, Cottage Country refers to the Parry Sound-Muskoka-Haliburton region of Ontario. Most Torontonians are familiar with the term “Cottage Country traffic,” which refers to the Friday afternoon and Sunday evening traffic to and from Cottage Country, which is notoriously heavy. What is it that brings people to this area in such large numbers?
Echoing the sentiments of the abovementioned Russian cottagers (Caldwell 2011), real estate developer Tony Dimucci told me, “The biggest point in cottage life is to get away from everyday life in the city; to escape the asphalt and concrete and the monotony. People want to escape the birdcage existence of condo living. People come up here to be in open spaces and to enjoy the beauty of nature as it was intended” (2008, interview). Since beginning my research in the Almaguin Highlands in 2008 I have heard countless individuals refer to the area as “undisturbed,” “pristine,” and “authentic.” Doris Atkins, a retiree from Sudbury who recently moved to the area, stated, “It doesn’t feel like the big world has hit here, and in one way I hope it never does” (2008, interview) (see Figure 4).
Viewing nature as “undisturbed” and in a state of equilibrium goes back to, among others, medieval Christian, and 18th century rationalist ideas (Worster 1994). Many who have subscribed to this school of thought feel that if undisturbed by humans, nature remains eternally unchanged and stable (Scoones 1999). Although typically not in the extreme form, “equilibrium” thinking persists today, and much literature on nature and ecology subscribes to equilibrium models, which often separate human beings from any discussion of ecology (Vandergeest and DuPuis 1996).

This idea of “undisturbed nature” has influenced the ways in which the Almaguin Highlands is marketed. In 2009 I was sitting in at a committee meeting for a regional arts council. The committee had hired Jack Modella, an outside economic development consultant, to
assist them in marketing the arts in the area. Jack felt that the best way to do this was by marketing “nature.” He said, “We need a strategy that reflects the unique aspects of the area – the nature. We need an art gallery in nature. We are not getting a Hilton here; we should create a rustic environment.” He added that individuals marketing the area need to “leverage the geography and uniqueness of the area, utilize the colorful and contemporary yet traditional values, and speak to the natural beauty” (2008, fieldnotes). This “rustic environment” that Jack wanted to market is part of what continues to bring cottagers to the area, even as prices and property taxes continue to increase. Before further exploring the modern cottager, however, I want to examine in greater detail the history of cottaging in the Almaguin Highlands.

In the late 1800s the Canadian government sold inexpensive waterfront land to the public. Many families who purchased this land eventually built basic summer cottages (Taim 2008). These early cottages were quite small and often lacked heat, indoor plumbing, or electricity. The main purpose of the retreat “up north” was to disconnect from everyday life and rejuvenate in “nature.” Well into the 20th century, for many, the cottage remained quite rustic, and for some today it still does, a point I will return to momentarily.

As discussed in Chapter 1, for early recreationists in the Almaguin Highlands, the trip up north was almost exclusively for men who embarked on “gentlemen’s retreats.” Men in upper-middle class homes who could afford to take time away from their jobs would come to the area to go fishing and hunting with friends. Lee Carling tells me, “They came with all the benefits, eh, their whiskey, and on and on [laughter]. In one fishing lodge here…they had a full basement, and that’s where the hookers were and everything else. And after the boys had their fish that day and their supper, they’d go down there and have a drink, you know, play cards or whatever – carry on” (2008, interview).
Over the course of the 20th century, however, cottaging became more and more popular for families, particularly after WWII. With a booming post-war economy, it was not uncommon for families to spend two to three weeks per summer at the cottage. At this time the area was still quite affordable to middle-class and working-class families. Oftentimes the wife and children would stay at the cottage over the course of the summer, while the husband would commute back to work during the week. A well-known example of such this phenomenon was Winnipeg’s “Daddy Train.” Throughout the mid-20th century, the Daddy Train was a popular way for fathers to make their way to the cottage on Friday nights and return to Winnipeg on Sunday evenings (Caldwell 2012a). While at the cottage, families often relied on local businesses and families to meet their needs.

It has been long common for residents in the Almaguin Highlands to supplement their incomes working for seasonal residents. Local historian Hillary Peth fondly recalls arriving in Emsdale (in the southernmost Almaguin Highlands) as a young child in the 1950s, and waiting for a farmer to greet her family and escort them to the cottage (2008, interview). Cottagers were also often served by small business owners who took to the waterways; storeowners would go from dock to dock taking orders and delivering goods. Not all goods were provided by local merchants, however. One of the better-known companies for supplying cottagers was the T. Eaton Company, which I mention in Chapter 1. Through the 1930s, the T. Eaton Company published a catalog specifically catering to cottagers called *The Summer Home Handbook* (Hart 2010). Cottagers could order goods via postal mail or telephone and the T. Eaton Company would deliver the goods to the nearest railway station or steamship dock. From this point the company could also provide arrangements to have the goods delivered directly to a cottager’s dock.
Local resident Edna Riverton recalls the arrival of the cottagers each summer as a teenager in the 1960s. Young teens would excitedly await the arrival of “city kids,” with the hopes of a summer romance. Edna told me, “When I was a teenager [in the 1960s], especially for teenage girls, it was a feather in your cap if you could get a boyfriend that was a summer resident” (2011, interview). Cottager Bill Rogers, who was one of those “city kids,” told me, “Coming to the cottage was always something special, even though originally you didn’t have the comforts of home. My brother and I had a cottage that was 20’ by 12’, it had no hydro, no water – just candlelight, a barbeque, and ice in a cooler. So this [referring to his current cottage] is very civilized” (2011, interview).

Today, many older cottages in the area have been in the same family for over a century (see Figure 5). Claude Whitney, an American cottager on Ahmic Lake, has had family cottaging in the area since 1905. What is it, then, that draws people to the area, and keeps them coming back year after year? Mayor Jeff Branson suggests, “For the seasonal resident, this is their little bit of heaven” (2011, interview). In addition to the physical beauty that attracts people, Claude Whitney discussed the emotional connections cottagers make. For Claude, the cottage is a place where he and his family bonded each summer. These memories have built his strong emotional attachment to the cottage. In fact, Claude directly ties his family’s history to the cottage (2011, interview). Coming to the cottage, then, is a way to reconnect with the past, make memories, and revisit the joys of youth. However, even though cottagers return year after year, in many cases, the modern cottage is a very different place.
2.2 – The 21st Century Cottage and Cottager

There is no doubt that the 21st century cottage has undergone significant changes since those initial 19th century dwellings gained popularity. These changes are directly related to the gentrification process discussed in Chapter 1, where property is revalorized, and becomes cost-prohibitive for the average resident. In the 21st century, for some, small rustic cottages have been transformed into multi-million dollar second homes, now equipped with heat, electricity, and running water. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for cottages to have air conditioning, high speed internet, full kitchens, hot tubs, wrap-around decks, and docks with boathouses suited to accommodate speed boats and jet skis. Brandon Morgan, a local developer, told me that the 21st
century cottager desires nice restaurants, golf courses, art festivals, and theatre. He also informed me that Cottage Country is beginning to see the arrival of cottage concierges. He stated, “People want a more sophisticated and hassle-free vacation. 12 years ago… the cottages people built were rectangles, now the designs are much more sophisticated. The people up here want more than burgers and onion rings” (2008, interview). Brandon’s comments exemplify the changing class composition of the new cottager who is moving to the Almaguin Highlands. Yet Brandon also warns that the lack of some of these amenities in the Almaguin Highlands may be slowing the arrival of larger numbers of higher-end/upper-class cottagers to the area.

Although the area may not possess some of these high-end amenities that Brandon mentions, the cottages in the Almaguin Highlands are certainly getting bigger. Countless people I have met with, both cottagers and locals, continually inform me that new cottages are not really “cottages” at all. Caitlin Simon, a local art gallery owner, has particularly noted the conversion of many seasonal cottages to year-round second homes. When she was growing up she noted that most cottages were quite small and only equipped for three seasons. Regarding modern cottages, she told me, “Now they are homes with washer, dryer, bathtub, and shower…I remember how Lake Muskoka changed in a short period of time, from the old camp-cottage to the large fancy homes. That will probably happen up here” (2009, interview). Brian Harrison from the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership agrees that the days of the summer camp on small lakes are over – today it is quite common for cottagers to bulldoze old properties and build their dream homes on the footprint (2011, interview). Bill Rogers, who has cottaged on Eagle Lake for decades, told me, “The development on the lake and the homes and properties, it is unbelievable. There are some big places on this lake” (2011, interview). He further informed me that the majority of the residences on Eagle Lake are now full-time – a significant change from 20 years ago. These full-
time residents include retirees, those who work locally, and remote workers/telecommuters, among others.

The arrival of remote workers is a relatively recent phenomenon, thanks to the increased availability of wireless internet and improved cell phone service. According to CFDC manager Ron Varney, this increase in connectivity has allowed many cottagers whose jobs remain in the city to spend the majority of their time at the cottage and only report to the main office a few times per month (2011, interview). One result has been city dwellers increasing the size of their recreational properties and downsizing their city homes (Foot and Stoffman 2004).

Real estate developer Tony Dimucci tells me that another growing trend is for Toronto retirees to sell their homes and retire to their cottage: “They are taking their tax-free haven out of that, transferring it into their cottage, because if they sold their cottage it would be capital gains, so they are selling their primary residence in Toronto, getting that tax free, moving up here, and fixing up their cottages to make them four-season homes” (2008, interview). Claude Whitney made the decision to retire to his cottage after realizing that he wanted to spend more than just a few weeks of the year on the lake. His original cottage was not built for year-round use, so in 2001 he sold it and found a year-round cottage on the same lake. He now spends half of his time at the cottage and the other half back at his home in the United States (2011, interview). As more and more baby-boomers approach retirement age, the trend of cottagers retiring to the cottage full-time is increasing (Lorinc 2012).

When making the decision to move to the area full-time there are a few options; cottagers can convert their seasonal residences into year-round residences, look for a new property, or raze their former cottage and build a new one on its footprint. According to realtor Ryan Torgen, the conversion of cottages to year-round homes and new construction is positive for municipalities:
the higher the price at which the property is assessed, the higher the tax that is derived from it for municipalities (2011, interview). Mayor Jeff Branson told me, “If you have the million dollar home you get the tax base” (2011, interview). Brian Harrison from OTMP added, regarding new lakefront property, “And for the municipality, hellooo, tax base. You go from a two hundred and fifty thousand dollar assessment to a million dollar assessment – the treasury just went cha-ching” (2011, interview). Others, however, argue that these larger homes are not positive for the area, noting that they require more services, including increased electricity, heat, water, and road use.

However, not all cottagers who decide to move to the cottage full-time end up staying. Some find that living in their vacation “paradise” year-round is not what they expected. Local Mayor Ed Dugan cited examples of cottagers moving up permanently and then, after five years, going back to the city. In his discussions with those who left, they often found the winters to be longer and more intense than they anticipated. Furthermore, “They didn’t understand that on a February morning there is nothing happening; you can hear a pin drop. You go outside and there is nothing, and they are not used to that. It is fun inviting your friends up in the summer to go boating, but in the middle of winter they want to go back to the city. So that happens quite a lot” (2011, interview). A recent article in Cottage Life magazine notes that “lake life in the depths of winter can be isolating, especially for single seniors” (Lorinc 2012: 42).

Darlene Peterson, the owner and director of a local summer camp noted some of the drawbacks of the arrival of larger cottages and year-round homes, and has, in some cases, taken steps to halt development. A few years ago, however, she found herself unable to say “no” to the local township. The summer camp owns a lake access road, and the local government approached the camp with a request to both extend and widen the road which would allow for
the construction of larger cottages and year-round homes on the lake. Darlene, an avid outdoors-
person and environmentalist, told me, “I gave my 54 reasons why not [to extend and widen the
road], and for 24 years I kept them at bay…So I fought and fought, not being a jerk, but telling
them that all they will do is speed up the rate people will come down the road” (2011, interview).
However, after 24 years of fighting she came to an agreement with the township because she felt
she “couldn’t continue to be a pain in the ass.” Now, with the new road complete, areas that used
to be inaccessible, particularly in the winter, are accessible year-round.

21st century cottagers often desire higher-end infrastructural improvements. For example,
local business owner Michael Thompson feels that improvements to the local airport, which has
two unpaved runways (see Figure 6), could increase the amount and type of cottagers that come
to the area, and create jobs. Michael proposes that somebody who buys a cottage and is
interested in aviation will chose an area with an airport over one that does not. Bringing these
extra people to the area, he believes, will bring more money to the local economy. Even if the
airport itself is not profitable, Michael feels it is still a benefit, telling me, “The airport in
Muskoka near Bracebridge has a $2 million dollar annual deficit, but it brings $3 million in
assets to the community” (2011, interview).
Although, in its current state, the local airport may not measure up to the needs of some wealthy cottagers, there are many ways in which local businesses do cater to the needs of cottagers. In Sundridge, for example, during the summer months the local grocery store carries a more significant assortment of cheeses, party trays, and different types of fruits. This increasing stock of certain items at grocery stores across the region first appears once the first “long weekend” arrives in late-May. Another indicator of the Almaguin Highlands catering to higher end cottagers can be observed by looking at the restaurants. One restaurant that most residents will point to is Danny’s Justa Pasta. Danny’s serves gourmet Italian food and, until the recent bypass, was located directly on Highway 11. Danny’s has become a destination for cottagers in the area since it opened in 1983. Retiree Doris Atkins told me, “Danny is a visionary…He set up
quality food, because he knew cottagers were looking for it” (2011, interview). In addition to his restaurant, in 2000 Danny opened a boutique/gift shop next door to his restaurant called The Eclectic Cottage (see Figure 7). As diners wait for their tables at Danny’s, they can visit the Eclectic Cottage which specializes in high-end knickknacks, as well as home, kitchen, and garden décor that is catered to Cottage Country travelers. Danny informed me that one of the reasons they opened the store was because of the notoriously long lines at Danny’s during peak season: “We knew we had a captured market, so it was like well what else could we do? We built this thing here, and yeah. Husbands hate me, they hate me…Wives love me” (2009, interview). In comparison to other shops in the area, one resident told me, “I mean it’s like you think you’re in New York City or something… it’s like a store that should be on Queen Street in Toronto, but it’s up here” because it differs from traditional tourist oriented shops that sell “moccasins and everything else that everyone is selling again” (2009 interview).
Figure 7. The Eclectic Cottage

Another recent change in cottage life in the 21st century has been the rapidly increasing prices for waterfront property. Donna Schauer, a lifelong resident in the area, was able to explain the implications of these changes in price. According to Donna, when she was a child in the 1980s there was a greater balance between locally owned and non-locally owned cottages. She also noted that a summer cottage was a realistic option for working-class residents. She told me, “Cottagers used to be people like my parents who had a house in town and a cottage on the lake, because you could get a cottage on the lake for $30,000” (2011, interview). Today cottages in the Almaguin Highlands start in the $250,000 range, leading to cottaging become a higher-class activity than in the past. Caitlin Simon notes, “It is definitely less affordable for people. It is people in a higher income bracket that can afford to have two residences. There are very few
residences available for under $200,000. People who buy cottages now are fairly wealthy” (2009, interview). Today, as a teacher, one of the higher paid positions available in the Almaguin Highlands, an economically depressed area, Donna Schauer feels that she could never afford a cottage. One way 21st century cottagers have been able to have their summer retreat has been through fractional ownership, where groups of families and friends join together to purchase recreational property. This practice is becoming increasingly popular, and it allows those with lower incomes to continue to cottage. Caitlin told me, “It works for people who can’t afford to buy a cottage. It starts at around $30,000 [per family]” (2009, interview).

Donna also has noticed that more and more cottages in the area are owned by people from “down south.” She told me, “As a kid I could go down to the lake and I knew everyone on that road, and now there are not as many local cottagers. People come from the city. That changes the dynamic. In the summertime there is a huge population increase. Thankfully it keeps some of our businesses running. That has been a change though” (2011, interview). Economic development consultant Betsy Hauser suggests that the trend of more “strangers” in cottages will continue as the highway development project makes it easier for people from the south to come to the area (2011, interview).

In what ways have developers, advertisers, and marketers been able to promote this new vision of cottage life? Developers and investors who produce commodified rurality and “nature” in search of profit market rural areas that possess the “natural” amenities that vacationers desire, such as lakefront property and large tracts of forest. North American urbanites are inundated with advertisements promoting a “pastoral ideal” and “back to nature” retreats, increasing demand for recreational property. Furthermore, products specifically catered to cottagers have become a lucrative industry, including cottage-specific furniture, clothing, beer, outdoor grills,
cameras, and even cars. Publications, like Ontario's *Cottage Life* magazine, cater to the modern cottager. Advertisements in this magazine promote specific products that will enhance the cottage lifestyle. In a *Cottage Life* advertisement from 2011, Muskoka Cottage Brewery offers a cream ale that provides the consumer with “the taste of Cottage Country,” Sawmill Creek Wine reminds you that “life is simpler here,” and Crate and Barrel offers 15% discounts to cottagers on purchases of outdoor furniture of $1500 or more. A recent *Cottage Life* issue also provided a review/promotional advertisement of the Mercedes-Benz ML350 BlueTec SUV in a section called “Weekend Commuter” which profiles “the best vehicles on the road to Cottage Country” (Bleakney 2010) The author said of the vehicle, “We of the cottage set love our fresh air, clear waters, green foliage, and all that goes along with a pristine natural setting…So it makes sense than an environmentally friendly hauler would hold extra appeal…The loons, chipmunks, and black flies will love you for it,” at a mere $58,900 (Bleakney 2010).

These depictions of the lifestyles of the modern cottager may lead one to the conclusion that cottaging is very different than it was only a few decades ago. Real estate developer Tony Dimucci told me, “The old days of the cottage have swayed. People are now coming up to actual homes that they call their cottage… The cottage is no longer ‘roughing it’” (2008, interview). Ed Dugan, a mayor in the Almaguin Highlands, added, “Even our landfill is a classic example of [the changing cottager]. We have way more beds, couches, TVs, showing up than you could possibly imagine, because people are coming up and bringing all of their good furniture from the city, and all of their cottage furniture is going to the landfill” (2011, interview).

Yet, upon further examination of cottagers in the Almaguin Highlands and in *Cottage Life* magazine, it is clear that not all cottagers fit this stereotype of the 21st century cottager. Beginning with *Cottage Life*, the actual article content is quite broad. Article subject matter
includes tales of the cottaging days of yesteryear, how to avoid taxes that come with a cottage inheritance, tips for hosting a dinner party, and how to live simpler at the cottage. For every Cottage Life story about expanding the boathouse there is another one devoted to having a simpler and more rustic retreat. For example, a June 2011 issue highlighted an Ontario family that cottages on a small island with no electricity and no running water, furthermore, their cottage is a mere 26 by 17 feet, smaller than some bedrooms in modern cottages (Vanderhoof 2011). In this way, the magazine is not necessarily promoting one cottager over the other, but instead recognizes the extremely wide variety of cottager that still exists. One thing that they all have in common, however, is a desire for the tranquility and happiness that comes with the cottage.

Another factor adding to the ease and tranquility of cottaging in the Almaguin Highlands is the new highway. The Highway 11 development project is playing a role in the increasing numbers of cottagers choosing the Almaguin Highlands for their seasonal homes. In the countryside, new transportation systems make previously remote locations more accessible to urbanites (Daniels 1999; Gutfruend 2004; Harris 2004; Jackson 1985; Kunstler 1994; Robinson and Thagesen 2004). Neil Smith refers to this as “ribbon development” which he defines as “precisely the case where new transportation routes alter the pattern of accessibility and hence the local ground rent structure, leading to new development that clings exclusively to the new route” (Smith 1996: 81). The pairing of green corridors and developed infrastructure, a hallmark of neoliberal development in the countryside, is ideal for new residents who desire areas that can offer both “pristine nature” and the conveniences of the city. Local reporter Gerry Robinson suggests that cottagers from the GTA who were once hesitant to come as far north as the Almaguin Highlands will now reconsider (2011, interview). He feels that in the past many
families were weary of traveling on the old two-lane highway. According to developer Brandon Morgan, the highway will “push people farther north, quicker” (2008, interview).

Another factor that will bring more cottagers to the Almaguin Highlands is the increasing prices of lakefront property in Muskoka. As local business owner Ted Hollingsbrook told me, “Muskoka has always historically been the playground of the rich” (2008, interview). In recent years Muskoka has become increasingly expensive, making Muskoka more cost-prohibitive than ever. Economic development advisor Betsy Hauser observes that Muskoka “is really starting to creep this way much more quickly than I think people really thought it would,” which, in her opinion, is positive for this area (2011, interview). Business owner Nora Maki feels that, as a result, the Muskoka area has out-priced itself: “People are starting to realize that if they drive 20 minutes north of the northern edge of Muskoka [Huntsville] that they are going to pay a third of what they pay in Muskoka” (2008, interview). Mitchell Banks, who works in tourism in the Almaguin Highlands, has been told by new cottagers that the reason they moved to the area is because of the lower prices (2011, interview). Brian Harrison, of the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership, has noted the trend as well, “[Cottagers say] ‘I’m gonna build this big thing that would’ve cost me five mil in Muskoka, or I can spend a million bucks [here] and I’ve got this great summer place that looks like the Taj Ma-freakin’-hal, right?’” (2011, interview). This potential incoming “Muskokafication” of the Almaguin Highlands, according to many residents, will provide a much needed economic boost to the area.

For many residents, cottagers are a positive economic contributor to the local economy. For example, Brian Harrison from the OTMP told me:

I mean, yeah it’s a tough thing to deal with from a local community because everyone kind of goes, “Oh, there’s those rich cottagers again.” But that rich cottager now employs somebody to maintain their property…When they need to fix things, they don’t screw around. I mean where you and I kind of patch
something, they go, “I am here for one week. My damn boat better work the entire time I’m there.” If it’s not working, they go and say, “Fix it. I want it by tomorrow morning,” and they don’t care what it costs. Money is no object to these people; it’s the experience that they’re going for. (2011, interview)

Restaurant owner Paige Harvey adds, “For a lot of businesses, summer is the time to make money for the year. So you cater to every cottager and every southerner’s needs and wants” (2011, interview). Claude Whitney, however, argues that many local businesses do not take advantage of the opportunities provided by cottagers. He feels that if local businesses focused on delivering services to cottagers they could be incredibly successful, and that more cottagers would shop locally (2011, interview).

Local business owner Jason Adelman suggests that local communities should devise ways in which to get cottagers to stay for longer periods of time, as opposed the many cottagers who arrive on a Friday and leave on a Sunday. One way to do this, according to Jason, is by providing dependable internet and having all of the necessary service industries that fit the needs of potential telecommuters (2009, interview). Economic development consultant Betsy Hauser echoes this: “If you can get a guy with a downtown office to come up to the cottage with his family and not go back home on Sunday and work at the cottage because he can, he is staying here longer, they are spending more money because they are living here, and going to the grocery stores. That is economic development” (2011, interview). As more and more cottagers spend lengthy periods of time in the area, however, new relationships emerge, both cooperative and conflicting. In this next section I examine these relationships in detail.

2.3 – Conflicts in Cottage Country

There are many instances of cottagers and local residents working together for the betterment of the area. Doris Atkins, a volunteer for a number of organizations throughout the
region, tells me that in the summer months cottagers frequently donate their time and resources. She cited a specific example of seasonal residents assisting in the renovation of a local church (2011, interview). Village councilor Ellis Butler added, “I don’t want to paint all the cottagers as villains. There are some that are really looking to protect their lakes too. There are cottagers associations that limit boat size and other environmentally conscious things” (2009, interview).

Alan Atkins, who was the chair of the committee for the new high school, took note that although many cottagers would never have children attend a local school, many of them were more than happy to donate their time and skills assisting with fundraising and planning for the new school. Interestingly, Alan found that in some cases the local residents were less enthusiastic than the seasonal ones. He concluded: “To me, these cottagers or whatever you want to call them, they are giving a lot back, and I don't know if that is recognized enough. When we looked at our calls for help, a lot of people who offered help were cottagers, and they are only here a short time. They have a huge love for the area because they vacation here” (2011, interview).

Despite these examples of cottagers and locals working together, many people I spoke with had much more to say about areas where these two groups conflict and those conflicts are the focus of the remainder of this chapter. At the same time, however, there are numerous issues on which cottagers and “locals” disagree, and those frictions are the focus of this next section.

First off, it must be noted that conflicts and alliances in the Almaguin Highlands are never as simple “local versus cottager,” “country versus city,” or “rich versus poor.” In fact, Farstad and Rye (2013) argue, for example, that in many cases locals have similar conservation philosophies as cottagers. Additionally, there are many “locals” with supposed “cottager values,” and vice versa – the relationships are extremely complex. Additionally, although there are many cases of conflict, there are just as many examples of neighborliness and cohesiveness. However,
for many cottagers and locals, the divisions do seem this straightforward, and have been a source of tension for generations. Furthermore, as some cottagers have become more involved in local politics, these tensions have increased. Sitting with Ted Hollingsbrook outside of his roadside motel on a hot June afternoon in 2008, we got to discussing cottagers and locals. He told me, matter-of-factly, “Cottagers and locals have different priorities.” Acceptance of discourses regarding land-use depends upon one’s role within that society; as mentioned earlier, those who come to the area for relaxation and recreation have a different relationship with the land than those who work, for example, in agriculture or forestry. Differing philosophies regarding land-use planning, aesthetics, and other issues may lead to conflicts (Nelson et al. 2010).

In the Almaguin Highlands, conflict may arise, for example, when retirees and summer residents attempt to put a stop to the possibility of development projects, fearing that these projects will ruin the area’s “natural” appeal. At the same time, many long-term residents may welcome development projects that offer jobs and security to an area that was recently bypassed, and has recently lost a number of industries. These conflicts are not unique to the Almaguin Highlands. Jaakson’s (1986) work in Canada demonstrates the trend of cottagers seeking to keep nature “as it is” – in what is occasionally referred to as a “museum-strategy;” whereas full-time residents are more positive toward the prospect of rural development initiatives (Jaakson 1986).

Ellis Butler, a lifelong resident and municipal councilor, told me:

> The majority of the full-time residents are middle-class blue-collar workers. That group wants to see controlled growth and prosperity in the area. The upper-class, your summer cottagers, want to see none. They want to see nothing change whatsoever; this is their vacation spot, this is where they come to get away from urban sprawl. It is hard to find balance between the two views, and, really, we don’t try hard to find that balance because we want prosperity for our area. (2009, interview)
One particular area in which conflict occurs is over land access. Cottagers and full-time residents occasionally disagree on access to particular parcels of land. Lee Carling told me that cottagers tend to have feelings of proprietorship regarding the lake on which their cottage is located (2008, interview). Cottagers assume that the lake on which they cottage is their lake. Trouble arises when this feeling of proprietorship leads to the denial of public waterfront access to local residents. Ellis Butler stated, “Just about every lake around here has a right-of-way to it, but cottagers go out of their way to try to discourage people from using it, or they even hide the fact that there is one. There are cottagers who will tell you to get off ‘their dock’ when it is a public dock” (2009, interview). Ellis encourages local residents and municipal governments to take a stand to preserve the shorelines for all. He cited Wasaga Beach, located at the southern end of Georgian Bay, as an example of what the Almaguin Highlands needs to avoid. According to Ellis, cottagers purchased and privatized much of the shoreline in Wasaga Beach. Ellis added, “Part of the reason we live here is for the natural beauty. To suddenly have a bunch of summer cottagers tell you that you can’t enjoy it anymore because they bought it, there is something wrong with that” (2009, interview). Paul Harrison, who works in forestry, also notes that cottagers will occasionally make claims that certain roads belong to them, and ask logging trucks to move elsewhere: “They get grumpy about that. ‘That’s my cottage road.’ Well, no, actually, it is a road over Crown Land” (2011, interview).

One reason for the disagreements between cottagers and locals comes down to a basic lack of communication. When cottagers come to the area, nearly all social life and social activity is on the lake, leading to isolation from the rest of the community. In a recent issue of Cottage Life magazine editor Penny Caldwell discussed the sense of community that exists on lakes. She states, “In our area, the cottagers don’t just know each other, they know each other’s parents. It’s
likely their grandparents knew one another too” (Caldwell 2011: 13). Typically, the only local residents that cottagers tend to interact with are those that live on the lake as well. According to Lee Carling, it is easy to get people to come together and discuss topics on the lake; however, once off the lake, it becomes much more challenging. Because there are different priorities, getting full-time and seasonal residents to work together on issues becomes challenging. Lee Carling states, “To get the community pulling together on anything is one hell of a problem” (2008, interview).

Additionally, some cottagers have expressed to me that they feel unwelcome when interacting with full-time residents, and believe that these residents are not fond of them. Mitchell Banks, who works in tourism, agrees that local residents are standoffish toward seasonal residents. He finds the local resentment of cottagers bizarre, however, considering that a large part of the local economy benefits from their presence (2011, interview). Art gallery owner Caitlin Simon shared this with me: “Sometimes newer cottagers think that all locals are out to get them. Some friends of mine think the prices go up when the tourists come. Now how would that work? It does not happen. Do we all go secretly shopping or know a secret handshake? I go out of my way to correct that misperception” (2009, interview). Yet, according to Michael Hunter, a reporter who recently moved to the area, there are a lot of full-time residents who feel that if you did not grow up in the area that it is impossible to understand it (2008, interview).

On the other side of this, and perhaps the reason for such standoffishness, there are many local residents who feel that cottagers view them as being less educated “country folk.” Reporter Gerry Robinson told me, “I think there is a prejudice out there that if you are from the country you are an idiot, and that city folk are going to come in and fix things and show us the light” (2011, interview).
Cottagers are also often perceived, if not in reality, as being wealthy, or at least wealthier than the average local resident. Over the years lifelong cottager Claude Whitney has overheard people discussing the arrival of the “rich Americans” when summer comes around (30% of the Ahmic Lake Cottagers Association is American) (2011, interview). Retiree Doris Atkins told me, “People that retire in God's country, which is what this is called, are highly skilled… These are all CEOs. These aren’t people like you and I. Highly trained, highly skilled, highly educated professionals” (2011, interview).

Claude Whitney has tried to bring these two groups together to mixed results. Claude occasionally gives public lectures related to his background in astronomy. However, early on he noticed that people were not sure who was welcome to these lectures: “When I give talks, people will ask, ‘Is this talk for us or for them?’ I say, ‘It’s for everybody!’ But there is that reluctance” (2011, interview). Another example of this divide came up when there was an attempt to allow hunting on Sundays. According to cottager Bill Rogers, the divide was roughly between locals who hunted and cottagers who did not (2011, interview). Yet there are cottagers, particularly those who decide to retire to the cottage, who make conscious decisions to establish themselves in the community by joining clubs, volunteering, and running for local politics. Paradoxically, this involvement in local politics has led to some of the greatest divides between these two groups.

The divide between cottagers and full-time residents occasionally rears its head in local politics and elections. It should be noted that not all cottagers choose to get involved. Many cottagers only come to the area on weekends for recreation and relaxation; this group rarely participates in local politics. Former cottager and current full-time resident Jason Adelman told me that when he cottaged in the Almaguin Highlands very few of his cottager friends were
involved in politics. Jason never even bothered to vote in elections when he was a cottager: “I came up to go canoeing or sailing, the last thing I wanted to worry about was these affairs. I knew I was paying taxes. I realized and knew that if you own a house and only chose to live in it 12 weekends a year and you are paying a whopping sum for the education, that’s the system” (2009, interview). Claude Whitney suggests that it is not until cottagers spend months at a time in the area that they get more involved in politics (2011, interview). A first step in this involvement is often through voting.

Cottagers, as residential landowners, are able to vote in municipal elections. Municipal election dates are controlled by the province and are often in autumn. During this time of year many seasonal residents have already left the area. One solution that some townships have instituted is an option for mail-in votes; however, from time to time various groups of residents have attempted to put an end to mail-in votes. One reason is that some year-round residents feel that individuals should only be able to vote in their place of primary residence. However, seasonal residents feel that as ratepayers they should be able to vote and have the same voice as any other taxpayer. This has been a contentious issue in various municipalities in recent elections. In one township in the area, mail-in votes are a relatively new option. According to cottager Bill Rogers, the proposal was brought to council multiple times before it went through, and it was not until pressure mounted that it did (2011, interview). Ted Hollingsbrook suggests that one reason it has taken so long for municipalities to enact mail-in voting is because locals know that if cottagers really want to, they can skew the political landscape. In many townships cottagers are a majority (2008, interview).

One relatively recent example of tensions leading to a change in the political landscape occurred in 2000. A local mayor told me, “The people, we just call them the people from
Toronto – it is not a slur or anything, the people from the south technically have control over the township from a tax point of view, and votes also” (2011, interview). This caused a huge rift during the election in 2000 when the cottagers put in place a majority in council. He told me, “The cottagers want to be treated fairly, and I guess they felt during the 90s that they weren’t. From the mail-in votes not being allowed to pits and quarries going in, they just felt they were getting screwed” (2011, interview). Prior to 2000 the full-time residents controlled the council. Frustrated, the cottagers banded together and eventually won a majority of seats in the 2000 election. He continued, “They came in and started to change things. They said, ‘Well we're going to show you local people how we run these things in the city,’ and a lot of changes were made” (2011, interview). This mayor added, regarding the cottagers, “They have a different set of standards. It is very ‘me, me, me, I want it now.’ That mentality is hard to deal with” (2011, interview). During the term from 2000 to 2003, the cottagers initiated mail-in voting which the previous council refused to do. In protest to the cottager victory, the permanent residents put together a concerned citizens association, and the locals eventually took back every seat in the 2003 election. Since then, the mayor, who is a full-time resident who did not move to the area until his 40s, has been the mayor, and he told me, “Since that time I have put my stamp on things, which is to not deviate from the center. This is not us-them anymore, everyone gets treated the same” (2011, interview). In 2010 he ran unopposed. He added, “They [cottagers] were never able to recover from what they did in those three years, and haven’t had a person elected since, yet they are still the majority [in terms of population]” (2011, interview).

Disagreements continued in 2011 when a group of cottagers attempted to put a stop to the construction of a tower that would provide the area with high speed internet. The seasonal residents felt that the tower would alter the natural beauty of the area, “disrupting the night sky
we’ve all come to love” (Doe Lake Flyer 2011). The seasonal residents posted flyers around town explaining what the tower would do to the landscape. They even took a photo of the lake and superimposed a tower on it (see Figure 8). According to economic development consultant Betsy Hauser, the tower will look nothing like the one in their image (2011, interview).

Figure 8. Doe Lake Tower Flyer
I attended the second meeting regarding this issue, and the divide between the cottagers and full-time residents was clear. The local mayor began the meeting by informing the audience that the municipality had already made up its mind regarding the tower, and it was doubtful that the seasonal residents would change the minds of the councilors. He went on to discuss the misinformation regarding the tower that had been prevalent for the last few months. What followed were the voices of numerous individuals involved in the project. The president of Spectrum Communications, the company responsible for constructing the tower, discussed why the proposed location was the only one that was possible. Because of the many hills and ravines in the area, there were very few choices that would serve the communities covered under this particular tower. The head engineer from Spectrum added, “We chose the best site for the area to cover the most people” (2011, fieldnotes). Economic development consultant Betsy Hauser provided the audience with some historical background on the project. Her economic development corporation had been working with the township since 2003 to find a solution to the lack of high speed internet in the area. In 2009 the federal government agreed to fund the project under an Industry Canada economic stimulus funding grant. The mayor added that the municipal government, while respecting the views of the seasonal residents, has to “promote economic development and modernization” (2011, fieldnotes). Keeping the area without high speed internet, he argued, is not following the guidelines of the province and is keeping residents “in the dark ages” (2011, fieldnotes).

The seasonal residents were upset because the meetings regarding the tower were held on Monday evenings – a day when many cottagers are not in the area. The seasonal residents also felt that there was a general lack of communication regarding the entire process. According to one cottager, only a few residents were informed of the proposed tower, and those residents were
only given five days to respond to the proposal. Cottager Julie Boyden felt that the cottagers were not able to voice their concerns (2011, interview). Another cottager, who had made the trek from Toronto strictly for the meeting, mentioned that notifying residents via the local newspaper was not the best way to get the message to seasonal residents (2011, fieldnotes). Julie Boyden added that the tower could hurt property values. She claimed that three brokers told her that her property value would go down if the tower was erected (2011, interview).

I asked Betsy if she had a lot of debates like this when working with townships to erect towers for high-speed internet and cell service, she replied, “This is the first time we've ever had anybody show up at a meeting. Nobody cares; they just want high speed so badly” (2011, interview). In the end, Betsy felt that the seasonal residents were attempting to override the needs of the permanent residents for a tower that might block their view. The council went ahead with the tower construction, feeling that it is in the best interests of the area. Interestingly, beginning in May 2012 Bell Canada constructed 21 new cell phone towers throughout Cottage Country, and all of them are disguised as trees. The editors of the Summer 2012 issue of Cottage Life feel this is an excellent idea, stating, “Cottagers don’t like unsightly towers mucking up the landscape, but we do love trees!” (Caldwell 2012b: 35). The article went on, in a tongue and cheek manner, suggesting disguising wind turbines as totem poles, uranium mines as turtle ponds, and a “huge big-box super-chain” as a huge roadside vegetable stand. This is a specific example of the abovementioned bourgeois ideology of nature, where the development and labor required to bring one away from “society” and into “nature” is necessarily hidden or disguised. Regardless, the abovementioned conflicts demonstrate that cottagers and locals do not always see eye to eye on municipal topics. Although cottagers no longer serve in the abovementioned council, there are many municipalities in the area where they do.
In various municipalities throughout the Almaguin Highlands, cottagers and/or “cottager-friendly” councilors have been elected in recent years. On one lake in the area, where mail-in votes constituted, until recently, only a small percentage of the total votes counted, the local cottager’s association board took the initiative to contact members of the association encouraging them to cast their ballots (I discuss cottagers associations in detail later in the chapter). The association created a pamphlet and mailed it to members of the cottagers association at their permanent residences. This pamphlet provided the members with information about the candidates in the upcoming election. The result: all of the cottager-friendly candidates won the election. The president of the association told me that their main goal was to get cottagers to vote and be active: “When you’ve only got a couple of thousand voters, every vote really does count. And it is a small community with a small budget, so these things have a significant impact” (2011, interview). This particular lake is not the only one where cottagers or cottage-friendly residents are elected officials, as Gerry Robinson told me: “Look at Kearney council, the front page from election week my headline was ‘Seasonals Take over Council’” (2011, interview).

As stated earlier, if seasonal residents want to sway an election, they often have the numbers to do so. In one township in the Almaguin Highlands, out of 1900 taxpayers, 1200 are seasonal. The seasonal-resident majority can pose a challenge for elected officials. For example, if there is an attempt toward a local arena or library, the seasonal residents may oppose it because it involves services that they never use. Because of the potential voting power that cottagers have, current cottager-friendly mayor Jeff Branson feels that the needs of the cottagers must be addressed: “We have a job six months of the year to ensure that our roads are at a premium state and that our landfill is fully functional [for the seasonal residents]” (2011, interview). When Jeff was running for mayor, he and his wife took the initiative to email seasonal residents, from as
nearby as a few miles up the road to as far away as Texas or England, to let them know his platform and plans for the area: “One of the reasons I ran here was because I thought that this area needed a change in government that fully understood the demographics of the taxpayers. We have a lot of baby boomers, a lot of professionals. A lot of people belong to our cottage association that didn’t just fall off the turnip truck. We also have a lot of low-income people here and a lot of people with hunt camps too… It is a real diverse population” (2011, interview). Jeff, who moved back to the area after living in other parts of Ontario for 20 years, wanted to give a voice to locals and to seasonal residents, whom he felt were being ignored in municipal politics and in decisions regarding the well-being of all residents.

According to cottager Dave Owen, having seasonal residents serve on municipal councils results in councils with broader perspectives. He argues that the former council in his township was narrow-minded: “Hopefully the kind of council we had we will never see again.” He went on to share these thoughts about some of the permanent residents:

See, if you have a job and you have two weeks of vacation, you or I might go to Mexico, and they [the full-time residents] go hunting. So even there, when they have a chance to go see something different, they just go to the deer camp ten miles down the road shooting deer, which is great; that is the life they love. But it is limiting. And then when they get on councils they are limited. You can't expect them to be broadminded. Things stay the same because they like it that way. (2011, interview)

Dave’s comments exemplify the class-politics that often accompany the cottager vs. local debates. Regarding the local vs. outsider attitudes, cottager Bill Rogers noted that at an all-candidates meeting in the last election some of the candidates made a point to remind the

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5 Importantly, as Cloke and Thrift (1987), Hines (2010, 2012), and Phillips (1993) note, the class-based conflicts that occur in areas undergoing rural gentrification are both inter- and intra-class, with many cases of one middle class group replacing another. For example, Dave and the local residents he differentiates himself from can be understood as different subsets of the middle class. Oftentimes what differentiates one class or class-faction from another are not socioeconomic factors, but instead are sets of particular practices or performances (Hines 2012)
audience that they were from the area, and that they had roots in the area. Bill noted that, from the perspective of long-term residents, being local was an advantage:

There is the joke about the 95 year old woman who had come to this area as an infant, and does nothing but good for the area, and she dies and her obituary starts, “Although not originally from here…” That captures the attitude that some of the locals have. And if you look, the area would not, for example, have as nice of a high school without the tax money coming in from people they would consider outsiders. (2011, interview)

For cottagers like Bill and Dave, then, the presence of non-locals provides a “broadmindedness” that locals lack.

On the flipside, Gerry Robinson feels that cottagers only run for council because they are “bored.” These cottagers bring with them not broadmindedness, but instead “city views and expectations” (2011, interview). Gerry argues that they try to change and fix things that do not need changing or fixing. For Gerry and many other local residents there is a fear that long-term residents will lose control if seasonal residents continue to get elected. As Doris Atkins, a retiree, told me, “The reasons why there isn’t a bridging between the seasonal and full time residents are long running. The worry is that maybe [the cottagers] will take over, and they [the locals] will lose control” (2011, interview). Yet Gerry also recognized that there is a need for cottagers and locals to attempt to compromise: “I obviously am from here, and in general I tend to side with local thinking, but at the same time we are going to have to change and be a little more open to some of those ideas” (2011, interview). These differences between cottagers and locals, however, go beyond politics, and are the focus of this next section.

Another aspect of cottage life that occasionally serves to isolate cottagers from locals is proliferation of cottagers associations. Oftentimes cottagers associations or new homeowners associations will have different land-use expectations from long-term residents (Hines 2010). At the same time, cottagers associations are also described by individuals I have talked to as
positive forces that help to keep lakes clean and bring cottagers together. Cottage associations often organize social functions, such as square dances, social dinners, and lectures/talks from guest speakers. Paul Harrison who works in forestry, for example, has given numerous presentations to cottagers associations regarding forestry in the Almaguin Highlands.

One local example is the Eagle Lake Conservation Association (ECLA). A group of cottagers formed it in 1977, and approximately half of the property owners on the lake are currently members. It has initiated various programs over the years, including a “cottage watch” security program, wildlife surveys, buoy placement, lake stocking, and pollution and water quality assessment. According to Bill Rogers, the founders intentionally named it a “conservation association” rather than a “cottagers association” to allow for broader goals; however, historically nearly all members have been cottagers (2011, interview).

In 2008 the ELCA commissioned the Eagle Lake Community Plan, funded through a grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. The vision statement for the lake plan is to “preserve and improve the natural environment in and around Eagle Lake in a sustainable fashion that will promote a healthy, family-oriented community” (ELCA 2008: 1). The ELCA lake plan includes suggestions for changing zoning laws that would help to “further protect the character of the lake” (ELCA 2008: 2). One goal of the lake plan is to enact limitations on future development to ensure that Eagle Lake “does not experience the metamorphosis occurring in other parts of Ontario where lakes lose their rustic appeal and begin to resemble suburban subdivisions” (ELCA 2008: 6). The authors of the plan suggest that new developments on Eagle Lake make the area less aesthetically pleasing: “Environmental concerns once thought typically urban, such as traffic, noise and waste disposal, are now prominent on the lake” (ELCA 2008: 4). They suggest this can be stopped by limiting the size of buildings and adopting bylaws that will
limit, among other things, tree cutting and the use of chemical fertilizers. Hines (2010) addresses similar actions occurring in recently gentrified parts of rural Montana. In particular, he discusses the covenants of a newly formed homeowners association which aims to preserve “natural beauty” by dictating “proper” land-use. Additionally, Green et al. (1996) have found cottagers to be more likely to promote restrictive land-use zoning and controls than permanent residents.

Overall, lifelong local resident Edna Riverton argues that some cottagers associations serve to provide cottagers with a larger voice, and, in some cases, have allowed for cottagers to “take over” municipal councils, as discussed above (2011, interview). One particular example of a cottagers association taking action to “take over” a council is a recent case with the ELCA. A few years ago the provincial government reassessed all properties in the province. This resulted in an increase in taxes for those with waterfront property on Eagle Lake, and a decrease in taxes for other properties in the township (ELCA 2008). The result of the reassessment was that a greater amount of tax revenue now comes from the people that have lakefront property. Cottager Betty Pike felt a certain level of resentment because of this, particularly because the seasonal residents do not use the schools, do not need the roads plowed, and do not use a number of other services that, according to her, “my tax dollars pay for.” Betty added, “Lake people provide the tax base. And the majority of the money is from people on lakefront, because the taxes are higher” (2011, interview). CFDC manager Ron Varney has often heard this type of argument throughout the region, to which he tells me, “You’ve got cottagers pissing and moaning about paying taxes for schools and welfare taxes; well, in this province that is the cost of being as successful as you are. You pay taxes where you live” (2011, interview). Regardless, according to Betty, the reassessment created the friction that led to their association getting more active in the last election. The ECLA sent out a survey to both mayoral positions and all five of the candidates
for the four council positions. They also attended an all candidates meeting. According to Betty, an attendee asked a question about seasonal residents and one candidate responded, “Well I don’t care about seasonal residents.” This candidate was not reelected. Historically, seasonal residents on Eagle Lake have not voted; however, Betty informed me that because people that were born and raised in the area felt that their opinions mattered more than seasonal residents they decided to become more active (2011, interview). One area where disagreements tend to materialize is in regards to development.

Different groups of residents have differing opinions on what constitutes “good development.” As Little explains, when debates develop over proper uses of nature, “contested frontiers” may arise which involve “disputes between multiple social actors over their definitions of, access to, and control over natural resources” (1999: 255). The literature demonstrates how the environment has become a political tool for various groups (Checker 2005; Conklin 1995; Doane 2007; Luke 2003, Menzies 2006; Peluso 2005; West 2006). Environmentalists, for example, may attempt to “lock up” nature in an effort to keep it in its “natural” untouched state, without considering the broader contexts (Berry 1996; Katz 1998). Ex-urbanites can significantly influence the vision for rural development and many ex-urbanites value nontraditional consumptive uses of rural land (Hines 2012). Furthermore, in many rural areas throughout North America, and across the globe, conservation has become a development strategy, and, in the process, rural communities may be encouraged to eliminate extractive practices in favor of conservation (West 2006), as the ELCA Lake Plan alludes to.

In the Almaguin Highlands, there are occasional disagreements between various groups over development. In general, cottagers are not pro-development. As Lee Carling told me, “The guy with the cottage, he don’t give a shit if there’s any more tourist development, does he? It’s
his place and his lake and he wants that. ‘Let’s not change. I like it the way it is’” (2008, interview). Ted Hollingsbrook added, “The majority of people who live and vote in the area are retired and/or cottagers and they don’t want development. Those who want development have moved away” (2008, interview). For example, there may be projects that cottagers protest, fearing that these projects will ruin the area’s “natural” appeal (as discussed earlier regarding the wireless internet tower). At the same time, many long-term residents may welcome development projects that offer jobs and security to an area that has recently lost many of its industries.

Regarding development restrictions, one township recently initiated restrictions on septic systems and the types of buildings that can be constructed within 20m of the shoreline. According to Ryan Torgen, these restrictions were implemented because the local cottagers association was trying to avoid “big monstrosities that you commonly find on the Muskoka lakes, where the boathouse will look like a mansion. That takes away from the look of the shoreline” (2011, interview). At the same time, Ryan also acknowledges that redeveloping cottages can be environmentally positive. When an old cottage is demolished or remodeled, the owners must follow current environmental standards. This often requires the installation of new septic systems, which provide less seepage and leeching into groundwater (many of the older cottages are not compliant with existing bylaws and legislation). At the same time, however, new cottages are often significantly larger and require more services.

In a recent attempt to limit development, one township [Armour] in the Almaguin Highlands has passed legislation that denies the ability of landowners to further subdivide any lakefront property. The council feels that the lakes in the township are at capacity, and that by passing non-severance laws they are limiting any potential increases. They have also added more
bylaws and costs for potential developers who are interested in the few pieces of remaining undeveloped lakefront properties. Mayor Ed Dugan told me,

If developers are willing to go in on marginal swampy land, as long as they jump through the hoops, they can. It might cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars now to jump through the hoops for these developments, but if they can jump through the hoops we are willing to listen to their proposals. Even those marginal developments are basically being jumped at right now. In a few more years I just don't see any lake development. (2011, interview)

One final area where cottagers and locals butt heads is in regards to local commerce.

Tensions regarding cottagers and the economy take two seemingly contradictory forms: frustration with cottagers who do not shop locally, and frustration with the busyness of local stores when cottagers come to town.

Regarding the latter, many full-time residents I have met with are quick to point out that once summer arrives the villages in the area become increasingly congested, particularly at local grocery stores. Brian Harrison had this to say regarding the arrival of cottagers:

My frustration is not with tourists. Yeah they’re a little confused and they sometimes do stupid things in their cars because they don’t know where they’re going, [but] cottaging is the issue...In the summer, where your population doubles or triples, suddenly trying to get through the line at Food Land – that’s when the attitude starts to happen. You’re trying to get through in the liquor store and it’s a long weekend and you’ve got sixteen kids in front of you and you know they’re going to someone’s cottage, you know, for the weekend, and all you want to do is get the bottle of wine to get home and have dinner, you know? So, it’s a love/hate relationship. There’s no question about it. (2011, interview)

There is a general perception among locals that cottagers are not respectful in these situations.

Mayor Ed Dugan has had discussions with local business owners who have told him that cottagers do not conduct themselves in the same way as the local residents: “A local person will come in and chat, where a cottager comes in and [says] ‘I want something now and I want it cheap, and if you can't meet my needs I'm going down to Huntsville’” (2011, interview). Local resident Kim Gehrig avoids shopping at times when she knows that cottagers will be at the
stores. Rather than picking things up on a Friday after work, she plans in advance and shops midweek (2011, interview).

Not all individuals are sympathetic to these complaints. Mitchell Banks, who works in tourism, has often overheard local residents complain about cottagers coming to stores on Friday nights leading to long lines and cramped shopping aisles. His response? “They are spending money. Does your daughter work as a cashier there? Small price to pay” (2011, interview). Brian Harrison understands Mitchell’s point. In an era when many rural areas are catering to seasonal residents, Brian feels that cottager communities need to be friendly and receptive to cottagers, with the understanding that they are an important part of the local economy. He argues that, in many cases, without their significant contributions to local commerce, many businesses would fail. Regardless of Brian’s abovementioned frustrations with cottagers, the solution is simple: accommodate the needs of the cottagers. He stated, “You better put a smile on and say thank you, better make people feel comfortable, and that they’re welcome” (2011, interview).

On the other side of this issue is the case of cottagers choosing to not shop locally. According to retiree Alan Atkins, many cottagers choose to shop in “the city” because items are less expensive there and there is more variety (2008, interview). Economic development consultant Betsy Hauser suggests that many cottagers also desire “gourmet goods” that are only available, for example, at gourmet food shops on Toronto’s Bloor Street, imported wine boutiques on Toronto’s Yonge Street, or cottage-wear specialty shops in Muskoka. Once cottagers arrive in the Almaguin Highlands, Betsy suggests that they are self-sufficient (2011, interview).

In the context of these comments, Ed Dugan feels that cottagers do not understand the importance of local community and local businesses (2011, interview). CFDC manager Ron
Varney agrees. He suggests that if cottagers want small towns to keep their businesses, they have to shop locally. If they do not, he argues that each summer they will arrive to more and more empty storefronts: “If you don't support the full time residents you will have a ghost town. You won't have a grocery store, or gas for your boats” (2011, interview) He acknowledges that things do cost more, but he feels that they have to. The small stores cannot buy in bulk like the large ones, but he points out that the local store will be there when they need something in a hurry.

2.4 – Conclusion

The summer cottage represents many things to Ontarians. For many cottagers, it represents a place of solitude, relaxation, and cherished memories. However, this representation often requires the obscuring of the labor and development that is necessary to create the modern rural idyll. This development and labor goes back to the construction of railroad lines in the early 20th century and continues today with the construction of multi-million dollar “cottages.” Neil Smith (2008) examines this phenomenon in the context of the bourgeois ideology of nature, where individuals romanticize nature, conceal its development, and perceive a binary between nature and society. In this binary, the outdoors is frequently interpreted as the antithesis of civilization; in an era when “civilization” is often correlated with squalor and confusion, “nature” has come to represent virtue and dignity (Smith 2008).

Yet for many full-time residents in the Almaguin Highlands, the cottager and his or her use of the countryside represents a threat via decreasing access to formerly public space, increasing property prices, the displacement residents, and an overall loss of power and control. In many cases, with lakefront property prices continually rising, the working-class and middle-class dream of a summer residence is no longer possible, leading to a gentrification of lakefront property in the Almaguin Highlands. Furthermore, seasonal residents often represent a higher-
class that is better able project its voice, providing cottagers increasing power and influence in local and provincial politics.

As this examination of the changing 21st century cottager makes clear, the seasonal home has changed significantly, and with these changes come significant challenges, including what constitutes “proper” uses and meanings of space in the 21st century North American countryside. Many of these issues are further explored in the chapters that follow by examining tourists, retirees, and other new full time residents.
3 – RURAL TOURISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

“We want to have it completely to ourselves, to feel like we are completely alone”

3.1 – Attracting Tourists to the Almaguin Highlands

As discussed in Chapter 1, tourism has played a major role in the economy in the Almaguin Highlands since the late 1800s. In a highly competitive tourism industry, marketers, economic development officers, politicians, provincial and federal officials, tourism operators and other small business owners must regularly seek ways to market the Almaguin Highlands so that it can continue to attract tourists and remain competitive. In this chapter I examine what it is that attracts tourists to the region, the needs of modern tourists, the pros and cons of a tourism based economy, government funding for tourism, emerging conflicts, and the future of tourism in the area.

Most tourists who come to the Almaguin Highlands do so to spend time in the outdoors. According to Cohen (1988), many individuals, particularly in industrial and post-industrial societies, seek out time in nature because they associate nature with peace and relaxation. Many North American tourists seek out what they perceive as “unpolluted landscapes” (Urry 1992), which they may associate with healthy living and happiness (Crawshaw and Urry 1997). What these individuals do once arriving in nature varies. Some nature tourists are interested in recreational nature, such as hiking, canoeing, skiing, snowmobiling, hunting, and rock climbing, whereas others may be interested in diversionary tourism, where the tourist “escapes” to nature to relax in the natural surroundings (Cohen 1988). For many people I have talked with, those coming to the area both temporarily and permanently, the Almaguin Highlands provides an opportunity to get out of the congestion and stress of urban life. Lee Carling shared this with me this regarding urban residents longing to leave the city:
There’s a whole group of people, eh, that lay awake at night during the winter dreaming about getting away from people and getting back to nature. And of course that tourist, eh, he’s the guy that’s going to get up at three o’clock in the morning and get into his vehicle and drive to be at the park office when they open up so he can paddle as fast as he can to get as far away from people as he can the first day [laughter]! (2008, interview)

Anita and Matthew Patton, for example, continually move north in their travels for the sole reason to "get further and further away from everybody." I happened to meet them at the Burk’s Falls library in 2008. Anita and Matthew would come to the library once a week to use their free wireless internet service, after which they would head back into the bush. The day we met, I was interviewing a local historian; they overhead our conversation and offered to share their experiences with me as well. Anita and Matthew purposely avoid places like Algonquin Park because they do not want to be on lakes with other people: “We want to have it completely to ourselves to feel like we are completely alone,” adding, “The further north you go the more you can have days and days and days of it being all to yourself while traveling” (2008, interview).

I have already examined some of the factors that attract cottagers to the area. In many ways, these factors are similar to what brings tourists to the Almaguin Highlands; however, there are subtle differences that merit an examination. To begin with, tourism is a competitive industry, and unlike cottagers and retirees who own land in the area, it can be challenging to convince tourists to return. There are, as Timothy Luke (2003) points out, many beautiful places in the world, so tourism communities must convince tourists why their location is the one they should return to year after year. Because many “natural” areas have little to sell beyond their wilderness, wildlife, and overall environment, in the 21st century the marketing of these areas must be constant and competitive for a tourism destination to survive. Marketing campaigns often promote “the nature experience” (Luke 2003), and the campaign that best convinces the consumer that they offer the most authentic, convenient, and/or affordable nature experience may
have a better chance of succeeding. The increase in what Luke (2003) refers to as “envirotsisms” (ecological advertisements) to attract more tourists and new residents to nature has steadily escalated in recent decades. Through ecological advertising, nature is more than just land – it becomes a produced, and often sanitized, commodity (Hoggart and Paniagua 2000). As Duckers and Davies (1990: 164) state:

In this Disneyland vision of the countryside both the agricultural purpose of the land and appreciation of the beauty of the countryside itself are obscured in favour of a series of saleable and marketable leisure ‘attractions’…the visitor, whose experience is disconnected from the working life of the countryside, is offered an easily digestible and interpreted version of it.

Advertisers sell touristic retreats as a way for city dwellers to get back to nature. Theorists interested in the social production of nature examine how nature is materially produced, created, and sold (Demeritt 2001). According to Neil Smith (2008) nature has been commodifiable since there were markets, and as time has passed and capitalism has expanded, the production of nature has become more intensive. This is not to suggest some sort of “primitive harmony” prior to the arrival of capitalism, but it is to suggest that substantial changes do accompany capitalism and commodification (Little 1999). Social production theorists agree that in the capitalist mode of production, nature is produced in the interests of profitability (Castree and MacMillan 2001; Smith 2007); however, the type of production changes in different eras.

In 18th and 19th century North American history, nature and wilderness are often described as “savage” and “desolate.” For example, early European settlers in Ontario in the late 1700s and early 1800s had a much different relationship with nature than wealthy tourists who visited rural Ontario for relaxation and rejuvenation. According to Wood (2000), settlers saw their relationship with nature as a struggle. For settlers, beauty in nature was demonstrated via
the clearing and control of the land; combating nature was an integral part of progress (Wood 2000). Throughout the 1800s trees were abundant in much of Ontario, and massive amounts of wood were needed to build and heat homes, make charcoal, build roads, and export for profit. With the exception of nature-tourists from urban areas, the clearing of the land was part of the rhetoric of progress (Wood 2000). Today, however, nature and wilderness are often seen as cultural icons and places of renewal. The “taming” of the wilderness ultimately led to a “back to nature” movement in the nineteenth century. As nature became domesticated and sanitized, and as urbanites longed to get away from the city, nature worship became a staple in North America. Patricia Jasen’s (1995) account of Ontario wilderness-tourism in the nineteenth century explains how, during this time, urban dwellers feared that living in urban areas was detrimental to their health. As a result, privileged classes, and eventually middle and working classes, attempted to rejuvenate themselves by spending free time in the wilderness. A desire to get away from the city continues to bring tourists to the Almaguin Highlands.

In my many conversations with tourists in the Almaguin Highlands, a recurring theme has emerged. Tourists come to the area because it is “rugged,” “unspoiled,” and “untouched.” Brian Harrison from the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership assists in marketing the region, and his organization specifically focuses on marketing these specific aspects, what he calls “nature and adventure” (2011, interview). Nature and adventure includes canoeing, kayaking, hiking, wildlife viewing, ice climbing, and snow shoeing. Although the particularities of nature tourists vary, there are some common threads. Take Anita and Matthew Patton. They are in their mid-thirties, and a few years ago they sold their home in London, Ontario, bought an Airstream trailer, and began traveling to sparsely populated regions of Ontario. They stumbled upon the Almaguin Highlands and only planned on staying for a few days. After discovering the many
different lakes and rivers for canoeing, and an overall lack of congestion, they decided to stay. They have been now coming to the area for four summers. For Anita and Matthew, and many others in the area, these wide open spaces and lack of congestion are the allure of the Almaguin Highlands. Unlike Muskoka to the south, Algonquin Park to the east, and Georgian Bay to the West, the Almaguin Highlands is less well known, therefore providing a “step back in time” and a “ruggedness” that is hard to find in the greater region.

As with cottagers, the Muskoka comparisons are prolific regarding tourism in the Almaguin Highlands. Hillary Peth suggests that tourists who come to the Almaguin Highlands are “fed up” with Muskoka, and are attracted to the less-touristy aspects of the area (2008, interview). For Doris Atkins, tourism in the Almaguin Highlands when compared to Muskoka focuses more on “rugged nature” than on developed outdoor activities like golf. She added that unlike Muskoka, “The restaurants will provide great food, but they are not fancy” (2008, interview). Mitchell Banks suggests that ruggedness of the Almaguin Highlands could be marketed to bring people who are seeking a more quiet experience. He is also aware that too much popularity could detract the tourists who come to the area for the quietness (2011, interview). Part of this “quiet experience” also applies to the villages in the Almaguin Highlands. Peter Cook, along with other economic development officers, have suggested promoting a “visiting the villages” tourism marketing campaign that would allow these individual villages to work together for a common economic development goal of attracting tourists.

Those who are optimistic about the future potential for tourism in the area point to Muskoka’s saturation and high prices. Former Minister of Tourism Monique Smith told me that the timing of the new highway and the saturation and high prices in Muskoka could not be better for the Almaguin Highlands (2011, interview). In fact, part of the new highway project included
the construction of a new tourism information center (Figure 9). Member of Parliament Tony Clement agrees, suggesting that the prices in Muskoka are too expensive for many tourists, leading some to head north to the Almaguin Highlands: “I actually think that the long term prospects for Almaguin and tourism are very high. Muskoka is just too expensive for a lot of people. People are looking for a genuine wilderness experience. They are right next to Algonquin Park” (2011, interview). In fact, it is these factors that convinced a local resort owner to locate to the area. He had originally looked at properties in Muskoka, but they were out of his price range. As an alternative, he and his family decided to purchase a resort in the Almaguin Highlands (2011, interview).

Figure 9. The Almaguin Highlands Tourism Information Centre
Who are the tourists that local resort owners attempt to attract? The majority of tourists who visit the Almaguin Highlands are from Ontario, in part because they are within driving distance, they are relatively familiar with the area, and they do not have to cross any borders which may hold up their trip. Many of these visitors come from the GTA, and there are significant groups of people coming from the Barrie and Orillia areas as well. Much like my earlier discussion of the changing cottager, the 21st century tourist to the Almaguin Highlands has also undergone transformations. Nora Maki, a local resort owner, suggests that modern tourists are more service oriented and demanding than they used to be (2008, interview). *Discovering Ontario: A Report of the Future of Tourism* acknowledges this, stating, “Tourists today pay attention to service and quality standards in a way they never have historically” (Sorbara 2009: 40). Nora’s resort is older and is not a chain (there are no chain hotels, motels, or resorts in the Almaguin Highlands). Although many of her visitors appreciate the “old charm” of the resort, she notes that many of her first-time guests expect similar accommodations to what they would receive at major hotel chains. Because of these changing expectations, she recently had to renovate the lakeside cabins so that the rooms resembled those that a visitor would find at a major chain. According to Nora, guests were demanding these changes. She suggests, “People don’t want the rustic at a resort. People want housekeeping to come in and do the dishes. The days of the rustic cabin are gone” (2008, interview) (see Figure 10). Developer Brandon Morgan agrees, suggesting that today’s tourist desires more “sophisticated” accommodations: “Today’s tourist has different needs than the tourist of the past. People are looking for service and that personal touch” (2008, interview). The desire for “sophisticated” accommodations also applies to some campers. Doris Atkins provided me with some insight on one type of modern camper – what he refers to as the upper-class GTA camper: “You see the Southern Ontario folks going for
their outdoor experience. You will see the BMW with a canoe that matches the car, the kids will have perfect outdoor outfits on; it is like Barbie and Ken camping” (2008, interview).

![Figure 10. “Sophisticated” accommodations under construction in the Almaguin Highlands](image)

With this understanding of the demands of modern tourists, economic development consultant Betsy Hauser argues that the area desperately needs more high-end tourism accommodations and attractions: “You need people who have more money to make any kind of a dent in the economy – they have to have money to be able to spend. So give them something to spend it on that they are really going to enjoy” (2011, interview). Other residents I have spoken
with agree that the area has not done enough to keep up with the needs of the modern tourist. Lee Carling points to Muskoka as an example of an area that has kept up with the times, particularly by focusing on high-end upscale resorts with attached golf courses. He argues that these developments are now the backbone of the area’s tourism industry. In comparison, Lee feels that the tourist facilities that are available in the Almaguin Highlands today are “marginal and traditional” (2008, interview). Anita Patton concurs. Although she loves the area and plans to continue coming back, she was surprised at the lack of facilities at the campground she visits: “The campground could have more services. Campgrounds in the United States will always have more level surfaces, access to cable TV, and Wi-Fi access at the campground” (2008, interview). She adds, however, that she and her husband are looking for a more rustic environment, and that is what they get while in the area.

There have been a few examples of new accommodations doing exactly what these individuals above have suggested. In 2009 a developer in Powassan constructed luxury rental cabins for tourists. Reporter Molly Harris tells me that the developer will be marketing the cabins as a “northern environmental high end retreat” (2010, interview). The owner’s long-term plans is to eventually add a small conference center with the hopes of attract executive retreats from corporations in the GTA. According to Ron Buxton, this development is the first high-end tourist development of its kind in Powassan (2010, interview).

Another change in regards to the modern tourist, according to FedNor economic development officer Adam Brandt, is that tourism dollars formerly provided by hunters and fishers have gone to the wayside: “They got old and died, and the young kids don't want to kill anything. They want to come up and do marathon races, and enjoy the outdoors, and kayaking and cycling” (2011, interview). This is part of the reason the Ontario Tourism Marketing
Partnership Corporation (OTMP) does not include hunters or fishermen in their data analysis. Adam sees this change as a new opportunity for the area. He points to Huntsville as an area where the local economy is embracing the new tourist by building new hotels and adding recreational opportunities like canoe and kayak rentals – things that he feels the municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands need to consider (2011, interview). One example of this new demographic is individuals attracted to the arts. As more and more artists have moved to the area, the local arts council has created tourism opportunities for those who want to visit galleries. They also produce an annual a full color booklet (see Figure 11) that provides information on traveling to the various small art galleries in the area. The booklet lists the locations of 20 local artists and galleries.

Figure 11. Almaguin Highlands Arts Directory, 2011
In spite of these new groups of visitors, there are a number of people in the area who feel the Almaguin Highlands needs to market itself to an untapped potential market: the large numbers of racial and ethnic minorities in the GTA. Racial and ethnic minorities currently represent 50% of Toronto’s population, and are approximately 20% of the total population of Canada. One way in which to begin marketing to racial and ethnic minorities, according to Lee Carling, could be something as basic as adding multiple languages to tourism websites for the Almaguin Highlands. He also suggested surveying visible minority populations to better understand what sorts of tourism experiences they are seeking (2008, interview). Interestingly, one of the province’s new initiatives is to reach out to “new Canadians” in the hopes of expanding tourism throughout Ontario (Sorbara 2009).

Others, however, suggest that the countryside is a “refuge” for white Canadians seeking to avoid racial diversity. A local business owner told me, “It is almost like [the Almaguin Highlands] is the last holdout for people who don't like a lot of ‘international flavor’ in their community…One comment that I hear from people [is that] they had to move out because they were being ‘invaded’ by this or this or that or whatever” (2011, interview). Food bank volunteer Sarah Braun suggests that this lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the area makes it challenging for minorities to find acceptance: “This area is very Anglo-Saxon/white, so to move up here is a risk for non-whites. There are stereotypes and old prejudices. Children might be teased badly in school” (2011, interview). Retiree Doris Atkins further added, regarding minorities in the Almaguin Highlands, “If you look different you are treated differently. People feel different if they are non-white. Almaguin doesn’t have colored people or First Nations, just milky white people. That is a real factor to think about. I don't know if they are prejudiced. They don't have to be because there is no one else here…We couldn’t have a multicultural festival here! [laughter]”
(2011, interview). Edna Riverton shared this story with me regarding the lack of diversity in the Almaguin Highlands:

> I was speaking to the executive director of the Arts Council in Sault St. Marie. She was saying that when you do your funding applications you really have to incorporate and emphasize that you are doing this for your aboriginal population and your visible minorities. And I said, ‘Oh yeah, well we don't have any of those.’ It just blew her mind. I think that makes us really unique. So when you talk about changing demographics, we are certainly not getting any influx of visible minorities (2011, interview)

As these residents make clear, the numbers of self-identifying non-whites are small, and for many of them, living in the Almaguin Highlands brings certain challenges, including the possibility of discrimination. This does not mean, however, that marketers will halt their attempts to attract minorities to the area. For the marketers, regardless of any underlying prejudices, underrepresented groups represent potential tourism dollars for the province.

One way to entice new groups to visit the area is via the new highway. 2009’s *Discovering Ontario: A Report on the Future of Tourism* states that “efficient, effective and safe transportation is critical to the health and vitality of tourism in Ontario” (Sorbara 2009: 46) The authors argue that highway improvements make it more likely for tourists to visit remote areas, have positive experiences, and extend their stays (Sorbara 2009). In regards to the Almaguin Highlands and the recent Highway 11 development project, most people I spoke with believe that the highway will bring people to the area in a faster and safer manner. Realtor Donna Perry told me, “The highway is good news for tourism; it just shortens peoples traveling times and everything is more accessible” (2008, interview). Former provincial Minister of Tourism Monique Smith adds, “I think it is the ease of transportation that is going to be the real boost for economic development, and particularly tourism for the region” (2011, interview). Ministry
employee Gary Howe agrees. Gary has noted that there is a perception among many people in Southern Ontario that the Almaguin Highlands is a great distance away (2009, interview).

Anthony Lombardi, who moved to the area from the GTA a few years ago, concurs that for most tourists in the GTA, Muskoka serves as a northern psychological barrier: “Anything north of there is the boonies… Even when I was moving up and telling people where I was going, there was a real lack of understanding of what was north of Muskoka” (2011, interview). Reporter Gerry Robinson recently encountered this perception while meeting with colleagues in Toronto:

I was down at 1 Front Street, which is the company’s headquarters down in Toronto. Some publishers came into the room, and my publisher is out of Barrie, and they say to him, “Hey Ed, how is life up north?” Well, Barrie is 40 minutes from Toronto, so that gives you an idea of what that mentality is. We had a launch party for the new paper up in North Bay, and it was the first time any of them had been north of Bracebridge in decades. The first comment was, “Wow, is that new highway ever great.” The second they got on it, it changed their mentality of what coming north meant. I think there are positive things to come here. (2011, interview)

The new highway, in the view of many individuals, is a major factor that will eventually bring increased tourism and the economic benefits that come with it.

3.2 – The Current Face of Tourism in the Almaguin Highlands

Currently, for the most part, the tourism industry in the Almaguin Highlands is on a small scale. Many people I have talked to over the years describe it as “mom and pop” tourism, referring to the large numbers of small family-owned motels and campgrounds. The Ontario Ministry of Tourism refers to these as “small and medium-sized enterprises” (SMEs). For Lee Carling, the prevalence of SMEs is problematic. Lee suggests that the area could prosper with larger and less “rustic” accommodations (2008, interview). Brian Harrison from the OTMP agrees, suggesting that the biggest challenge for the area is the prevalence of “a product that is
small, mom and pop, and from a quality perspective, probably pretty light, and needing some investment” (2011, interview).

There have been occasional attempts to launch larger scale tourism in the area. In 2001 there was a proposal to turn the main thoroughfare in Powassan into a tourist focused “Main Street.” The idea was that the street would house various unique specialty stores, catering to tourists. However, after proposing this venture to numerous individuals, the Powassan Business Improvement Association (BIA) was unable to attract enough investors.

Another recent attempt was the proposed Black Sky Preserve Observatory, also in Powassan. The initial proposal came forth in the late 1990s, after which the municipality hired a planner to assist in developing the project. The planner felt an observatory would be beneficial for the area because of the clear skies and lack of light pollution. Early on in the process, residents were generally optimistic that the observatory would bring tourists to the area. The municipality did not intend to charge significant amounts for admission; instead, their goal was to use the observatory to bring people to the area with the hopes that they would spend money locally. As Ron Buxton told me, “All we wanted to do was have an attraction so people would come into the area; that was the only reason for doing it. We weren’t there to make a million dollars for people to look through the telescope, because we know you can’t make money on that” (2008, interview). In fact, Ron was not particularly concerned with what the attraction was; instead, he felt the financial payoff would come via the filling of hotel rooms, restaurants, and shops. Early on, Ron suggested to the municipality that they attempt to outsource the idea to private investors: “I said, ‘We don’t have to know anything about it at all. We just go Disney or Paramount or Polaris or Bombardier or somebody to do it. I mean, we don’t have to own it; we
just got to offer them the facility. Let somebody else spend the 5 million dollars building the
damn thing, but we’d have it there and people would be coming in’” (2008, interview).

The group decided to attempt to take the private investment route, and things were going
somewhat smoothly until a potential investor pulled out. From the early 2000s until 2008 there
was very little progress with the project; however, many in the area still felt that the project was
legitimate and that it would eventually see the light of day. A new attempt to get the project off
the ground came in 2008 when the Hunters and Anglers Association offered to partner with the
municipality to create a conservation center where they would teach children about wildlife and
hunting safety. Although the municipality partnered with the Hunters and Anglers, there has
been very little movement since the initial partnership.

After a decade of work, including countless volunteer hours and $60,000 spent on
proposals and plans, the project, according to Ron, “has gone nowhere” (2010, interview).
Although disappointed that so many people volunteered their time, in hindsight he feels that not
building the observatory was a wise decision. The main reason Ron feels this way is because
many Northern Ontario tourist attractions have been facing serious financial problems in recent
years. For example, the multi-million dollar Shania Twain⁶ Centre in Timmins, Ontario, opened
in 2001, is now on the brink of closing its doors. It is currently only operating on a part-time
basis, and many employees have been laid off due to the lack of visitors. Furthermore, in July
2012, much memorabilia was removed from the museum and returned to Ms. Twain. Timmins
has been searching for alternative uses for the facility, but at this point none have emerged
(Gerch 2012). Betsy Hauser informed me that the centre now has as few as 20 visitors per week:
“They all thought that people would flock there, that people would come from all over the world.
There was millions of dollars of government funding that went into that project…But it wasn’t

⁶ Shania Twain, born in 1965, is well-known a country pop singer and songwriter from Windsor, Ontario
realistic” (2011, interview). Similar problems have faced the Cochrane Polar Bear Habitat in Cochrane, Ontario, and numerous other Northern Ontario tourist attractions. As many tourist attractions have continued to falter, Canada’s FedNor has cut funding for these types of tourism investments. Like Ron Buxton, Marcy Helner is also relieved that Powassan did not go through with the proposed observatory. Marcy saw the observatory as a magnet for significant debt for the municipality: “I mean, you look at the Elk Lake Resource Center, you look at Shania Twain, all those things, they’re all municipal black holes of money. And yes, they are attractions, but can they hold their own?” (2010, interview).

Instead, many municipalities in the area focus on small-scale festivals and attractions to attract tourists. These festivals include triathlons, seasonal festivals, snowmobile races, and dog sled races. One example that nearly all communities in the area host is a fall fair. A fall fair is a festival that takes place in late August or early September. These fairs typically have vendors, music, games, rides, and a focus on agricultural heritage. In fall 2011, however, Powassan attempted something new for its fall fair in the hopes of attracting larger numbers of visitors. The municipality hired the A Bar K Rodeo – the oldest rodeo company in Ontario (see Figure 12). The decision to hire the rodeo frustrated some residents who found the admission to be cost prohibitive ($25 for adults). However, according to those involved with the project, the inclusion of the rodeo was a great success. The success was so great that the rodeo returned to the 2012 Powassan fall fair, and was hired by the village of Burk’s Falls for a summer event in June 2012.
Beyond tourist attractions, recreational activities draw a significant number of tourists. Three popular recreational activities in the area are snowmobiling, ATV (all-terrain vehicle) riding, and motorcycling. Snowmobiling has been a popular activity in the Almaguin Highlands for decades. For many hotels, it is the snowmobilers that keep them afloat throughout the long winter months. Recently, however, the industry has faced new challenges. Many snowmobile and ATV trails in the Almaguin Highlands have sections that run on private land, and private landowners have historically provided land-use permits to snowmobile clubs. In recent years, however, some landowners have refused to renew their land-use permits. In the Powassan area, this issue eventually created a five mile gap on one of their trails. According to reporter Molly
Harris, the refusal to renew the permits began over a small argument between two individuals. The parties chose to take the issue to court, and the landowners obtained an injunction. Since then, the municipality has attempted to correct the situation by offering an unopened road allowance to the snowmobile club, but this road turned out to be unacceptable for safety reasons. In the end, the municipality lost the snowmobile trail and potential tourism dollars for the local economy (2008, interview). According to two former hotel owners I interviewed, this incident cost them nearly $40,000 dollars during the first season after the trail closure (2008, interview).

Incidents like this have not been limited to Powassan. According to motel owner Sally Irving, the closing of trails has been devastating to the entire snowmobile industry throughout the Almaguin Highlands region (2008, interview). Realtor Ryan Torgen explained that as more and more landowners revoke land-use permissions to snowmobilers, organizations are forced to reroute trails every winter. Ryan informed me that local resistance is significantly damaging the local tourist economy: “It is a billion dollar industry, snowmobiling, and in this area there is not much else…So people may or may not like snowmobiles running around, but when they spend their money here, whether it is in a restaurant or gas station or hotels or whatever, at least that money is being spent locally” (2011, interview). One reason landowners are refusing to renew permits is the fear of liability if snowmobilers are injured in an accident on their land (Figure 13). Motel owner Sally Irving told me, “The laws have changed – there are more cops on the trails, people are afraid to have beer, and so they don’t ride. Also, directors of snowmobile clubs and landowners are afraid of the very real threat of potential lawsuits” (2008, interview).

On July 23, 2008 at 7:00pm I went to a public meeting in Chisholm Township regarding land-use for snowmobile trails. It was a warm night and the small room at the United Church was packed. This meeting was incredibly tense, and there was a clear divide between those who were
pro-snowmobile and those who were not. On both sides of the coin, attendees came with large signs and placards expressing their opinions. One at a time, residents took their turn at the podium stating their opinions. For the residents who opposed the trails, they argued that snowmobiles are destructive to wildlife habitats, lead to increased noise and chemical pollution, increased litter, damage to private property, potential decrease in property values, a destruction of their “quality of life,” and “invasion” of non-local trail users from “all walks of life” (2008 fieldnotes). A number of residents told stories of riders doing “doughnuts” on their property and leaving behind beer cans and other trash. One resident exclaimed, “80% of realtors say that property is worthless if it is within hearing distance of a trail” (2008 fieldnotes). Another resident stated, “I don’t want to be against progress or development, but I do want to live peacefully in the community” (2008 fieldnotes). Those against the trails also suggested that although many trails are advertised as “voyager multi-use trails,” or VMUTs, a trail that is home to ATVs and snowmobiles is not hiker-, skier-, or horseback rider-friendly. These residents were also adamant that snowmobile trails do nothing for their economy, because Chisholm has no gas stations or hotels. For them, as residents of Chisholm, all that snowmobiling brings is “litter, danger, and harm to the environment” (2008, fieldnotes).

Proponents of the trails urged the residents to reconsider their position, explaining that although trails may not benefit Chisholm directly, having snowmobilers in the general area is beneficial to businesses in neighboring municipalities, generating over $1 billion annually to the Ontario economy (2008 fieldnotes). They further argued that the trail would be entirely located on Crown Land, coming no closer than 1.5 kilometers from the nearest home, that it is cleaned each spring and that litter has not been an issue in the past, and that “the folks who use the trail are usually local folks” (2008 fieldnotes). Finally, the proponents argued that snowmobilers take
part in snowmobiling to *celebrate nature*, not destroy it. They went on to explain that the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs has an environment program that, since 1992, has invested $1.25 million in projects to improve the environment and to minimize environmental impacts from snowmobiles.

Figure 13. Snowmobile restriction sign posted in Burk’s Falls

As the Chisholm example makes clear, there are groups of residents who see snowmobiling and ATV riding in a negative light. For example, one new resident in the area
makes a clear distinction between snowmobilers/ATV riders and those who use trails for hiking and skiing. As a hiker/skier, she feels strongly that the use of provincial tax dollars to provide grooming machines for trail upkeep is a waste of money, suggesting that any provincial funding or promotion of snowmobiling and ATVing only serves to harm the environment, pollute the air, and make trails less accessible to others: “The government says that the trails are for everyone, but ATVs ruin trails. They dig up all of the dirt so that it is only soft sand, and I can’t enjoy the trails” (2009, interview). She also suggests that statistics which correlate snowmobiling and its contribution to tourism are skewed, adding, “People who talk about the benefits of snowmobiles often fail to talk about the costs to the area. The amount of rescue services we use when people crash – who have almost always been drinking – there is at least a 75% correlation” (2009, interview). For this resident, there are two conflicting groups: those who choose to spend time in nature with motorized crafts, and those who people prefer nonmotorized time in nature. “This is a big divide,” she told me, “There aren’t too many snowmobilers who are also cross country skiers. This divide may not be seen that much until it comes closer to people’s backyards.” She suggests that snowmobilers and ATV riders are “folks who want to drink a great deal, ride the machines, and get injured” (2009, interview). Cottager Dave Owen adds, “They don’t know or care whose yards they are going through. Snowmobilers are supposed to stay on trails, but they don't” (2011, interview). For these individuals, snowmobilers represent a lower-class and somewhat irresponsible population that does not fit into their view of what the modern Almaguin Highlands should be.

To the south, in Muskoka, some communities have similar points of view, so much so that they are now known as “snowmobile unfriendly” communities. A former Huntsville resident suggests that this reputation is positive for the area. He asks
Why would they want snowmobiles up and down the street with the type of atmosphere that they are trying to create? It is absolutely against the atmosphere. The reason people visit Huntsville, and the rest of the area, is because of the rocks, trees, and water, and the laid back lifestyle that a town offers. They have all of the right elements and they have to make sure that those elements are guarded properly and that they maintain their image of why people visit here. (2008, interview)

In his opinion, a prevalence of snowmobilers and ATV riders is damaging to the image that they are attempting to maintain.

Yet many in the Almaguin Highlands see snowmobiling in a more positive light. For economic development advisor Betsy Hauser, snowmobilers are great for the local economy. She argues that because snowmobilers travel light, nearly all accommodations and food are purchased locally, unlike “pork n’ beaner” campers, for example, who pack nearly all of their food and other required gear prior to arriving: “Snowmobilers hop on their sleds with a Visa card in their back pockets and that is all that they bring. That is all they can fit. And yet you'll get to a municipality where there are a lot of little sheep farms or lambs running across the back 40, and they want nothing to do with snowmobilers, because they don't want them crossing their property” (2011, interview). She also argues that many landowners overreact to the potential dangers and liabilities that come along with allowing snowmobilers to cross private property.

Furthermore, she contends that stereotypes about snowmobilers are unfair and damaging: “Horseback riders and walkers are seen as really good people and snowmobilers and ATVers are [seen as] a bunch of drunks” (2011, interview). Brian Harrison is also a firm believer in the economic benefits of snowmobilers. For example, he suggests that Sundridge and South River, both of whom were recently bypassed, would be wise to immediately become ATV, snowmobile, and motorcycle friendly. He goes so far as to recommend passing bylaws that welcome snowmobilers and ATVers: “I would make it so friendly and so welcoming for them.
I’d have yards where they could park their stuff safely” (2011, interview). Brian suggests that the bypass makes the villages safer for the snowmobilers and that because so many municipalities are not snowmobile friendly, these villages could stand out by being an area that is welcoming to them.

Another potential source of motorized tourism, according to Brian Harrison, is motorcycle tourism. Brian suggests that the bypass in the Almaguin Highlands has opened up scenic secondary highways that are of interest to motorcyclists: “They look for interesting, scenic little towns, and to me that’s what Sundridge and South River have. Now that they’ve been bypassed, that’s a nice little gentle ride into the countryside” (2011, interview). Through his employer, the Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership (OTMP), Brian works with the Motorcycle Confederation of Canada to develop route planners and trip planners for motorcycle touring. The most recent trip planners include the Almaguin Highlands; however, Brian suggests that the Almaguin Highlands could become even more of a destination if they took the right steps to promote it. Brian is an advocate of motorcycle tourism, in part, because the process for becoming “motorcycle ready” does not require significant investment (2011, interview). Of course with motorcycling, as with snowmobilers, there are negative stereotypes that would have to be overcome for the villages to go forward with such a plan. Regardless of the touristic development plan, however, the role of provincial funds to assist in marketing and development is a major aspect of Ontario tourism.

3.3 – Government Funding

Tourism dollars have decreased across Canada in recent years. This decrease is, in part, due to a recent recession, high gas prices, and, with regards to American tourists, an even
exchange rate and a border crossing. One way in which the federal and provincial governments have attempted to boost tourism throughout Canada has been through various forms of funding.

There are some who work in tourism who completely disagree with the ways in which the federal and provincial governments distribute funds set aside for tourism. Resort owner Nora Maki is one of them. She argues that the government needs to put an end to short-term solutions and strategic plans. She feels that there is an overabundance of studies on tourism. Nora suggests that the funds could be more useful if put in the hands of the actual tourism operators to advertise and promote their businesses (2008, interview).

Nora also explained that provincial funding and private bank loans are not particularly supportive of SME (small and medium-sized enterprise) tourist-based businesses, which, as mentioned earlier, are the majority in Northern Ontario, particularly in the Almaguin Highlands. She argues that although owners of small motels and resorts can generally make a living, few are able to save large amounts of money (2008, interview). As a result, when owners need to make improvements to their accommodations, acquiring funds is challenging. Traditional banks do not tend to lend to tourism operators because they are seen as high risk. CFDC manager Ron Varney confirmed this: “The tourism industry doesn’t fare favorably with any of the banks. It is not high on any of their priority lists” (2011, interview). As a result of the challenges that many small businesses face, in the mid-1980s Industry Canada initiated Community Futures Development Corporations (CFDCs). CFDCs are emblematic of neoliberal “self-help” development initiatives. The program encourages communities to create their own economic development opportunities, often though assisting small businesses and entrepreneurs with start-up grants (George, Mair, and Reid 2009: 26; Reid 1998). There are 268 of these organizations throughout Canada, and they are, for the most part, located in rural areas. Because the federal government does not directly
deal with the private sector, the CFDCs take on that role. CFDCs provide business assistance, counseling, and mentoring to small businesses, and, importantly, they also provide loans of up to $500,000. Some of the businesses they work with are start-ups; however, most of them are businesses going through transitions, and are in situations where the banks are not willing to fund them. This is particularly the case with seasonal businesses. The goal of CFDCs, according to Ron Varney is to “preserve employment in small communities,” and, as Ron explained, “hence our risk tolerance is considerably higher than banks. Banks probably don't have much tolerance period. They don't lend to small businesses in rural communities anymore” (2011, interview).

Where the federal government has provided opportunities via CFDCs, the provincial government regularly invests in tourism as well. What follows is a discussion of the most recent tourism campaign spearheaded by the Ontario government.

In 2009 the Ontario Ministry of Tourism and Organizations decided to attempt a new approach to tourism, unveiling its newest tourism strategy: the creation of 13 tourism regions across Ontario. Through its new program, the province of Ontario hopes to double tourism receipts by 2020, from $22 billion annually to $44 billion. These “Regional Tourism Organizations” (RTOs) are “responsible for building and supporting competitive and sustainable tourism regions. And each will help attract more visitors, generate more economic activity, and create more jobs across the province.” (Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport 2012).

The goal of the RTOs is for each region to create a “unique brand and a stellar experience within a provincial brand” (Sorbara 2009: 20).

According to the RTO, the decision to adopt a regional approach came from consultations across the province with various stakeholders, including tourism operators. Motel owner Ted Hollingsbrook was not one of them. I first met Ted and his wife Sally in May of 2008. I was
driving down the old Highway 11, prior to the bypass, and I saw a funky roadside motel with a bicycle on the roof. I was intrigued, and as soon as I reached my destination, I looked up the phone number and called the motel. After calling Ted and explaining who I was, he invited me over to the motel/bead shop for a tour and an interview. Since that first meeting, I interviewed Ted and Sally every year, and became good friends with them. Professionally, Ted is a wealth of knowledge. As a small business owner located on the old highway, and as someone who was formerly active in municipal politics, Ted has proven to be a great person with whom to discuss all topics Almaguin related. On the particular topic of tourism, Ted’s insights have proven incredibly valuable. In 2009 Ted attended an all day meeting where the province presented the goals of the new program. Ted had this to say about the meeting:

> Half of the people in the room were already in the economic development business; they were working for the government, or some agency. Only half the people in the room were actual [tourism] operators, and what a cynical bunch [laughter]! Holy cow, we were grouchy. It was just like, “What the fuck are you doing to us now? You didn’t consult with us on anything that had anything to do with this. You just kind of dropped it out of the sky on us, and it’s crap.” (2009, interview)

In Ted’s 22 years working in tourism in the Almaguin Highlands he has witnessed many provincially sponsored campaigns come and go. According to Ted, at the unveiling of each campaign the Ministry claims “This time we’re gonna get it right,” yet every time things remain the same. Ted suggests that one reason these programs do not succeed is because there are many competing voices in the tourist industry: resorts, fishing and hunting camps, outfitters, luxury accommodations, roadside motels, amusement parks, restaurants, golf courses, water parks, etc., and every sector has different ideas and needs. Furthermore, each sector has its own independent association with its own thoughts on what is best for Ontario tourism. Ted suggests that until tourism operators have a more unified voice, tourism will continue to struggle (2009, interview).
This lack of a unified voice is acknowledged in 2009’s Discovering Ontario: A Report on the Future of Tourism, where the report strongly encourages the formation of a single tourism industry association (Sorbara 2009). Furthermore, the frequent reorganization and rebranding of province sponsored and marketed tourism has led many tourism operators and small municipalities to either ignore or only reluctantly participate in provincial tourism.

In spite of the bitterness that many individuals have acquired over the years, Brian Harrison at OTMP argues that ignoring regional initiatives is a poor decision: “We go in these big arching circles and what’s old is new again, you know? So, you know, yeah in 1974 we brought in regional tourism in Ontario, and then we disbanded it in Northern Ontario, and now we’re realigning it. You know what I mean? We’re going in this big circle and the only good news is the government’s put some money on the table, right? So grab it!” (2011, interview). Furthermore, Monique Smith, former Minister of Tourism, feels that the program has great potential. For Monique, regionalization will encourage the specific regions to work together, strengthening all aspects of a particular region, rather than having many small unorganized communities attempting to promote tourism individually (2011, interview). EDO Laura Jenner, however, is less optimistic, and argues that the province is “ramming regional tourism down our throats” without paying attention to the inconsistencies in some regions (2011, interview). For the provincial goal of providing tourists with a comprehensive and unified image of Ontario tourism (Sorbara 2009), however, it appears that the province first needs to convince tourism operators of the validity of the new program, something that, based on my conversations with tourism operators, is missing.

Of the 13 new RTOs, the Almaguin Highlands falls under the RTO-12 region. The marketing name for RTO-12 is Explorers’ Edge: Naturally Adventurous. RTO-12 encompasses
Muskoka, Parry Sound, Algonquin Park, and the Almaguin Highlands. There is some disagreement as to whether or not the Explorers’ Edge branding is suitable for the four regions it encompasses. Although Brian Harrison of OTMP generally likes the Explorers’ Edge branding, he does feel that including Muskoka under the Explorers’ Edge moniker is a misbrand: “It misses what Muskoka’s about, which is cottaging. It’s about cottage country, lakes, streams, you know? It’s not about natural” (2011, interview). In this case, Brian differentiates Cottage Country “outdoors” with Almaguin Highlands’ “rugged” outdoors – an interesting distinction. Brian does, however, think that the Explorers’ Edge branding has potential for the Almaguin Highlands because of the more “rugged nature” it offers when compared to the “manicured” image of Muskoka. Brian sees a danger, however, in the Almaguin Highlands being glossed over in RTO-12, mainly because the other three regions within RTO-12 (Muskoka, Algonquin Park, and Parry Sound) are huge players in tourism. He suggests that the Almaguin Highlands hire or appoint a representative who is focused, devoted to tourism, and willing to work with RTO-12 so that this glossing over does not occur. If the Almaguin Highlands does not do so, he argues that they will miss out on potential funds and marketing that RTO-12 provides (2011, interview).

3.4 – Marketing and Economic Challenges

Regardless of whether or not vendors in the Almaguin Highlands take advantage of opportunities provided by RTO-12, in one form or another, tourism in the Almaguin Highlands requires marketing. As Luke notes, “Natural attractions, such as unspoiled land and water in relatively undisturbed ecosystems can provide recreational, ecotourist, or research opportunities in special niche markets, if these attractions can be made alluring enough by aggressive mass-media promotions” (2003: 97). An example of this type of promotion is a 2008 province funded
advertising campaign called “Canada’s Great Outdoors.com: An Adventure in Ontario.” Upon entering the site (note: the site has since been completely modified), the viewer sees the interior of a log cabin which contains, among other things, a canoe, a fishing pole, and a backpack. Each item represents outdoor activities (boating, fishing, or hiking). The user can drag these items into the “pack up and go” section, and once dragged here, the user chooses a region, which directs him or her to commercial tourism websites that will meet his or her outdoor needs for planning a trip to Ontario.

The overall visual feel of this website is one of rusticity, serenity, and relaxation. The site has a celebrity spokesperson, Babe Winkelman, who is a sports fisherman and television personality. The site is maintained by the Government of Ontario and was part of their strategic tourism development program at the time, which, as discussed above, has recently changed. This site was heavily promoted outside of Ontario. For example, in 2008 I was residing in Chicago, Illinois and I frequently saw the campaign advertised on television, on numerous websites (in the form of banner ads), as well as on public transportation. Importantly, on this particular website there is no mention of non-“nature” or metropolitan activities that are available – the entire focus is on escaping to the great outdoors. The portion of the website devoted to the Almaguin Highlands has this to say about the area: “The Almaguin Highlands has an untouched feel to it. Canadian history reveals very little early exploration or settlement in the highlands” (Ontario’s Near North 2008). The theme of “untouched wilderness” is a constant for many websites and other tourism literature promoting outdoor experiences.

Although one can find some information about the Almaguin Highlands on websites like canadasgreatoutdoors.com and on the RTO-12 website, one criticism that I have heard from a wide variety of individuals, including residents, tourists, and government officials, is that the
area is poorly marketed. An attendee at a 2009 Central Almaguin Economic Development Committee (CAEDA) meeting stated: “This area is forgotten. It is not mentioned in the papers, on weather reports, or anything else. Almaguin has a huge marketing issue. The area has never been marketed well, and it will be worse after the highway goes through if we don’t do something. No one knows Almaguin. People know Muskoka and North Bay. Marketing will have to mention proximity to Muskoka” (2009, fieldnotes). One common complaint is that the Almaguin Highlands does not have an official webpage. Instead there are a variety of independently operated websites that fail to provide a cohesive overview of the area. With the absence of effective marketing, some residents feel that the Almaguin Highlands is missing out on opportunities to attract tourists. Retiree Jason Adelman notes that in order to compete with the many other tourist areas nearby “you’ve got to go out there and sell yourselves. You’ve got to go to where your market is and capture it. That won’t happen sitting in Sundridge doing nothing. All that will happen is that less and less people will come here” (2009, interview). As RTO tourism manager Allan Boddington told me, “It is a very competitive landscape, and while we can make an effort to work together, at the end of the day we are all chasing the same person” (2011, interview). It is this competition along with many other factors that lead some to question the economic benefits of tourism.

For some of communities in the Almaguin Highlands, after employment opportunities in lumber and agriculture decreased, tourism appeared to be a potential answer to the area’s economic woes. However, although tourism development is often at the top the list for economic development when timber, agriculture, and mining decline in rural areas, George, Mair, and Reid (2009) are critical of such strategies, stating, “In reality, many communities have neither adequate amenities nor infrastructure, and chances for success seem highly
remote…governments do a terrible injustice to communities in crisis by fostering false and unrealistic expectations, providing large dollars for feasibility studies and quick-fix programs that have little chance for success” (30). At the very least, suggesting that tourism and recreation will rescue the countryside is an overstatement (Butler, Hall, and Jenkins 1998), yet tourism continues to be a popular response in many rural areas, especially when considering the massive challenges that rural communities face when attempting to attract industry (Reid 1998).

Regarding the shift to tourism in West Parry Sound, Ron Varney told me, “The transformation to a tourism economy took place grudgingly in the 80s because there was nothing else” (2011, interview). What follows are some of the concerns residents have regarding a tourism based economy.

In the Almaguin Highlands, like many tourist areas, in addition to often being low paying, tourism is seasonal. The seasonality reaches its low point in spring. Interestingly, my first trip to the Almaguin Highlands was in March 2008, and I was able to observe the slowness firsthand. Prior to arriving, I made arrangements at the Pickerel Lake Lodge, which has since gone out of business. I drove straight through from Chicago. Once I was north of Huntsville, Highway 11 had yet to be four-laned, and it was an icy snowy evening. After leaving the highway and driving down narrow, icy, snow covered, winding gravel roads I finally made my way to the lodge. I was relieved to have made it there intact, and was ready to check in. As I went to the reception window at around 9pm, rather than finding an employee, I found an envelope taped to the window. On the envelope it said, “John.” I opened it to find the key for my room. My car was the only car in the parking lot and I was the only guest at the resort. The next morning as I was preparing to head to Burk’s Falls hoping to find some participants for my new project, the sole employee, Wendy, asked me when I was coming back. This struck me as
somewhat strange, but I told her I would return later in the afternoon. The reason she asked is because I was the only guest, and if I was not going to be back for lunch, she was going to go home. She went on to discuss the seasonality of the resort. She mentioned that although they have some snowmobile tourism in the winter, summer is when they make most of their money.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s Ron Buxton and Molly Harris owned a hotel in the area, and they also struggled with the seasonality of business. The hotel, in their case, had to rely on local residents to frequent the bar and restaurant for eight months of the year. Even during the height of tourist season, there were many weekday evenings when most of the 15 rooms were vacant. According to Molly, most guests arrived on Fridays and left on Sundays (2009, interview). Eventually the hotel went out of business, and since closing, like the Pickerel Lake Lodge, no one has reopened it. One of the reasons Ted Hollingsbrook removed the restaurant portion of his motel was due to the seasonality. Restaurant owner Paige Harvey added, “Without the local support, you wouldn’t survive, because once the tourists are gone, the town cuts in half” (2011, interview). This seasonality can stretch rather late into the spring if the weather is not cooperating. In May 2010 I had an interview scheduled in Powassan and I was living in Burk’s Falls (a 55KM trip). Early that morning the interviewee called me and asked to reschedule because of the snowstorm that was making the highway inaccessible.

According to Ron Varney, the brevity of the tourism season also plays a role in the comparatively high prices for lodging. He explains, “Because it is a short season they have to make a few bucks in that short window. You go to any newspaper you find a trip to Mexico with everything for $700; you can blow that in a weekend up here at a little mom and pop resort” (2011, interview). Lee Carling agrees, stating that there is “nothing affordable in the Almaguin
Highlands” (2008, interview). It is not only the seasonality, however, that poses challenges to those working in the tourism industry in the Almaguin Highlands.

Another challenge, as mentioned earlier, is the drastically changed exchange rate with the United States. This change has led to a sharp decrease in American tourists, who make up 20% of Ontario’s tourists (Sorbara 2009). For many years, beginning in the late 1970s and peaking in the early 2000s, the relative inexpensiveness of Canada was a major selling point for Americans – their dollar went a long way. That competitive advantage has since disappeared. In 2002 the exchange rate was approximately $1.60CAN to $1.00U.S. As of 2012 the exchange rate was nearly even. That, alongside comparatively high gas prices (as of October 2012 the Ontario average gas price was $1.34/liter whereas the U.S. average was $1.01) has meant fewer and fewer Americans making wilderness excursions to Ontario. Ted Hollingsbrook suggests that, without the economic perks, in many ways, American tourists can a get a similar experience to what they would get in Northern Ontario in places like Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin (2008, interview). Furthermore, by remaining in the U.S. tourists do not have to deal with border crossings, which have become increasingly restrictive and time consuming since September 11, 2001. The provincial tourism agency is aware of these challenges, and is encouraging the Canadian federal government to work together with the U.S. government to ensure that crossing the border does not deter American tourists (Sorbara 2009).

Finally, recent broad economic downturns have added more challenges for the tourism industry. Countrywide recession has meant Canadians are taking fewer vacations. This has, in turn, meant less seasonal employment opportunities in the Almaguin Highlands. Andrea Taylor, who works as an employment counselor, told me that, historically, unemployment significantly decreases once the summer tourism season begins. In recent years, this has no longer been the
case. She notes that motels and resorts cannot afford to hire seasonal work, and many do not have the numbers of tourists to justify hiring extra help (2010, interview).

Because of these challenges, many residents adamantly feel that tourism is not the answer to the area’s economic woes. Economic development consultant Betsy Hauser worked at a firm where a colleague did a study on rural tourism. The results, perhaps not surprisingly, indicated that the tourism industry does not provide the economic benefit and spinoff that many economic development advisors espouse it does (2011, interview). Furthermore, in the shift from an extractive to attractive economy a new type of workforce is required – one that is willing to work low paying seasonal service jobs at restaurants, resorts, and retail shops. In Ontario alone, nearly 200,000 people work in the tourism industry, and it is the number one employer of young people, in part, because many adults are unwilling or unable to work for the low wages it provides (Sorbara 2009). Village councilor Ellis Butler suggests that the prevalence of such jobs has played a role in youth outmigration in the Almaguin Highlands (2009, interview). Another significant challenge is the high levels of competition; countless former forestry and agriculture-based towns across North America have attempted to cater to tourism. Allan Boddington asks, “Everyone is trying to switch to tourism, but how much tourism can you have?” (2011, interview).

Regardless, Ted Hollingsbrook suggests that everyone in the Almaguin Highlands, regardless of occupation, benefits from the arrival of tourists (2009, interview). Nearly all individuals I spoke with, however, agree that although tourism is important, economic prosperity for the Almaguin Highlands depends on a mixed economy. Tourism official Brian Harrison stated, “You’re never going to fix Sundridge’s and South River’s problems with tourism. It’s going to be part of a solution, absolutely, but I don’t think that it will be the solution” (2011,
Yet, for the foreseeable future it appears that tourism will remain a significant part of the economy in the Almaguin Highlands, as will occasional tensions between tourists and locals.

3.5 – Locals and Tourists

As with cottagers, there are occasional disagreements between locals and tourists, and these quarrels differ enough from those among the two aforementioned groups that they are worth describing separately. Resort owner Nora Maki sees the local relationship with tourists as love/hate. She had this to say: “The tourists are referred to as the terrorists, but it is not that we have anything against the tourists; they bring money into the community” (2008, interview). Although Nora appreciates the steady business during the summer, particularly the financial benefits that come with it, she suggests that all resort employees “breathe a sigh of relief” on Labor Day when many of the tourists are gone. However, she added, “By October you wish they were back because you haven’t made any money for the last two months” (2008, interview).

RVers Anita and Matthew Patton felt an “initial coldness” the first year they summered at a local campground. They found this standoffishness particularly intense because they spend their summers in the southern United States, where they describe the hospitality as “off the charts” which, according to Anita, like the coldness in the Almaguin Highlands, “also freaked us out” (2008, interview).

Ellis Butler suggests that these tensions exist, in part, because many residents take tourists for granted, particularly their contributions to the local economy (2009, interview). For example, former hotel owner Ron Buxton explained to me that the locals at the hotel bar often resented the tourists, and resented the ways in which some local business owners would pander to them. Ron would tell them, “It is my job to pander to the tourists” (2008, interview).

Restaurant owner Paige Harvey adds, “For a lot of businesses, summer is the time to make
money for the year. So you cater to every southerner’s needs and wants. Sometimes it is a little annoying when it takes ten minutes instead of two seconds to get through town, but you realize that this is good for the town” (2011, interview). Developer Brandon Morgan agrees. Brandon notes that as a business owner he has always been a benefactor of the spring arrival of tourists; he told me, “I welcome them, and I want more of them …I understand where the bread is buttered from” (2010, interview). Hotel owner Mitchell Banks added that tourists are “always in the way,” but that they are positive for the local economy (2011, interview). In general, he enjoys the influx of residents in the summertime, but as a whole he, like Ron and Ellis, feels the area is not particularly welcoming to tourists, something that the Discovering Ontario tourism report strongly suggests communities must remedy (Sorbara 2009).

Much like local relationships with cottagers, some of the resentment mentioned above exists because many local residents feel that tourists, particularly those from Southern Ontario, treat local residents as if they are unintelligent. Nora Maki told me, “People from Southern Ontario treat people in Almaguin like they are morons…a lot of them are rude and treat locals like they are stupid. There is a lack of tolerance that they, the tourists from urban areas, have for the residents in the smaller communities. They feel they are smarter and that they know everything” (2008, interview). Nora also suggests that tourists are short-tempered. She particularly observes these behaviors with families in the summer, “The summer crowd has driven up from the city with screaming kids in the car for the last three hours. By the time they get to the resort they are cranky. If things aren’t perfect, you will hear about every little thing” (2008, interview). In Nora’s experience, winter tourists, the majority of whom are male snowmobilers, are more laid back: “They are here to ride, eat, sleep, and have a few beers. They are far more relaxed about things” (2008, interview).
Furthermore, for many residents, when tourists arrive they tend to “destroy the place.” Doris Atkins shared this: “It is like the tourists come in and rape the area on a Friday, and then we got a ghost town Monday through Thursday. Like any town based on tourism, that’s what you get” (2011, interview). Doris, who has been in the area ten years, did not initially understand why residents would not want tourists coming to the area, because she was focusing on the economic benefits. She now understands the frustration that residents have with tourists, adding, “If you don't go with the flow you can have a lot of resentment” (2011, interview). Brian Harrison notes that when “leafers” arrive in fall (“leafers” are tourists who come to the area to observe the changing leaf colors), traffic congestion increases, stores become crowded, and visitors are in a rush (2011, interview). Even Ron Varney, who regularly encourages community members to be tolerant and friendly towards tourists, occasionally loses his patience: “Some of them are just downright ignorant. Honking their horns as we cross the street. Fuck off! ‘Hey buddy, you are on holiday. Settle down. Relax’” (2011, interview). If, as many in the area predict, tourism will grow in the near future, it is likely that these conflicts will continue. This final section examines prospects for future development.

3.6 – Future Development

When talking to various individuals in the area, it becomes clear that there is not overall agreement on what constitutes “good” tourism development for the future of the Almaguin Highlands. For some, the answer lies in building tourist attractions (e.g. a water park), for others, the ideal solution is the construction of high-end resorts and golf courses, whereas for yet another group, the area must focus on the “ruggedness” and nature of the Almaguin Highlands.

Interestingly, Brian Harrison suggests that discussing such things is premature – instead, he argues that before the Almaguin Highlands can consider the future of tourism, the area
requires a cohesive strategy (2011, interview). However, with the Almaguin Highlands being an unorganized conglomeration of independent townships and villages, it is challenging to get groups to work together, particularly if one village suspects it is not receiving the same payoffs as another. Brian suggests that the answer to this problem lies in hiring an outside consultant. This consultant would assist in overcoming the abovementioned obstacles and in devising a tourism strategy specifically catered to the Almaguin Highlands. In theory, hiring someone from outside the area would provide an impartial voice that could facilitate discussions, devise a realistic plan, and help the communities create a strategy for the best ways to succeed. I discuss the role of outside strategists in detail in Chapter 6. For Brian, the Almaguin Highlands needs one voice to represent the entire area. This person can then work with the provincial and federal tourism agencies to best assist the region. The alternative, according to Brian, is to “sit back and cry…You can sit back and say, ‘You know what, I’m not doing anything. We’re just gonna let the world pass us by.’ You know, that might be their approach, or they may say, ‘You know what? It’s not worth the aggravation to try and attract these tourists. I’d rather see an industrial strategy that gives me more jobs.’ Because the other side of it is, these are service-sector jobs, right? They don’t tend to be the best paying jobs in the world” (2011, interview). And that is why for some, tourism is not the answer. For those who disagree with Brian, there are numerous paths the area can follow.

Doris Atkins told me, “The wilderness in Almaguin is the goldmine of the area. If we can keep the wilderness the way it is, that is the gold mine. If you allow a Deerhurst [a 400 room, 760 acre resort in Muskoka] type place it will kill the natural freshness that they have up here” (2008, interview). Local councilor and social worker Andrea Taylor agrees. She realizes that tourism is a major part of the local economy, but she feels that any new tourism development
must focus on the wilderness: “Development that focuses on that and doesn’t bring in waterslides and Ferris wheels is good development” (2009, interview). Andrea sits on tourism roundtables where there is talk of bringing in casinos or five-star resorts. She is perplexed when individuals propose such strategies: “Why would we want that here? It is already there in the urban areas…We don’t have Best Westerns and Marriotts, and we kind of don’t what that either. It is not what it is about here – to have a great big roadside hotel” (2009, interview).

Summer camp owner Darlene Peterson agrees. Although she feels that the area requires a larger hotel, she argues that future accommodations must reflect and respect the “natural world.” She told me, “We don't need Red Leaves [a 220 room resort and spa] like in Muskoka” (2011, interview). Any hotel that does come to the area, in her opinion, must respect the environment, and, for example, not offer waterskiing and motorboats, and instead must focus on trails, sailing, kayaking, windsurfing, and canoeing. To ensure this she feels that the residents in the area need to take charge: “If we just sit and do nothing, some schmuck will come in and buy” (2011, interview). Overall, like Doris and Andrea, Darlene strongly believes that the best tourism for the area is one that focuses on the environment. On a brisk sunny fall morning in September 2011 Darlene took me for a hike around the summer camp. It was a quiet day, all of the campers had gone home for the fall, and the only sounds were of the birds and the leaves beneath our feet. As we hiked, she paused and said, “Look outside today. If we go down by the water, across the lake, that beautiful precious gem of a lake, the beautiful colors that only the north delivers. What would work? There can be tourism that focuses on the environment…That is a very simple, old fashioned idea, but there is a place for this” (2011, interview).

Brian Harrison from OTMP argues, however, that in order for tourists to help the local economy they have to be more than “pork ‘n beaners:” those who camp in the area, but bring all
of their food and equipment with them from their homes. Although still important, pork n’ beaners do not significantly contribute to the local economy. Brian suggests that one way to attract tourists who will spend money is to promote excursions through small operators (2011, interview). One example in the Almaguin Highlands is Rails, Ales, and Trails. The concept involves taking a train from the GTA to the Almaguin Highlands, going on a guided mountain bike tour, and finishing the day at a lodge drinking local beers and eating local foods. Brian feels that these niche markets are excellent touristic economic development for places like the Almaguin Highlands. It is this type of “soft development,” which requires significantly less investment than “hard development,” such as tourist attractions like the Shania Twain Museum, which for Brian is the most logical direction for tourism in the Almaguin Highlands (2011, interview).

For Brandon Morgan, however, growth is important, and he feels that the area needs to reinvent itself to some degree. The first step in this growth, Brandon suggests, will be the arrival of chain hotels. A number of chain hotels have contacted Brandon about the possibility of building in the area, and local politicians have been receptive to this prospect (2010, interview). A number of individuals in the tourism industry in the Almaguin Highlands have told me that when people come to the area for festivals, snowmobile races, and other events, they often stay at hotels outside of the area, either in Huntsville or North Bay, because the Almaguin Highlands does not possess the type of amenities they desire. Having a hotel in the area, according to Brandon, means that more tourist dollars will be spent in the local economy. Ron Buxton agrees, noting that when tourists come to the area, they often spend their evenings in North Bay or Huntsville because of the lack of a large chain hotel (2008, interview).
Lifelong cottager Claude Whitney, however, suggests that the area forget about tourism altogether and instead focus on summer residents: “Forget tourism, deliver services and things [cottagers] want and you will get the economic impact. The [Almaguin Highlands] isn’t doing that. They just don’t get that message” (2011, interview).

3.7 – Conclusion

As I have demonstrated over the course of this chapter, there is not overall agreement on the direction tourism should take, or the benefits that it provides to the area. The particular type of tourism that is best for the area is dependent on many factors, including one’s class, role in the community, and reason for residing in the area. For example, certain types of tourism may be seen as antithetical to the bourgeois ideology of nature. For those who feel this way, what might be described as “working-class” activities, such as snowmobiling and ATV riding, take away from the type of nature they are hoping to experience – one of solitude and tranquility. Those who partake in these forms of recreation are often perceived as irresponsible and uncaring for the environment. Yet for many residents, particularly small business owners, snowmobilers are an important source of annual income. Regardless, in recent years, changes in provincial and municipal legislation have limited where and when recreational vehicle users are allowed to ride. In this context, the larger and more powerful voices of those opposed to snowmobiling and other related activities have succeeded in decreasing the opportunities for this particular group of recreationalists.

Differing views regarding the appropriate use of nature also lead to disagreements regarding what constitutes “proper” touristic development. For some, including local developers, the area needs chain hotels, restaurants, resorts, and water parks. These individuals may believe that the arrival of such developments is first step in the eventual arrival of sprawling high-class
resorts – what they see as the pinnacle of modern development for the area. For others, particularly cottagers and those who camp in the area, the Almaguin Highlands needs to focus on promoting the idyllic “undeveloped” and “pristine” environment. Cottagers and campers have often told me that the arrival of resorts and chain restaurants detract from the nature experience that they came to the area for in the first place. What is interesting about these disagreements is that the developers and the cottagers who disagree on what constitutes proper development are often members of the same social class; however, because of their particular interests, they have different interpretations of acceptable development. At the same time, cottagers and campers, who typically represent different social classes, come to the area for the same reasons and tend to have similar philosophies regarding what constitutes appropriate development. Furthermore, local working-class residents may side with the developers, feeling that hotels and resorts will bring much-needed jobs to the area. These complexities demonstrate how differences regarding future development are both inter- and intra-class based.

Finally, in this chapter I have demonstrated the ways in which the countryside remains incredibly productive in the neoliberal era. In recent decades new forms of production, such as touristic and residential development, have replaced a significant amount of former agricultural and silvicultural development. As the countryside loses more and more jobs in forestry, agriculture, and industry, the provincial and federal governments are constantly creating new programs that attempt to increase tourism revenue in former farming and logging locales. These programs also further reveal how in the neoliberal era federal and provincial governments are still incredibly active. However, their activities today tend to focus on attracting private investment – including touristic attractions. In the next chapter I will examine how tourists, along
with cottagers, retirees, and other new residential groups coming to the area, relate to the larger process of rural gentrification.
4 – RURAL GENTRIFICATION

“People are weary and they sense that things are changing”

4.1 – Muskoka and Its Influence

Throughout the preceding chapters I have occasionally referred to Muskoka in relation to the Almaguin Highlands, particularly as an example of what the Almaguin Highlands currently is not, and as an example of what it may become. Muskoka has historically been a popular tourist area for those from the GTA, and is seen in many circles as a “playground for the rich.” Unlike the Almaguin Highlands, Muskoka has sprawling resorts, elite country clubs, marinas, and countless multi-million dollar cottages, including the well known “Millionaires’ Row” on Lake Muskoka. Because of these differences, to many people, Muskoka is the antithesis of the Almaguin Highlands, with Muskoka representing the “haves,” and the Almaguin Highlands representing “have nots.” In this chapter I will examine the impending “Muskoka-fication” of the Almaguin Highlands. I begin with a brief background on Muskoka, followed by a lengthy discussion of whether or not the Almaguin Highlands is on its way to becoming the next Muskoka, concluding with local reactions to the potential gentrification of the Almaguin Highlands.

Muskoka, which is directly south of the Almaguin Highlands, is home to 50,000 year-round residents, but that number increases by an extra 100,000 in the summer months with the arrival of seasonal property owners. Muskoka is a district municipality that includes three towns and three townships, located on approximately 1600 lakes. As mentioned above, it is known by some as a “playground of the wealthy” and has been since the mid-1800s. Today it serves as a seasonal home to many upper class individuals, including various NHL players and Hollywood celebrities such as Tom Hanks and Stephen Spielberg. To cater to the many wealthy seasonal
residents and tourists in the area, Muskoka has many exclusive country clubs, spas, and restaurants. As Thomas Richards, who manages a CFDC, told me, “We have restaurants here that no rural region would normally have because of the population that comes here” (2009, interview). One result of the significant proportion of wealthy seasonal residents is a large tax base. This tax base has been beneficial for the local economy, and has allowed towns in the district to undertake development projects that would be out of reach for other towns of similar size.

Like the Almaguin Highlands, Muskoka is also considered part of Northern Ontario. This designation has caused political friction in the past. Municipalities that are designated as part of Northern Ontario have access to certain funding programs that Southern Ontario does not. Some Ontarians feel that Muskoka should not have this designation because of the significant amount of money that is already in the area. However, Adam Brandt who works for FedNor, a federal agency that funds Northern Ontario, disagrees: “People think all people in Muskoka have tons of money, but in terms of residents, many of them operate small businesses. Those with the big money are often visitors. So the point they were trying to make is that from a municipal perspective they have the same challenges as the people of Parry Sound or Sudbury” (2011, interview). Yet economic development consultant Carly Grant informed me, “Compared to the rest of Northern Ontario, Muskoka is way out of whack when you look at labor markets. If performs even better than Southern Ontario” (2009, interview). Regardless of where one falls on this debate, from an outside view, Muskoka certainly appears different from the rest of Northern Ontario.

Peter Cook, who works in economic development for a town in Muskoka, explained to me that the municipality is extremely image conscious and takes many steps to ensure that they
maintain this particular image – one of picturesque villages and pristine lakefront cottages and resorts. Take, for example, downtown Huntsville. In the late 1990s the Huntsville government made a decision to resurrect their struggling downtown. According to Peter, the goal was to create a “trendy small town experience.” Peter told me, “We know that the people coming from Toronto don’t want to go to a Wal-Mart – they want the [small town] experience. They want to get out of their cars and walk the experience” (2008, interview). With this in mind, the town built a state of the art performing arts center, restored the town hall, renovated the main street storefronts, and invested 20 million dollars into a community improvement program. Through the community improvement program, the businesses that chose to invest in beautification were matched in funds by the town. Huntsville also purchased a former lumber yard along the river and built a park in its place, which attracted further commercial development. With this background information in mind, I want to explore the ways in which Muskoka is slowly creeping northward into the Almaguin Highlands.

Lees, Slater, and Wyly use the term “overspill gentrification” to describe areas that are, simply enough, “reservoirs of gentrification overflow” (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008: 251). This is one of the factors driving the northward push of Muskoka into the Almaguin Highlands. One reason has to do with the cost: it is less expensive to purchase property in the Almaguin Highlands, and the tax rates are lower. Resort owner Nora Maki told me, “People are starting to realize that if they drive 20 minutes north of the northern edge of Muskoka that they are going to pay a third of what they pay in Muskoka, and their taxes are lower” (2008, interview). This sentiment has been echoed to me by dozens of people over the years, including Member of Parliament and Muskoka summer resident Tony Clement: “Muskoka is very expensive for a lot of people now, and we have certainly seen indicators that people who are interested in new
property or a more modest cottage by a lake are looking further north now, rather than in the Muskoka area” (2011, interview). Economic development advisor Carly Grant adds, “People are realizing that if they just go a half hour north they can get pristine lakefront property for nothing and build a palace” (2008, interview). Developer Brandon Morgan agrees. In 2008 he explained to me that a modest home in Huntsville costs between $250,000 and 350,000, whereas in Burk’s Falls, for example, the equivalent home would cost from $150,000 to 160,000. Realtor Ryan Torgen explained to me that this is not an accident. He informed me that realtors in the Almaguin Highlands have always followed Muskoka’s prices and intentionally keep them lower, “giving them a reason to travel…otherwise they’ll buy in Muskoka first; it is closer to Toronto” (2011, interview).

Another factor in the northward push of Muskoka is tied to nostalgia. For some new residents and visitors, the Almaguin Highlands reminds them of what Muskoka used to be like. For many individuals, modern-day Muskoka has become too congested and “city-like.” A recent Smart Centre development in Huntsville, which includes a Wal-Mart, Independent Grocery, Wendy’s, Dairy Queen, and Holiday Inn, among other commercial enterprises, was cited by art gallery owners Caitlin Simon as a reason why some of her friends moved to the Almaguin Highlands from Huntsville (2009, interview). For former Minister of Tourism Monique Smith, the over-crowdedness of Muskoka along with the Almaguin Highlands’ “very clean pristine lakes and waterfront, rivers, and streams” makes the Almaguin Highlands an attractive option (2009, interview). Individuals have told me that they are attracted to the quietness and solitude in the area, and how it reminds them of their childhood memories in Muskoka. Resort owner Mitchell Banks told me, “It is pretty unspoiled up here still. It is pretty clean. Even on this lake there are not a ton of big boats. The towns are still small and quaint. They haven’t become full of
little boutiques” (2011, interview). He suggests, in fact, that regional advertisers should promote this aspect of the Almaguin Highlands: “Tell them, ‘Come up here, it is quieter, it is cleaner’, you know?” Mitchell is aware, however, of the potential backfiring of such a campaign. If the quietness and solitude of the Almaguin Highlands is heavily promoted, the area has the potential to become exactly what it is that people are coming to avoid. Caitlin Simon agrees. She already fears upcoming increases in congestion with the recent subdividing of land near her home: “It will create more traffic, [and] it is probably an example of things that will be coming” (2009, interview).

As touched on in Chapter 3, another factor in the northward push of Muskoka is the Highway 11 development project. Many residents predict that the completed highway will increase the speed and degree of the Muskokafication of the Almaguin Highlands. Farmer Heidi Murphy told me, “The reality of the situation with the four-laning of the highway is that it is going to be the next Muskoka. It is hard to get property on the lakes already. It is a beautiful area, and it is definitely going to be that next destination” (2011, interview). Village councilor Pete Otte adds, “I think what is happening with the highway will drive [Muskokafication] faster. We will become less isolated; we will have more pressures put on us because we'll have more people here” (2010, interview). Ex-urbanite Anthony Lombardi agrees. He suggests that the new highway has removed a psychological barrier that formerly existed. No longer, he argues, will people in the GTA feel that anything north of Muskoka is “too far north” (2011, interview). Prior to the highway completion, this psychological barrier was, for many, a reality. Mayor Ed Dugan is a perfect example of someone who felt that moving north of Muskoka was akin to entering “no man’s land.” Ed originally considered moving to Muskoka to start his business, and only settled on the Almaguin Highlands because he was looking for something both affordable and on
lakefront. To meet both of those requirements, Ed told me, “I had to come this far north. The first time I saw Katrine [a community in the Almaguin Highlands] on the map I saw it was north of Huntsville and I thought, ‘Who would live up there? Why would anybody live up there, and how could you ever run a business north of Huntsville? That's impossible!’” (2011, interview). Yet, Ed decided to give the area a chance, and has been successful. Ed came to the area years before the highway project was completed, but he recognizes that the highway was a significant barrier, and now that it is completed, he suggests that this barrier will slowly deteriorate.

These changes and developments are leading some individuals, particularly realtors, to refer to the Almaguin Highlands as “Muskoka North” or “North Muskoka,” much to the displeasure of many Almaguin Highlands residents. Motel owner Ted Hollingsbrook told me, “People in Almaguin hate that term, but realtors love it because they see dollar signs” (2008, interview). Lifelong resident Edna Riverton further suggests that referring to the area as Muskoka North takes away from the Almaguin Highlands’s own unique identity: “I personally do not want to be called the new Muskoka. Then we are not our own identity any more. I know a lot of people see it as that, though” (2011, interview). Village councilor Pete Otte suggested that an alternative would be to rebrand some of the villages in the Almaguin Highlands as “The Villages.” Although many people in the townships do not like the idea of rebranding the Almaguin Highlands, Pete sees it as a way to attract new residents and tourists without having to use the “Muskoka North” moniker (2010, interview). Reporter Michael Hunter suggests that referring to the Almaguin Highlands as the “next Muskoka” is much more positive than “Muskoka North” (2008, interview). Political advisor Mark Abrams agrees, and he suggests that the region focus on the proximity to Muskoka without including Muskoka in part of the name of
the Almaguin Highlands. He further suggests the inclusion of a tagline in advertisements that would read, “Just north enough of Muskoka to be perfect” (2011, interview).

There are some individuals, however, who see the term “Muskoka North” in a much more positive light. Although economic development officer Peter Cook firmly believes that the area should never lose its name or identity, he feels the fact that some people are referring to the Almaguin Highlands as Muskoka North is drawing positive attention (2009, interview). For example, when marketing her art gallery along with other art galleries in the Almaguin Highlands, Caitlin Simon and her colleagues purposely named their gallery driving tour the “North of Muskoka tour.” She told me, “By doing that we were trying to capitalize on the name Muskoka” (2009, interview).

In the context of this discussion, it is important to ask if the “Muskoka North” moniker makes sense. For all of the individuals who seem certain that Muskoka is making its way northward to the Almaguin Highlands, there are numerous individuals who disagree. Some feel that although there are new residents moving to the area, this does not make it similar to Muskoka. Ted Hollingsbrook recognizes that there are new individuals buying property and spending leisure time in the area, but he feels that people who come to the Almaguin Highlands do so for very different reasons than those going to Muskoka: “It is not as expensive, so it doesn’t attract the same elite clientele, which doesn’t then enhance the image of the area. We get a more ‘Milwaukee crowd,’ which is fine. People are people, but I don’t think that Almaguin will ever be the glittering jewel that Muskoka is” (2009, interview). Caitlin Simon also recognizes some of the differences. She sees the Almaguin Highlands as “more northerly, more rugged, and proud of it. It is distinctly more rural. It is connected to the bush and forest…It is of a more northerly and rustic flavor than Muskoka; it is more backwoods, which can have positive
and negative connotations to it” (2009, interview). Regardless, there is an overall consensus that if the proper steps are taken, the northward push of Muskoka will significantly contribute to the local economy.

Because of the prosperity that many residents in the Almaguin Highlands witness in Muskoka, some individuals suggest that if the Almaguin Highlands is “Muskokafied,” similar prosperity will follow. However, in order to ensure these changes, some argue that the Almaguin Highlands must take certain steps to so that new residents and tourists choose to head north. Political advisor Mark Abrams suggests that the key to attracting new residents is implementing the appropriate facilities and services for potential new residents. For example, he urges the area to recruit high-quality construction companies that are capable of building large sprawling homes. He also urges villages and townships to make it easy and inexpensive to acquire building permits and to sever large pieces of land. Doing so, in his opinion, will make the area more attractive than similar areas attempting to attract new residents (2011, interview). Retiree Jason Adelman further suggests that businesses offer particular services to seasonal residents, such as shuttle services to and from local airports, and home monitoring services for seasonal homes. In his opinion, not only will these services please seasonal residents, they will also provide local employment opportunities (2009, interview). Mark Abrams agrees, suggesting that once wealthy Muskoka-type residents do arrive, they will require services, and these services will provide more jobs: “The person who comes here doesn’t want to build their own home, shovel their own snow, cut their grass – they bring a lot of toys and they don’t want to fix them… Them not wanting to do anything is a youth retention strategy. People can provide them with all sorts of services – working in the grocery store, build the houses, fix the toys, and all sorts of other services, and that brings young families back into the community” (2011, interview).
Whether or not any of these types of jobs will provide an income that allows one to raise a family remains to be seen; however, new residents are already providing the local workforce with employment. Social worker and job counselor Andrea Taylor has observed an increase in employment opportunities for those working in skilled trades, including electricians and plumbers. Regarding these specific types of jobs, she commented, “With the wave that is coming, having a skilled trade will make them not servants, but they can provide maintenance, building, and infrastructure for what is coming” (2009, interview).

These abovementioned examples demonstrate that, at the very least, some aspects of Muskoka are making their way into the Almaguin Highlands. In fact, nearly everyone I have spoken with agrees on this point. As village councilor Andrea Taylor told me, “The rural gentrification of the Almaguin Highlands is inevitable” (2009, interview). However, there is disagreement as to the extent and speed at which Muskokafication is occurring. For township Mayor Ed Dugan, Muskokafication is occurring in the Almaguin Highlands “at a snail's pace.” Many people agree with Ed’s conclusion. Ed argues that as the population increases in Muskoka, individuals looking for a particular rural lifestyle need somewhere to go, and the availability of land, lakes, and the new highway assist in bringing people to the area, but he cautiously adds, “Just because the highway is here doesn’t mean we are going to explode” (2011, interview). With that being said, his township has been carefully planning for the eventual Muskokafication via the passing of certain bylaws in regards to residential, industrial, and commercial development. These bylaws attempt to separate industrial and residential development so that any potential industrial development does not interfere with new residential and recreational developments. Ed told me, “The planning we are doing now for the township, I fully feel that in
30 years people are going to say, ‘Geeze, the council back in 2010 they had their act together; look at what they did’” (2011, interview).

Unlike Ed’s diagnosis, there are some individuals who feel that the northward push of Muskoka is moving quite rapidly. For Betsy Hauser, this northward movement of Cottage Country is happening faster than she could ever have imagined. Betsy also argues that this is a tremendously positive phenomenon. However, she also fears that if the area lacks “the services and the things that cottage people are looking for,” people will look elsewhere, adding, “We have to make sure we are ready” (2011, interview). Because Muskokafication is occurring faster than she imagined, she urges villages and townships to invest in their infrastructure now, so as to be prepared for the onslaught of new residents.

Andrea Taylor falls somewhere in the middle, and is uncertain of the timeframe of these changes; however, she points to Eagle Lake as an area that has undergone massive changes in the last 15 years. Regarding the lakefront properties, she told me, “They went from log cabin traditional cottages to massive landscaped homes. And the prices, although still not Muskoka prices, are in the $300,000 and $400,000 range. When I moved here 13 years ago property was $60,000” (2009, interview).

There are numerous examples of the ways in which the northward push of Muskoka is visible in the Almaguin Highlands, including the arrival of upper scale restaurants and specialty shops, holistic medicine, art galleries, and new homes; a relatively common accompaniment to rural gentrifying areas (Guimond and Simard 2010). Art gallery owner Caitlin Simon points to the recent opening of a tea room at a local garden center as evidence of a changing Almaguin Highlands. The tea room she mentions is called Lily’s Place and is located at the Fern Glen Farm & Garden Centre in Emsdale. The beverage menu at Lily’s Place includes fair trade coffee,
espresso, macchiato, chai tea, latte, soy milk, and organic herbal tea “which we are happy to serve in teapots with English bone china” (Fern Glen Farm 2012). On their web page, the owners of the garden centre go on to say, “When we moved to Emsdale in 2008 we knew we had found a wonderful spot to call home. We haven’t missed the city one iota but being a country garden center has one major drawback – you have to go a long way for a really good cup of coffee.” They continue, “Many of our clients are cottagers and they made it clear that they do not like to be rushed when they shop for planting material however they sometimes are accompanied by people who fall into the ‘not so keen’ category. We thought about what we could do to make shopping at Fern Glen a great experience for all. The answer was simple – we like good coffee, we had the space and now we have the café…We have magazines and videos for entertainment plus on quiet days our barista will read your tarot cards!” (Fern Glen Farm 2012). Caitlin suggests that the opening of Lily’s Place is significant, particularly for an area that traditionally is more “rugged” and “salt of the earth” (2009, interview). Jenny Mitchell, lifelong resident and employment center manager has also taken note of such changes. She points to an increase in holistic medicine, including massage therapy and reiki, as evidence of change. She feels that such services would not have existed in the area 15 years ago. She suggests these changes are a result in “the change in the personalities that are coming in. I think it’s growth…I mean, you see [holistic medicine] more in urban centers than rural, so the more urban that comes our way tends to bring that” (2010, interview). One specific sign of change in the area is the arrival of new residents. The first group I want to discuss are retirees.

4.2 – Retirees

One major demographic change in the Almaguin Highlands in recent years has been the increase in retirees. By retirees, I am specifically referring to people who relocated to the area
following retirement, as opposed to lifelong residents who are retired and still living in the area. As a result of these demographic changes, the median age in the Almaguin Highlands (50.5 years) is around ten years higher than the provincial average (40.4 years) (Statistics Canada 2012). There is no immediate sign of this trend slowing down.

Evidence for these changing demographics can be seen in the unchanging overall population in the area alongside the declining numbers of students attending schools in the Almaguin Highlands. Local reporter Gerry Robinson stated, “Ten years ago Magnetawan's school population was at around 80 students, now it is down to under 50. Over those 10 years, Magnetawan's building permits have led the area by far, by far. Nobody is building more than Magnetawan, but the people who are investing are retirees. There is that demographic shift” (2011, interview). On a larger scale, the population of the Almaguin Highlands high school has been cut in half over the past 20 years. Paul Lipton, a retired teacher told me:

The shrinking of the student body, it is just unbelievable. I think when I came here [in the 1970s] the high school had about 1300 kids, it is down now to 6 or 700….What really bothers you is that there really aren’t a lot of opportunities for the kids to stay here if they want to stay here. It breaks your heart. They are good kids, but there aren’t jobs for them here. They have to go to Toronto or something, and I wouldn’t want to go there [laughter]. (2011, interview)

Andrea Taylor, a social worker in the area, argues that these changing demographics, particularly the increase in retirees and cottagers, are detrimental to many residents. She suggests that this new population brings with them higher taxes and home costs. The arrival of retirees and seasonal residents has also led to massive waiting lists for affordable housing for the lower-class residents in the area. She added, “When you drive through here, all of those houses that were old and decrepit now have brand new windows and doors and siding. Well, who bought those? Speculators and retirees” (2010, interview). Village councilor Paul Lipton is concerned that the arrival of retirees is increasing property prices to a point where working class residents
cannot afford to purchase property (2011, interview). Economic development officer Marcy Helner, however, sees both positive and negative factors to the arrival of retirees. In her opinion, they are positive because they increase the taxbase and utilize local labor to build homes (2010, interview). Marcy is not alone; it is common for municipal officials to welcome an often much-needed increase in the rural taxbase (Guimond and Simard 2010). Marcy adds, “I think it is great, and it’s a death note, because if you don’t have your schools you’re not going to have any families. When everybody dies, you have to wait for the next generation to retire to come live here” (2010, interview). What factors are bringing retirees to the area?

Part of what is drawing retirees to the Almaguin Highlands is the desire for a rural lifestyle. Of the 34 million people in Canada, nearly 10 million are baby boomers (Foot and Stoffman 2004), many of whom are now retiring to the countryside (Nelson et al. 2010). Individuals who leave their areas of primary residence after retiring (around 20% of all retirees) tend to move either to the forest, the waterfront, or farmland (Foot and Stoffman 2004). William Thorsell of The Globe and Mail suggests that for retirees “the thrill of living shifts from the erotic intensity of the central city to that of field and stream” (quoted in Foot and Stoffman 2004: 46). Ted Hollingsbrook has this to say in regards to retirees flocking to the area: “They don’t want it busy; they moved up here because they wanted peace and quiet. They came to run away from the busyness and noise.”

Mark Abrams refers to these retiring baby boomers as an incoming “retirement tsunami” that will come to the Almaguin Highlands from both the Toronto and Ottawa areas (2011, interview). Retirees in Canada are a huge market because many have disposable income, paid-off mortgages, and are soon to be inheriting a large sum of money from their parents. Economic development officer Peter Cook and his wife are an example of this “tsunami.” They moved to
the Almaguin Highlands five years ago, and Peter plans on retiring in another five. One of the reasons they moved to the area, like many retirees in the Almaguin Highlands, is the desire for privacy, outdoor space, and relaxation. They had previously lived in Huntsville (population 19,000), but wanted something more rural. Their residence in the Almaguin Highlands has everything they were looking for: 100 acres, no neighbors, privacy, and a huge garden (2008, interview). Not all rural retirees to the area will live in as isolated as Peter, however.

With the incoming “tsunami,” there are many people who feel that if the Almaguin Highlands wants to remain competitive with other retirement communities it needs to invest in senior housing opportunities. Interestingly, Peter Cook is one of these people. He argues that there are massive opportunities in the area for senior housing and senior care. He mentioned that companies like Chartwell Seniors Housing have already built operations in Muskoka. He suggests that similar ventures could be successful in the Almaguin Highlands (2008, interview). Chartwell is one of the largest senior housing real estate investment companies in North America. According to Annual Reports, Chartwell’s aim is to “capitalize on the strong demographic trends present in its markets to maximize the value of its existing portfolio of seniors housing facilities programs” (Annual Reports 2011). For Peter Cook, the appeal of Chartwell Seniors Housing and other similar ventures is that the buildings allow residents to transition from a condominium-style residence to a nursing home. Furthermore, these housing transition options tend to be self-contained in one building. Peter told me, “It is like a big hotel with doctors, nurses, and restaurants” (2008, interview). Peter suggests that companies like Chartwell will do well in the Almaguin Highlands because they “provide services to the upper-end income person from the time they go into the retirement home to the nursing home” (2008, interview).
Whether it is Chartwell or some other type of senior housing, no one seems to disagree with the fact that there is a shortage of senior housing in the Almaguin Highlands. I attended a Central Almaguin Economic Development Committee (CAEDA) meeting in summer 2009 and one of the main topics was the need for senior apartments. According to those at the meeting, there are waiting lists throughout the Almaguin Highlands for senior housing.

Many people in the area point to Elliot Lake as an example of a successful retirement community that the Almaguin Highlands might choose to model itself after. Elliot Lake was a successful mining town from the 1950s to the 1970s, but after the mines closed, developers in the town decided to rebrand the community as a retirement destination. Developers built homes, sold them for a reasonable price, and provided residents with snow shoveling, lawn mowing, garbage pickup, and other services; they set up the community to completely cater to retirees. Ted Hollingsbrook told me that the developers had an RV that they drove across the province to market Elliot Lake (2008, interview). The developers would go to legion halls in small towns and discuss opportunities for residences in Elliot Lake. To further pique interest, the developers traveled with retirees who actually lived in the town. Whether or not a similar venture will materialize in the Almaguin Highlands remains to be seen; however, one thing is certain, for many retirees the Almaguin Highlands is an affordable option compared to other nearby areas.

Particularly in comparison to Muskoka, the Almaguin Highlands presents an affordable option. According to economic development officer Eric Miller, prices are often less than half of what someone would pay for a comparable residence in Muskoka (2008, interview). Mark Abrams told me:

[Retirees] can sell the $600,000 home in Toronto, and that goes a long way in Ryerson Township [in the Almaguin Highlands], but not necessarily in Muskoka. So I think people will look a little bit further north [to the Almaguin Highlands]… They will be driven by price of real estate and lack of congestion. I think
everyone underestimates the lack of congestion. Gravenhurst or Huntsville [towns in Muskoka] in the middle of summertime is like downtown Toronto. (2011, interview)

One of Ron Buxton’s colleagues, a real estate developer in the area, has recently attracted the interest of a group of these people that Mark Abrams describes. He described them as “very successful businesspeople in Toronto…[who] will come up to this area because they realize they’re getting the bang for the buck” (2008, interview). It is important to note that this “bang for the buck” does not apply to all, of course. The prices in the area are relatively inexpensive. As James Mullen, a recent transplant to the area who is not a retiree, told me, “It is pretty expensive up here, and the expensiveness is driven by the influx of boomers” (2008, interview). Many of these retirees, like seasonal residents, have opted to get involved in local politics.

When I have inquired with retirees about their involvement in local politics, many are quick to distinguish themselves from cottagers. Unlike some rural gentrification literature which tends to lump newly arriving rural residents into a single category that represents the postindustrial middle class (Hines 2010), I have observed important differences between these groups, which I will continue to discuss over the course of this dissertation. Regarding these differences, Doris Atkins told me, “We [retirees] are year round tax payers, and different than people who just come for the summer” (2008, interview).

Retirees are quite active politically, and for Ted Hollingsbrook, this is problematic. According to Ted, and many others I have met with, people who retire to the area tend to vote against development: “That’s one of the reasons there isn’t development - the retired people who have saved their whole lives to be here say ‘no way’” (2008, interview). Paul Harrison, who works in forestry, agrees, noting that the increase in retirees makes it challenging, for example, to attract small industry to the area (2011, interview). According to Ellis Butler, one of the
reasons he ran for town council was because of all of the anti-development retirees serving on municipal councils. He does not want to see development opportunities, which he feels can potentially bring jobs to the area and retain youth, passed by: “Our youth is moving away because we are designing our towns to offer them nothing until they are ready to retire. Youth need to be offered something so they can stay here, work here, and raise their children” (2009, interview). He noted that there has been a recent increase in younger local residents on municipal councils for this very reason, whereas even a few years ago many municipal councils were populated predominately with retirees and real estate developers. This does not mean that all local councils today are without retirees.

Retirees, many from the GTA, regularly serve on municipal councils in the Almaguin Highlands. The reasons they run and get elected vary. As far as why they are getting elected, Gerry suggests: “The local people aren’t putting their necks out there; [they] aren’t stepping forward. The last election I had to vote for a guy who moved here from Toronto two years before the election. That isn’t normally what I would do, but considering the choices I had, it was what I did” (2010, interview). Gerry added that having retirees on council is not necessarily negative, but he does feel that retirees may not share the same points of view of someone born and raised in the area. He suggests that retirees serving on municipal government may not understand the complexities of certain relationships in the area, or the importance of funding certain projects. He also suggests that local concerns “might not be held with the same respect” because these individuals do not have a lengthy history in the area (2010, interview).

Yet many retirees see their political involvement as necessary for the betterment of the area. Retirees Doris and Alan Atkins are involved with committees looking to improve recreational facilities, schools, and the arts. Doris notes that retirees are demanding
improvements, and are either running for council or calling their municipal councilors demanding action: “The locals might think things are fine, but [retirees] come with different expectations, and these people are quite willing to join the committee. I am not sure they are wanted on that committee!” (2011, interview). Alan adds, “The people with the innovative ideas are coming in, but the locals are saying ‘not so fast.’ There is a resistance, not a wall, but resistance. It is slow change” (2011, interview). Member of Parliament Tony Clement suggests that the arrival of retirees, many of whom are well educated, come with to the area with new and positive ideas. He told me, “We should try to harness all of this ‘creative class’ talent that we have here. We have people with interesting backgrounds, perhaps some were executives in the city, they come up here to retire and ten years later they are mayor. That happens all the time now” (2011, interview). Tony is referring to Richard Florida’s “creative class” hypothesis. In his book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2004), Florida argues that cities need to recruit the “creative class” (gays, youth, academics, artists, entrepreneurs) in order to improve economic life for the poor, reduce poverty, and provide better schools in depressed areas. His hypothesis that gentrification is inherently positive, which aligns with consumption side gentrification theorists such as Ley (1980) and Caulfield (1994), is heavily critiqued by production side theorists (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008; Smith 1996).

Regardless, the fact that locals are voting for retirees is one example of the ways in which retirees and locals work together. According to local business owner Sally Irving, retirees tend to be more accepted than cottagers. She feels that many of them, because they chose to retire in the area, want to have sense of community (2008, interview). Retiree Doris Atkins feels that she and her husband were welcomed to the area with open arms, but only because they worked at it. Her husband concurs, noting that he worked hard to become involved in various clubs, for example
with the Lion’s Club and the local arts council. Doris also notes that the retirees who do not try to integrate into the community may be snubbed and seen as snobby (2011, interview). Farmer Darcy Engel suggests that some of the retirees she has met do not make an effort to be part of the community. She understands that many retirees come to the area because they are looking to relax, but she also feels that for the communities to thrive, all residents, including retirees, need to be involved and help one another (2011, interview). One issue which has recently brought locals and retirees together is access to healthcare.

Seniors are generally a population that requires regular access to healthcare. Access to physicians in rural Ontario has long been somewhat limited; however, cost-cutting programs initiated in the 1990s, which continue to present day, have increased these problems (Foot and Stoffman 2004; Keating 2001). In fact, according to many people I have spoken with, it is relatively common for retirees from the GTA to retire to the Almaguin Highlands and then re-reitre back to Southern Ontario when they begin to have health issues that require frequent medical attention. As Ted Hollingsbrook told me, “If you live out on a lake around here, you are a long ambulance ride to the hospital” (2009, interview).

Although the specifics of recent cuts to local healthcare are beyond the scope of my research, in this section I will broadly cover some of the larger issues that have affected the area in the recent past. What follows in this section is not just an examination of healthcare challenges for retirees, but for many residents in the Almaguin Highlands as well. In general, all residents agree that there is a clear need for medical services and facilities in the area, particularly because the area has an older than average population. Many rural Canadian municipalities have an older population, and this trend has increased as more and more as baby boomer retirees make their way to the countryside (Foot and Stoffman 2004). Regardless, the province as a whole will see
the senior citizen population double by 2028 (Ontario’s Local Health Integration Networks 2012).

One response to the increased need for healthcare and the decreasing funds has been the province’s Aging at Home Strategy. The goal of the Strategy is to provide an increase in at-home care. Social worker Andrea Taylor argues, however, that the Strategy is ineffective in a rural setting: “Explain to me how a caretaker can go from home to home when they are 20 minutes apart. Because of the distances, you can’t get enough seniors on your list to make a living” (2009 interview). She feels that the province is attempting, unsuccessfully, to take urban healthcare policies and apply them to rural areas.

The most recent and drastic cut in the Almaguin Highlands has been the 2009 closure of emergency services, urgent care, and long-term care at the Burk’s Falls Health Centre. This closure is an example of a provincial-wide trend where sparsely populated areas are losing provincial funding for their medical facilities. According to economists David Foot and Daniel Stoffman, these provincial policies are shortsighted, significantly affecting future prosperity for potential retirement communities (2004). In their opinions, rural hospitals are economic development tools rather than burdens. Regardless, the services in Burk’s Falls were cut. On two occasions busloads of local residents went to Queen’s Park in Toronto to protest the closing, but to no avail. Reporter Gerry Robinson suggests that one reason the area was not able to halt the closing of the hospital was because local municipalities do not work together as a regional body – a topic I discuss in detail in Chapter 6.

Paul Lipton fears that these changes may lead to sick rural residents choosing to not seek medical attention because of the increased travel and inconvenience required for medical assistance. Since the Burk’s Falls medical centre closed its doors for urgent care in 2008, the
nearest hospital in Huntsville has not seen a corresponding rise in emergency room visits. Paul suggests that residents who would have sought out urgent care in Burk’s Falls are now second guessing a trip to Huntsville. Paul stated, “People who used to go to the urgent care to get treated for things like early stages of diabetes, they let it go. Now what they are finding is people are coming in very serious stages, and if it had been caught earlier it wouldn’t be happening” (2011, interview).

Another healthcare challenge throughout rural and Northern Ontario is attracting doctors. A Muskoka physician said this regarding the rural recruitment process for physicians: “You never stop recruiting doctors, you never have enough” (quoted in Lorinc 2012: 44). In an attempt to solve this problem, the province has created the Underserviced Area Program, which is a provincial program designed to assist rural communities in the recruitment of healthcare professionals (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care 2012b). According to Gerry Robinson, the program has been somewhat effective, but it does not necessarily provide doctors with a financial incentive. Through this program doctors are paid a salary rather than getting paid on a per-patient basis. Gerry cites the salary at around $250,000 year, and with that salary doctors must pay for their own reception workers and the rent on their practice. On the flipside, doctors in this program are only required to provide 38 weekly hours of clinical care. Gerry has been informed, however, that the arrival of Family Health Teams (FHT) to the area will bring possible financial incentives for after hours care for these doctors (2010, interview).

Family Health Teams (FHT) are a current provincial attempt to solve rural healthcare woes. According to the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, FHTs teams were first initiated in April 2005. The purpose of these teams is to provide care and service to individuals without a family doctor. They often include a team of physicians, nurse practitioners, registered
nurses, social workers, and other healthcare workers. As of August 2010 there were 200 teams across Ontario (Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care 2012a).

Ron Buxton and the Municipality of Powassan Economic Development Committee (MoPED) recently organized an FHT for the area because, as Ron told me, the area is badly understaffed and underserviced (2010, interview). The Municipality of Powassan and its surrounding area has three physicians servicing around 12,000 people. Furthermore, the area ranks well above the provincial average for alcohol abuse, diabetes, smoking, colon cancer, teen pregnancy, and various other health related issues (2011, personal Communication). These statistics made Powassan an excellent candidate to receive FHT funding. In August 2010 the Municipality of Powassan received word that they had been awarded an FHT, followed by an official announcement and ribbon cutting ceremony in September 2011 (Figure 14). The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care has provided the area with a $500,000, and Ron feels that the FHT will be an anchor for Powassan and will assist in attracting new residents, including retirees. Prior to the FHT, Powassan’s medical center was in desperate need of help. Ron had this to say:

The facilities were an absolute disgrace. I would condemn the thing. The backs of the stainless steel sinks were rusty. When does stainless steel go rusty?! This is a medical clinic with a rusty sink! There are spongy parts of the floor, so they put filing cabinets over them. The lights in one exam room were pitiful. He said he sometimes needs to bring patients to the windows so he can see…There is no sound proofing in the exam rooms. Dr. Ken pipes music in when they examine a patient so that the rest of the office can’t hear ‘Oh, Mrs. Smith has piles again’ [laughter]. It was a mess, there were no plugs in the right place, cords are everywhere. (2010, interview)
Figure 14. Family Health Team ribbon cutting ceremony, Powassan, 2011

For municipalities counting on retirees for assistance with their financial burdens, a lack of adequate medical facilities, such as those in Powassan, is problematic. If the cuts continue, the end result, according to many individuals I have talked with, will be an exodus of seniors from the area, and a lack of future retirees considering the Almaguin Highlands as an option. Real estate developer Tony Dimucci states: “People don’t want to travel 30 kilometers to get to an emergency room. Rural communities with medical facilities will draw more people from the urban areas for that reason alone. You need it if you want to compete” (2008, interview).

Developer Brandon Morgan agrees that the communities that provide services to the elderly and retired will win out: “It will allow people to live there, be part of the community, and spend their
retirement dollars. Having access to good medical care is going to be a huge drawing card” (2011, interview). It is in this context that many in the area see retirees as essential to future economic prosperity.

For many, the arrival of retirees in the Almaguin Highlands is a positive addition to the local economy. Reporter Michael Hunter notes that retirees, like cottagers, spend money in the area without competing for jobs (2008, interview). Furthermore, many retirees purchase land and build new homes from scratch, hiring local contractors and laborers to do the work. For others, retirees are not the only answer. Marcy Helner, former economic development officer in Powassan, suggests the need for a balanced population and economy. When attracting retirees becomes the major goal for municipalities, there is a risk of losing youth, schools, and employment opportunities. The goal, in her opinion, must be an economic development strategy that attracts future residents from the full age spectrum, from young families to retirees (2010, interview). This next section examines these young individuals and families.

4.3 – Young Professionals

In 2011 I met young professional Anthony Lombardi. He and his partner recently moved to the area because they were seeking “an idyllic rural place to live…This was just a little further [north] where you could get reasonably priced real estate and enjoy a rural lifestyle” (2011, interview). Like Anthony, James Mullen came to the Almaguin Highlands for the same reasons. James took a significant decrease in salary to move to the Almaguin Highlands from a large metropolitan area. He told me, “I was tired of spending three hours a day in rush hour traffic and working 100 hour weeks.” What pushed him over the edge was receiving a $300 water bill, a significant portion of which was for watering his lawn “in a house that I never saw.” James described his daily routine where he would wake up at 5:00am, go to work, and not return until
9:00pm. James told me, “All of my values and priorities were screwed up… I had an identity crisis. I was at a party two years ago and someone asked me to tell them about myself and I said, ‘I’m an IT project manager,’ and that was it. After the party I had to think about how I identified myself beyond that. It became important after that for me to define myself as a person and to realign my values” (2008, interview). Soon after, James quit his job, sold his house, and moved to the Almaguin Highlands. James sees people like himself and Anthony as the front edge of a trend of individuals who are “fed up with life in the city” and are looking for affordable alternatives.

Some of these young professionals have the option to work remotely from their jobs, which are often located in larger nearby urban centers. Others use the Almaguin Highlands as a “bedroom community” and commute to their jobs in the nearby hubs of North Bay and Huntsville. Finally, some are able to find employment opportunities in the Almaguin Highlands. Over the course of this section I discuss these new groups, followed by a detailed discussion of the relationships between these new residents and long-term residents.

Many new residents in the Almaguin Highlands use the villages and townships in the area as bedroom communities. A “bedroom community,” also known as a “commuter town,” “dormitory town,” or “sleeper town,” is a community that is primarily residential, and where most working residents work outside of the particular town. Because of the proximity of the Almaguin Highlands to the nearby hubs of Huntsville and North Bay, the area can plausibly serve this role. In fact, many realtors are predicting steady growth because of the area’s promise as a bedroom community. Whether or not this is a positive trend is another question.

Since beginning my work in the area, I have met many residents who work in either North Bay or Huntsville and live in the Almaguin Highlands. Interestingly, for many long term
residents, the thought of Huntsville having bedroom communities is surprising; in fact, 20 years ago this would have sounded absurd. As Anthony Lombardi stated, “Huntsville was a one pony town 15 years ago and now they have Wal-Mart [laughter]. But all kidding aside, they have really flourished…Who would have ever thought Huntsville would have bedroom communities?” (2011, interview). Peter Cook also notes this trend: “Toronto people are buying homes in Muskoka, and people in Muskoka are selling to those from Toronto and moving to Almaguin” (2008, interview).

For those using the area as a bedroom community, there are many reasons to do so. As discussed above, housing and property taxes are less expensive, the communities are small, quiet, and as countless residents have told me, they offer a “quality of life” that one cannot find in the abovementioned hubs. This “quality of life” often includes quiet villages in close proximity to nature. The use of a “quality of life” model to attract new residents is widespread across rural North America (Guimond and Simard 2010; Nelson et al. 2010; Robbins et al. 2009). Although living in these bedroom communities may add 20 to 40 minutes to one’s commute, for many residents it is well worth it. Furthermore, the new highway makes the commute faster and less treacherous than it was just a few short years ago. Developer Brandon Morgan also speculates that the increasing number of bedroom community residents could eventually spur new economic development in the area, as these new residents eventually demand more local shopping options (2010, interview).

Debbie Rollins, a former Huntsville resident who now commutes there from her home in the Almaguin Highlands notes, “There are a lot of us up there. It is amazing. There are a lot of people who travel up the highway” (2009, interview) Reporter Gerry Robinson understands the appeal:
In the city I look at the prices for housing and the quality of life and I think that as people realize what they could have here, and with that highway complete, people are going to be much more open to living in our area...Also, with the investment of the [new] high school, people will realize that they are not putting their kids at a disadvantage by coming here. Our high school is the same size as a city high school, so the course selection is about the same, and the chance to get on a sports team is about the same. (2011, interview)

Not everyone agrees with Gerry on the role of the new high school, however.

One challenge that comes with being a bedroom community is declining school enrollment. For example, if a family lives in Powassan and the parents work in North Bay, it is relatively common for the children to enroll in schools in North Bay rather than in the Almaguin Highlands. Contrary to Gerry’s statement, some parents have told me that the North Bay schools offer a wider variety of courses and more extracurricular activities. Furthermore, children can enroll in non-school related activities in North Bay. As reporter Molly Harris told me, “A lot of [Powassan] kids go to North Bay…many sports programs, league programs that are available in North Bay aren’t available here” (2008, interview). Enrolling one’s children in schools in North Bay or Huntsville can lead to less money spent in the local economy. Molly continues, “So if you’ve got to take your kid up to North Bay for a six o’clock soccer game or baseball game, then while the kid’s playing baseball, you can go shopping, you can do your groceries, you could do whatever… I mean, especially with dual income two working parents. You don’t just sit like my mother did when I tap danced and watched. I’ve got things I can do for this hour, and I’m in North Bay so I can do them” (2008, interview). In addition to convenience, Almaguin Highlands’ residents who shop in North Bay or Huntsville also suggest that there are more options and better prices. With this understanding, there are disagreements as to how the villages and townships in the Almaguin Highlands should approach their role as bedroom communities.
For Ron Buxton, the best thing that communities in the Almaguin Highlands can do is accept their role as bedroom communities. He does not think it is realistic for the Almaguin Highlands to compete with places like North Bay when it comes to attracting commerce or offering lower prices for groceries and other goods. Furthermore, he does not feel that attracting industry would be good for the area: “I think we’re far better to reconcile as being, you know, a dormitory place for North Bay, and building around that and making sure that we’ve got the right environment” (2008, interview). Local mayor Jack Grant echoes this sentiment: “Rural areas in Almaguin away from the highway should be treated simply as bedroom communities and recreational areas” (2009, interview). With this acceptance of being a bedroom community, mayor Jeff Branson suggests that his township can ensure that people continue to choose it as their home by “concentrating on being the best bedroom community around” (2011, interview).

In order to do this, Mark Abrams urges small municipalities to update their official plans and bylaws, for example, to allow for easy severances of larger lots. He also suggests that these communities “be in sync with your nearest major urban center in some way, shape, or form. If North Bay is making a pitch to a corporation, bring the [Almaguin Highlands] economic development officer to talk about low taxes and lakes and everything else” (2011, interview). Mark specifically explained to me that as North Bay attracts more and more companies, including industries and information technology centers, many of those employees will live in rural areas, including the Almaguin Highlands.

Yet there are some individuals who suggest that being a bedroom community is a “death sentence” for the local economy. Economic development officer Peter Cook is one of them, and he urges communities in the Almaguin Highlands to avoid focusing on becoming bedroom communities. He suggests that instead these communities need to invest in attracting commercial
and touristic development; if they do not, he fears that many of the already existing businesses will close. Peter points to one village in the Almaguin Highlands where this has already happened – Novar: “The residents are now using Novar as a bedroom community, and the jobs are draining. I can remember when Novar was a vibrant little community. Now all of their residents are coming to Huntsville to use the pool, theatre, hospitals, schools, and everything else…The mayor of Novar told me, ‘You are spending yourself to debt in Huntsville. I don’t have any debt whatsoever.’ I told him, ‘That’s because your township is dying’” (2008, interview). Ron Buxton does agree that once a village concedes to becoming a bedroom community, “you basically have to write off the economic thing. It becomes a nice quiet little place to live. If that is what you want it is fine, but if you want any commerce it is game over” (2011, interview). Economic development officer Laura Jenner also feels that focusing on becoming a bedroom community is potentially devastating: “I am frustrated. I know [Powassan] is a bedroom community, but that is not all it is, so stop calling it that. Residential taxes don’t pay for anything…[bedroom communities in the area] are desperate for cash because they have no commercial development. There is no commercial tax base. So that doesn’t work very well in the long term” (2011, interview). Because of these potential negative consequences tied to becoming a bedroom community, some residents in the Almaguin Highlands are instead hoping to attract larger numbers of remote workers.

Remote workers, also known as telecommuters or teleworkers, work from their homes or a private office as opposed to working in a traditional office. Options for remote working have increased as information technologies have allowed for workers to access much of the needed information and materials from a home computer. These employees spend much of the year working at home, and occasionally, often one to four times per month, make the trek to the
traditional office. The traditional office can be as nearby as a few miles and as far anywhere on the planet. Not until recently, however, has modern telecommuting been a serious possibility in the Almaguin Highlands because of the historically poor internet options. This is slowly changing, as more towers are being constructed (see Chapter 2).

Many individuals believe the ability to remotely work will significantly change demographics in the Almaguin Highlands. Gerry Robinson had this to say: “I don’t think people around here really grasp what [high speed internet] is going to do for us…We are finally going to be on a level playing field with the city in terms of communications. It is just such a leap forward, and I think, ahead of anything else that happens, that it is going to be an economic driver for us” (2011, interview). Gerry suggests that comparable high speed internet access to that in the city will be the backbone of how the area operates:

With the [low] cost of housing around here and the amount of space we have, I think that is really where our potential is… If you can go into the office two days a week and work from home the rest, we are your spot. You can buy a house here for $150,000 that will blow your $550,000 house in Toronto out of the water. Not to mention we have a quality of life that people will enjoy. (2011, interview)

Ellis Butler agrees: “If this area could be wired and ready to go, people would come here for the fresh air, the low crime, snowmobiling, skiing, swimming, a quality of life, and more time with family” (2008, interview). James Mullen further argues that the four-laning of the highway along with the ability to work from home will entice more people to move to the area: “There will be more thirty-somethings who are tired of the prices in the city or that can’t even get into the housing market that will check out and come up here” (2008, interview). Politician Monica Johnson agrees. She feels that high speed internet combined with “the fact that we do have very clean pristine lakes and waterfront, rivers, streams, you know, kind of bucolic locations” will lead to an eventual remote worker boom. She mentioned examples of people who live in the area
and work remotely for jobs in Toronto – something that would have been unheard of 20 years ago. She argues that the addition of remote workers is positive for the local economy (2011, interview). In addition to providing a larger tax base and the construction of new homes, there will also be a perk for local businesses that will likely see increase sales as a result of these new residents.

CFDC manager Thomas Richards explained to me that in Muskoka the municipalities have been encouraging the 100,000 cottagers who come to the area seasonally to consider working remotely:

I call them migrant workers. They are working down south and in Philadelphia and places like that. This is their special place, this is their home, their hearts, and where they spend their money to have fun. I said, ‘Why not work here as well?’ So they are. There has been quite a growth in population through people actually staying here because they can carry on their business because of the internet. (2009, interview)

Yet there are some who remain skeptical of the predicted remote worker boom. Jenny Mitchell, who manages an employment office, suggests that the numbers of those working remotely are still quite small: “You hope that with the internet people can start working remotely, but they have been telling us that for ten years, and that hasn’t happened yet” (2010, interview). Mark Abrams agrees that it will be some time before a remote worker boom enters the area. He told me, “The people of my generation will have to die off first…Technology itself is not the barrier, it is the perception of technology. Most people in their 50s are not in a historical conscious to do business that way. It is more difficult for them. And who runs most of the companies? People in the 50s and 60s” (2011, interview). As a result, some new residents are attempting to find employment locally.

Regarding those moving to the Almaguin Highlands and choosing to work locally, employment agency manager Jenny Mitchell has noted an significant increase in “higher skilled”
and “professional” individuals. Jenny informed me that, historically, the typical client at local employment agencies was a “low skilled laborer,” or what the National Occupational Classification Code categorizes as level D, which, Jenny explains, “tends to be your low skill [worker], [with] no post-secondary education required” (2010, interview). Today, she frequently meets with higher skilled “professional” clients seeking full time employment in the area. The new wave of a higher skilled college educated workforce is “completely shocking” to Jenny. Yet Jenny told me that finding work in the Almaguin Highlands is often challenging for new residents because people like to hire locally, telling me, “It’s really hard to break in when you’re not a local” (2010, interview). Part of this challenge is tied to the complexities of the relationships between these new residents and locals.

4.4 – Relationships between Locals and Young Professionals

In this section, I discuss relationships between long-term residents and the above discussed new groups of residents. For some of these new residents, a major complaint is that local residents do not accept them in the community. Business owner Nora Maki recalls feeling unwelcome and being seen as an “outsider” for her first decade in the area (2008, interview). Business owners Dorothy and Bruce Graff also felt an initial distance from locals upon moving to the area, particularly from residents who were also in the hospitality business. Bruce and Dorothy struggled immensely in their first few years, and told me that they regretted their decision to move to the area, particularly because of the unwelcome response they received locally (2011, interview). According to Ron Buxton, even after living and being an active member of the community for over 40 years he is still seen as an outsider (2011, interview). Anthony Lombardi relates to this standoffishness, telling me that locals were “suspicious” of his arrival to the area and his decision to live out in the country: “There is a sense from some people
of, ‘What are you doing here? We’ve been working hard to survive here and you are coming up with all your money to do whatever you want.’ That wasn’t the case at all with us, but there is a suspicious vibe” (2011, interview). Anthony emphasizes that “vibe” was not imparted by all local residents, and that much of the suspicion and trepidation eventually subsided. For 36 year old James Mullen, who manages an employment office and moved to the area after getting tired of “big city living,” although locals are polite to him, he feels like an outsider. James has been told that he is “different” from local residents. Residents have told him that he dresses too formally, speaks differently, and uses too many “twenty dollar words.” He has tried to change this by speaking less formally and altering the way he dresses (2008, interview).

Some individuals I have talked to have suggested that this standoffishness stems from the many deep interconnected family ties in the area. Social worker Kim Gehrig told me, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but so many people are related to each other – it just shocks me” (2011, interview). Ron Buxton concurs, stating, “We need some new blood lines up here. The old crowd that, and they basically stem from four or five families who came up here in the early 1900s, so some of them have got 250 first cousins, and I’m not kidding about that…There’s about ten families there and every one of them is related” (2008, interview).

For Caitlin Simon, the minimal communications she has had with locals since moving to the area, in part, is a result of disagreements on what she calls “core issues.” In general she feels that locals tend to have more socially conservative views, whereas recent transplants have more liberal views. She went on to suggest that the locals are somewhat xenophobic. She has found local residents to be unwelcoming to new residents, particularly ethnic minorities, adding, “The lack of racial diversity is one of the least attractive components of long time rural residents. They are really into stereotypes.
The reality is that there really is very little racial diversity around here. Whenever there is some, it is cause for comment. I attempt to remain civil, but it is probably because I don’t fraternize much, because I don’t share the same point of view” (2009, interview).

Business owner Mitchell Banks agrees, and makes a point to take his son to Toronto regularly to expose him to cultural diversity. Mitchell states, “Somehow I feel in the back of my mind that it contributes to a bit of a redneck mentality which I really dislike. So we shoot down to Toronto with my son, and he gets exposed to it a lot” (2011, interview).

Mitchell Banks also touched on the possibility that locals and newcomers have different views of the world, telling me, “The work ethic up here isn’t the greatest. It is the norm to take half the year off, so they don’t achieve much. If somebody comes in who is a little more aggressive, there is this resentment towards them. It is kind of strange” (2011, interview). Mitchell suggests the presence of a “redneck mentality” in the area, and makes sure to take his son to Toronto regularly to expose him to diversity. James Mullen acknowledges these contrasts between locals and newcomers, telling me, “I don’t want to see my kids getting married at 18 with two kids and thinking that the only job they can get is hauling pebbles up and down the road” (2008, interview). Caitlin Simon also suggests that differences between these groups stem from locals who are less environmentally conscious than transplants: “You would be astonished at the number of beer cans I pick up on the side of the road. Drinking and driving is really prevalent here. It is not the tourists. Locals drink and drive a lot and toss the beer cans out the window” (2009, interview). Mitchell also suggests that local residents are frequently jealous of newcomers. He told me, “This idea of a small town where everybody embraces you, I'll tell you right now, that is not true...there seems to be a lot of jealousy...I am still amazed” (2011, interview). Mitchell went on to suggest that this stems from a sense of entitlement that comes
from living in the area for many generations. Business owner Rob Moore concurs, “I think this is a ‘them’ thing, and a bit of envy” (2009, interview).

On the other side of this, many locals suggest that they are not jealous; rather, they feel that new residents are conceited and elitist. Lifelong resident Linda Kelly did not mince words when I asked her about new residents, “There is a lack of understanding of the area from people who come in. They don’t understand the way of thinking” (2009, interview). Jenny Mitchell suggests that the cold reception newcomers often receive from locals is based on fear – including a fear of losing the “close-knit personal touch that we have” and a fear of the unknown (2010, interview). Even newcomer James Mullen agrees, stating: “People are weary and they sense that things are changing” (2008, interview).

Ron Buxton agrees that many local residents fear change and are wary of those from outside of the area. However, Ron wishes that this was not the case: “I want the locals to understand that there is life beyond the boundary here, and there are people with opinions and ideas that don't necessarily fit into their mold and the way we have been doing things forever” (2011, interview). Ron feels that the problem is that many residents have “never been outside the frickin’ village. A bit of an exaggeration, but, you know, they haven’t seen the world” (2011, interview). Retiree Alan Atkins agrees that people in the area tend to see change as a “liability rather than an enhancement” (2011, interview). Like Ron, Peter Cook also suggests that locals need to alter their way of thinking, suggesting that long term residents in the area need a “broader view.” He stated: “How do you tell someone, ‘You’ve got to make these changes or you’re going to die’? It is almost like a step back in time when you drive through Almaguin. Then you get to North Bay and the level goes back up again” (2008, interview). He added that the level of expected standards “almost drops five years” when going from Huntsville to the
Almaguin Highlands. Cottager Claude Whitney concurs: “In my personal opinion, I continue to get the feeling that the people in this area are still in the 19th century in their thinking to a great degree” (2011, interview).

Yet for many locals, these suggestions come from people who know very little about the area. Jason Adelman suggests that newcomers are often too quick to suggest ways in which the community might improve, which locals might find offensive (2009, interview). Furthermore, many locals have told me that they are quite pleased with the current state of things in the area. Importantly, however, over the course of all of the discussions I have had regarding locals and outsiders, nearly all of these individuals stated that there are many exceptions to the rule. I do not want to over-exaggerate the differences between these groups; rather, I want to demonstrate that there are important differences and concerns between them. There are hundreds of examples of locals and nonlocals spending time together as friends, colleagues, and advocates for each other’s causes. In addition to new residential groups moving to the area, another way in which we can begin to understand the changes occurring in the Almaguin Highlands as the early stages of rural gentrification is via increasing property values, increasing stratification, and the onset of beautification initiatives.

4.5 – Beautification, Stratification, and Rising Prices

Many residents who anticipate further growth and development in the area suggest that for the area to truly thrive, improvements are required. One oft heard suggestion of a way the area can “improve” its image is through beautification projects. It should be noted that policy documents tend to use terms like “beautification” rather than gentrification because of the political connotations that accompany the term gentrification (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008). Regardless, suggestions for such projects are prevalent. For example, economic development
advisor Carly Grant regularly urges villages to make beautification a priority. She told me, “Everything should be beautiful, like it is in Muskoka. If you go to downtown Huntsville it is gorgeous. There is a program that helps people upgrade businesses so that they all look really nice. They need to do that here” (2009, interview).

The program that Carly refers to is the national Communities In Bloom program/competition. “Communities in Bloom” is a volunteer based non-profit organization formed in 1995 that focuses on community “beautification.” According to their website: “The program strives to improve the tidiness, appearance and visual appeal of Canada's neighbourhoods, parks, open spaces and streets through the imaginative use of flowers, plants and trees” (Communities in Bloom 2012). Communities that choose to participate are evaluated on specific criteria that include floral displays, tidiness, natural and cultural heritage conservation, and environmental awareness. One result, according to the website, is that participating communities can “benefit financially from the program through community tourism initiatives, business opportunities for the entire community, and other related projects” (Communities in Bloom 2012).

A similar program is the First Impressions Community Exchange (FICE), which is funded by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA). Through this program, FICE pairs two similarly sized villages or towns with similar economic and demographic profiles. Each village organizes a group of individuals who will visit the partnering village, unannounced, for one day to analyze the village. FICE provides booklets that guide the teams to assist them in their analysis/critique. The teams look at particular aspects, including commerce, schools, healthcare, and tourism. A few weeks later, the group that visited the partnering community’s village reports their results to the town council and other interested
community members. The OMAFRA website explains that, through the program, the community receives “an assessment of the strengths and challenges through a fresh set of eyes, from a first-time visitor. By participating in the FICE program, your community will benefit from the feedback you receive from the visiting team, and your community volunteers will gain insights from their visit to the exchange community” (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs 2011). Burk’s Falls participated in this program in 2010. Beautification, however, is not limited to these larger programs.

Broadly, EDO Peter Cook recommends that villages in the Almaguin Highlands begin beautification with small and easy projects. For example, he recommends removing “eyesores,” such as vehicles on people’s front lawns, and “sprucing up” storefronts. He also encourages municipalities to incorporate beautification requirements into strategic plans, and including specific clauses regarding what is and what is not permissible. By having specific bylaws, Peter suggests that beautification is easier to control: “In a township where there are no bylaws some of it is pretty rough” (2009, interview).

Why is beautification such a priority? Some individuals have expressed concerns that the villages in the Almaguin Highlands are “unattractive” and “run down.” When I asked an economic development officer from Muskoka for her thoughts on the aesthetics of Almaguin Highlands, she responded, “From a visual standpoint it is, well, I am thinking of the word ‘scrubby.’ It could be dressed up quite a bit” (2009, interview). One North Bay resident who works in economic development told me, “Burk’s Falls is not attractive in its present state, but it has all the right elements. Landscaping and enforced property standards would help” (2008, interview). A recent retiree to Sundridge feels that there are too many “disheveled areas” that are in need of repair: “That garden center just past the high school on the right hand side, that is your
welcome to Sundridge? It is just horrible and deplorable. It looks just awful” (2008, interview). Regarding the reasons for the current state of the villages, one retiree told me, “Some of the landowners have low pride of ownership, and that has a lot to do with income levels and education. I noticed after moving here that people throw out their garbage when driving. That is an acceptable standard of behavior here, and that has to change” (2008, interview). As a result, there are some townships in the Almaguin Highlands that are currently committed to enforcing beautification standards.

One recent example is the Tim Hortons development in Armour Township. To say that Tim Hortons is a well-known Canadian coffee chain is an understatement. Regardless, in the early phases of development, Armour Township approached the developers in regards to the exterior design of the building. Although Armour Township did not have any design controls within its bylaw at the time, the township officials requested that the developers make the façade of the Tim Hortons in a “Muskoka” style, rather than the traditional brick façade. The “Muskoka” style, in this case, includes red, varnished wood siding with beige trim (see Figure 15). The developer, Brandon Morgan, was able to make this change; however, he was somewhat aggravated by the request: “You would think that a municipality that had just had its tax base completely eroded by the new highway would just be clamoring to get a new million dollar building which they could tax in their town, but yet they were really concerned about what the look of the building would be. You know, we’re not talking about Hilton Head Island here. This is a Tim Hortons on Highway 11 in rural Ontario” (2011, interview). Brandon suggests that this request was the beginning of Armour Township attempting to create a planned community that is modeling itself after communities in Muskoka. Brandon also mentioned that there are plans to “Muskokafy” a new hardware store in the area, to give it “cottage-country feel.”
However, some individuals feel that current methods of enforcing beautification are too lax, and need to be highly regulated and strictly enforced in order to be successful. For example, an individual who works in economic development in Southern Ontario suggested to me that the Almaguin Highlands should consider using the extreme methods his municipality has recently taken to enforce beautification:

You know what we’re doing? We’ve hired private sector to knock down some [other] private sector buildings that we have been going after. They are suing us, but we don’t give a shit. We want these evil landlords that are fucking up the visual appearance of our community to know that we are going to take them on. Go ahead and take us to court. If you don’t clean things up in a reasonable amount of time we are going in, and we are going to tear it down and add it to your taxes. And we’re doing it right now. We’ve got a couple of really awful buildings on the main thoroughfare that are falling down, and we’ve been after them for years. This year the mayor says, ‘They are going to take us to court anyhow. Let’s take them on.'
Let’s let everyone know that if you have an eyesore you’ve been given a great opportunity to clean it up and lots of time. We’ve communicated with you. We’re going to come in and tear it down.’ Of course the owner then takes us to court. They say, ‘Well, you’re tearing our building down.’ Well, we’ve been working with them, and there is not a court in the land that will award the owner anything against the municipality. (2009, interview)

Whether any villages in the Almaguin Highlands will consider such methods remains to be seen. Regardless, all of these abovementioned changes are leading some residents to fear incoming changes in the Almaguin Highlands.

As discussed in Chapter 1, gentrification brings significant challenges to those who are not part of the “gentry.” Although the degree to which gentrification is occurring in the Almaguin Highlands is debatable, there is no doubt that changing demographics are bringing unexpected challenges to the area, including rising property costs, environmental concerns, the arrival of “urban values,” and the loss of farmland.

Rising property costs tend to accompany rural gentrification (Guimond and Simard 2010; Nelson et al. 2010). Between 2008 and 2012, a period of recession in Ontario, property values in the Almaguin Highlands have increased by 11.5% (Hartill 2012). Ex-urbanite James Mullen suggests that this is due to retirees, cottagers, and people like himself moving to the area. James went on to tell me, “There is land prospecting going on here now. There are cheap farms going up for sale and being sold really quickly. Developers will purchase these places, put it in their back pocket, and build a subdivision in a few years” (2008, interview). Andrea Taylor, a social worker who assists unemployed and impoverished residents, notes that this is a relatively new change. Historically she has observed that people moved to the Almaguin Highlands from Muskoka because they could not afford their taxes. Today, this same process is forcing some residents in the Almaguin Highlands to seek out new, more affordable, places to live outside of the area. Regarding these changes Andrea told me, “That is rural gentrification, and we’ve
become the serfs to serve the gentry” (2009, interview). She also added, contrary to the supposed benefits espoused by many others regarding the arrival of multimillion dollar homes, “When this becomes the next Muskoka and there is demand for better and bigger homes, and food, that doesn’t bring the whole economy up – it just stratifies it” (2009, interview). Andrea explained to me that new wealthy residents are increasing the costs of home prices for the entire region. This is a relatively common trend in rural areas experiencing inflows of populations with a higher degree of purchasing power (Hoggart and Paniagua 2000). These high costs also concern local councilor Paul Lipton: “The concern I’ve got is that this is driving property prices in this area to a point where people can’t afford property. You’ve got all kinds of people who grew up here, and the jobs aren’t all that good paying here, and not just waterfront, but all housing. The more people you’ve got coming up, the higher the prices go, and it makes it that much more difficult for the people here to afford a place” (2011, interview).

To address these challenges, CFDC manager Ron Varney suggests that developers in the area build more affordable housing for what he calls “a ‘Wal-Mart family,’ where a husband and wife both work those kind of jobs making $50,000 between them a year” (2011, interview). He feels that for this to happen, however, the provincial government needs to step in and provide incentives. Ron also argues that the government must provide incentives that will allow for more affordable and available rental properties. Ron’s pleas for governmental intervention, however, seem to run contrary to the current approach of the neoliberal policies in place both provincially and federally. In any case, the Almaguin Highlands has a massive shortage of affordable rental properties available. One reason for this shortage is that, as Andrea Taylor explained, developers are purchasing “lower end” housing and rehabilitating the properties (2010, interview). This trend has meant fewer housing options for lower income residents. Andrea states, “Remember,
poor people can’t afford the housing to begin with. They need affordable housing, which we don’t have any of. We have huge waiting lists, huge, for affordable housing – 450 families on this side of the district, and at least as many on the other” (2010, interview). Andrea suggests that the recent highway bypass only adds to these challenges by adding a picturesque quality to the villages, causing the prices of homes to continue to rise, forcing some residents to relocate.

The gentrification of the Almaguin Highlands also raises environmental concerns. Cottager Claude Whitney suggests that the northward movement of Muskoka is bad for the environment, telling me, “We don’t want the lake taken over by big huge McMansions on the shoreline destroying the environment…That would be bad development, from my perspective, and from the way people think on the lake” (2011, interview). Claude’s comments are a perfect example of the false consciousness experienced by some cottagers. Although Claude can see the potential damage to the environment that new cottagers would bring to the area, he fails to take into consideration the damage that he and his fellow cottagers have and continue to bring.

Summer camp owner Darlene Peterson agrees with Claude, however: “In the rural places today, which are so valuable, we introduce all these rich people who are building year round houses by lakes, and wanting their big boats, their wakeboarding with their heavy duty motors” (2011, interview). As a result, Darlene is active on the lake, and she hopes to play a role in how development occurs, stating: “This lake is filling up because everything is moving up north of Huntsville, and it is going to come fast. There is some urgency, and a rationale in my not retiring…The demands being made are caused by some of these people who are coming in and demanding services and things and expecting them to be inexpensive” (2011, interview).

Some residents also fear that new residents bring with them a different set of values and beliefs. I have already mentioned some of these in Chapters 2 and 3. When James Mullen first
relocated to the area from the GTA he was told by some long term residents that although they
did not have any problems with him moving to the area, they do have problems when new
residents come to the area expecting “city amenities” (2008, interview). Camp owner Darlene
Peterson has this to say about the arrival of new residents: “What they are doing there is taking
Toronto, and Toronto values, and homes and the way they are built and what it costs to run them,
and putting it in a wilderness setting and creating havoc” (2011, interview). When referring to
“Toronto people” residents have certain stereotypes. Toronto people are thought to be somewhat
wealthy and have more free time than the average resident of the Almaguin Highlands. There is
also an assumption that Toronto people believe rural residents to be “morons” or “backwards.”
Toronto people are also thought be snobbish and demanding of gourmet goods, including
groceries, clothing, and restaurants. Long-term residents in the Almaguin Highlands see them as
being image conscious, and valuing the acquisition of expensive designer material goods. As
Gerry Robinson told me, “People are coming with city views and expectations” (2011,
interview). Broadly, when people refer to Toronto people, they are referring to class. Their fear
is that with this class comes money and power – two factors that are a threat to local residents.

Farmer Darcy Engel suggests that another consequence of gentrification in the Almaguin
Highlands is the loss of farmland. In recent years former productive farmland has been
subdivided and sold as residential land (see Figure 16). Regarding this recommodification of
land, Darcy stated, “I think it is hard for farmers in the area to see a beautiful farm that had been
working, and they see the old couple die, and then they see someone move in with 12 horses and
outside money…Farmers disrespect things that show off in a way that is not useful or practical”
(2011, interview). Indeed, many former working farms in the Almaguin Highlands are now home
to families that have purchased horses for recreational purposes. Aaron Sinclair told me,
“They’re setting up horse farms all over the place but being absolutely unproductive” (2011, interview).

Figure 16. New home on former farmland

One example that demonstrates the increasing popularity of horses in the Almaguin Highlands is the opening of the Knowlton Ridge Equestrian Centre in April 2005 in Powassan (see Figure 17). Knowlton Ridge is a multimillion-dollar centre that attracts many riders. When it first opened, the owners had three horses, one small arena, and five stalls. As of 2009, the centre
was home to 43 horses, 45 stalls, two indoor riding arenas, two outdoor rings, and much more. The owner, Rob Moore, has invested millions of dollars into the centre. Riders who come to the facility come from as far south as Muskoka and as far north as Sudbury. Economic development officer Marcy Helner believes that because of Knowlton Ridge and the growing number of hobby farms that are home to horses, horses are going to be a significant part of the local economy in the near future (2010, interview). Ron Buxton notes that recreational horses now contribute more to the local economically than cattle, something he could never have imagined 30 years ago (2009, interview).

Figure 17. A trillium show at the Knowlton Ridge Equestrian Centre
As a result of these changes, there have been a few instances of local resistance to gentrification. Interestingly, the most prominent case came from a relatively wealthy group of individuals: cottagers. A few years ago a local cottagers association was weary of what cottager Claude Whitney called “Muskoka style” development. Claude explained to me that some wealthy individuals had recently constructed multi-million-dollar homes on the lake. The cottagers association was concerned about both aesthetics and the environmental harm that accompanied these large homes. In order to try to prevent further development, the cottage association has recently attempted to enforce zoning and planning restrictions to help to “prevent total overrun” of the lake. Furthermore, the association also keeps a close eye on cottagers that go up for sale. In a recent case a group of cottagers banded together to purchase land so that others could not develop it. In this case the piece of land was the local nine-hole golf course. The cottagers association learned through the grapevine that the course was for sale, and that a developer was looking to purchase it, raze the golf course, and build large lakefront homes. To prevent this from happening, the cottagers association organized a consortium of lake residents to pool together enough money to purchase the property. Since purchasing it they have started leasing the golf course. Claude stated, “We are not looking for profit”; their only goal was to preserve that piece of land. This particular cottager’s association plans to continue to be on the lookout for parcels of land that are for sale to avoid Muskokafication. Claude told me, “This association is strong and has a desire to have the lake as it is, and there are enough families with enough money that I am comfortable knowing that if a crisis like that arises we can rally the troops and go in and do something” (2011, interview).
4.6 – Conclusion

As I have demonstrated throughout this chapter, the changes happening in the Almaguin Highlands are complex and controversial. For example, the northward push of Muskokafication strikes some individuals as incredibly positive. For these individuals, Muskokafication will bring prosperity, positive development, and a sophisticated image. For others, these changes will lead to increased divisions between the rich and poor, increasingly higher priced homes, and an economy that is focused on the service industry. As middle and upper class residents relocate to the Almaguin Highlands, the need to preserve the “quality of life” that has attracted them to the area will continue, potentially resulting in an approval of certain types of development (those that allow the bourgeois ideology of nature to prosper) and disapproval of others (those that propose light-industrial and working-class oriented commercial development).

This chapter also demonstrates that rural gentrification is a reflection of the class transformation of space related to cycles of capitalist investment. As Neil Smith’s rent gap thesis predicts, as former tracts farmland and forest have decreased in value in the context of neoliberal economic policy, developers, investors, and individuals have purchased this land and recommodified it via new residential lots. This has resulted in new groups of residents moving to the area, including retirees, remote workers, and those using the area as a bedroom community. As in urban gentrification, many of these new residents have become active in local organizations and in local government. The result has included new residents with different views regarding what constitutes proper development in the area, leading to conflict between long-term residents and newcomers.

The diverse and divisive reactions to a changing Almaguin Highlands are, in part, due to the area’s past and present relationship with agriculture and forestry. In the next chapter I
examine the current state of these extractive industries. In particular, I examine changes in legislation and policy beginning in the 1970s that have affected these sectors today.
5 – CURRENT CHALLENGES IN AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

“It is not a bright future”

...This is the country of our defeat and yet
during the fall plowing a man
might stop and stand in a brown valley of the furrows
and shade his eyes to watch for the same
red patch mixed with gold
that appears on the same
spot in the hills
year after year
and grow old
plowing and plowing a ten acre field until
the convolutions run parallel with his own brain —

And this is a country where the young
leave quickly
unwilling to know what their fathers know
or think the words their mothers do not say...

– from “The Country North of Bellville” by Al Purdy

5.1 – Introduction

On an overcast and chilly morning in late October of 2011, I was sitting in Paul Harrison’s small office. Paul is a forestry operations manager and has been working in forestry for his entire adult life. Over the course of our discussion, Paul described his experiences as a logger who has had to struggle with a significantly changing economy over the last 30 years. In particular, he described the massively altered ways in which forestry is practiced in the Almaguin Highlands, which includes an increasing focus on forests in the area being used for “recreational” and multifunctional purposes. In fact, Paul refers to the forests in the Almaguin Highlands as “recreation forests,” unlike forests to the north which, according to him, are still “production forests.” The Almaguin Highlands is not alone in these changes; in fact, Mather (2001) makes a similar distinction between forest types, but instead refers to the former as
“postindustrial forests” and the latter as “industrial forests.” Broadly, throughout North America over the last 30 years, many forests have seen a reduced emphasis on timber production and an increase in recreation (Mather 2001). As a result of these changes, Paul, as an operations manager, has had no choice but to focus on the ways in which loggers, tourists, cottagers, and governmental agencies can work together to ensure that, although these forests are recognized as “recreational,” there is still room for logging. He told me, “Forestry and tourism go hand in hand in this forest… We are not going to screw their tourism and they are not going to screw up our forestry; we are going to work together” (2011, interview).

In the context of these changes, over the last twenty years Paul’s responsibilities have changed significantly. According to Paul, his forestry agency spends more time talking to recreational groups, like cottage associations and tourist operators, than they do with others involved in forestry. For example, representatives from cottage and tourist associations often have concerns regarding the impacts of logging on recreational activities, including the “noise pollution” from logging trucks driving along tourist-frequented roads or the sound of buzz saws in the forest. Although I sensed some frustration in Paul’s voice when discussing these concerns, he emphasized how important it is that these various group keep the lines of communication open. For example, during summer peak tourism season, those in the forestry industry in the Almaguin Highlands have often come to agreements with tourist outfitters to not haul logs down certain roads any time after 3pm on a Friday afternoon, so as not to take away from the tourist and cottaging experience. Paul went so far as to give one tourist outfitter a two-way radio; when the outfitter had a group coming down a road he would contact Paul, and Paul would make sure that no trucks hauling logs passed by. Paul has also taken cottagers associations and tourism outfitters into the forests to show them what the forest will look like when they are finished with
a particular cut. He said, “I am not interested in butting heads. It costs all of us too much money. We don't want a bad name and we don't want them having a bad name. We don't want tourists saying, ‘There was all this logging going on behind us on our trip’” (2011, interview). Yet, Paul also suggests that many of the concerns of cottagers and tourists are not so much with forestry as a whole, but rather with how forestry affects their particular recreational experience. Paul suggests a NIMBY (not in my backyard) mentality among the cottagers and tourists regarding deforestation: “People don't really worry about the forest as a whole, but more about when we are coming down their cottage road and at what time” (2011, interview).

As Paul’s experiences demonstrate, and as I briefly discussed in Chapter 1, forestry and agriculture have changed significantly in the recent past. In the current post-Keynesian/neoliberal era, as a result of changes in provincial and federal policies in the 1970s and 1980s, forestry and agriculture have frequently come to be understood as “incompatible” with free trade (Fink 1998; Knuttila 2003). For many farmers and loggers, these changes have meant an end to their livelihoods; however, others have been able to find ways to make ends meet. Over the course of this chapter, I examine these recent changes in forestry and agriculture, what these changes have meant to people living in the area and working in these industries, changing village dynamics, employment challenges and opportunities, and the ways in which farmers and loggers have attempted to overcome these recent challenges. By exploring the effects of free trade agreements, mechanization, re-regulation, the rezoning of land, corporatization, increased competition, and ever increasing costs, I provide an understanding of the ways in which neoliberal legislation directly affects these extractive industries and the individuals in the area.

7 Countless scholars have noted, of course, that free trade agreements do not promote free trade at all. Instead, these agreements tend to increase the power of large transnational corporations and protect core countries. These changes are frequently at the expense of, among others, taxpayers and domestic producers (Schaeffer 1995).
5.2 – Forestry

There have been four periods in recent history that define resource extraction in Canada: The first was the late 19th and early 20th century – a time of import substitution industrialization where, although dependent on foreign machinery and production processes, Canada produced many of its own goods and focused on domestic consumption. This was a time of high tariff levels. In the second period, from the 1920s to 1940s, U.S. firms began to gain access to this tariff protected market. In the third period, from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s, import substitution industrialization became increasingly institutionalized; however, many U.S. firms perceived the Canadian market as domestic. During the fourth and current period, the neoliberal era, resource extraction has seen the removal of tariffs as a result of various trade agreements, including NAFTA in 1994. This period is also marked by an increase in international competitiveness (Williams 2004). This most recent era has directly affected employment opportunities in forestry: Nationwide, forestry employed 89,000 people in 1995, whereas by 2007 it was down to 56,000 (Hurtig 2008). In the Almaguin Highlands, just last ten years ago, the forests in the Almaguin Highlands provided around 2400 direct and indirect jobs (Suthey Holler Associates 2003); today, however, that number has decreased by approximately one third (Personal Communication 2011). Broadly speaking, the 21st century North American forest has seen an increased focus on environmental services and a decrease in timber primacy (Mather 2001). I begin this section with an examination of the factors that have led to the recent decline of forestry in the Almaguin Highlands.

5.2.1 – Factors in the Decline of Forestry

Forestry operations manager Paul Harrison concisely sums up 21st forestry in the Almaguin Highlands:
There are less folks working in the forest, less folks working in the mills, and materials are going to other places. The equipment on the ground is changing. It used to be a guy on the ground with a chainsaw; now they use feller bunchers [a tree harvester], so there are less guys needed on the ground. If you look at new mills, you don't need 100 people to run them. Two guys and an engineer is all you need. Automation has changed everything. (2011, interview)

As Paul makes clear, one major factor in the decrease in employment opportunities in the forestry industry is mechanization. These changes in mechanization have not been limited to the forest; mills have also become increasingly automated. These changes, in turn, have affected management and supervisory positions. In the 1980s, the Parry Sound forest management office employed approximately 40 people, as did the forest management office in Muskoka; today those 80 employees have decreased to approximately 20 (Personal Communication 2011).

Mechanization is not the only reason for the decrease in available jobs in the Almaguin Highlands. As discussed above, free trade agreements have also played a role, and as a result, many Ontario timber operations are unable to compete globally. Paul Harrison, noticeably frustrated, exclaimed, “We can't compete with fifty cents an hour labor in Asia. We just can't…The problem with outsourcing is that you are screwing yourself in the future, because then your local people don't have any jobs to buy your product” (2011, interview)

Another challenge is increased expenses, including rising insurance, fuel, and licensing costs. Additionally, the prices paid for logs have not kept up with these increases. Paul Harrison explains, “Today they are getting the same price for the logs as they probably got in the 80s and that is not very good, and of course expenses have gone up, as opposed to income which has gone way down. Expenses such as insurance, just liability for running a logging operation, and your fuel costs have gone nuts. Those factors have hurt the industry in the present time” (2011, interview). Scott Muller, who manages a lumber business in the area told me, “It is a much changed industry…Truckers don't make money, loggers don't make money, nobody on that food
chain is making money. I was just talking to a sawmill owner in South River this morning, and he says, ‘Scott, I can't even afford to haul logs from even Huntsville [70km from South River]’” (2011, interview). Scott noted the irony of a recently completed multibillion-dollar highway where truckers cannot afford to haul logs because of low commodity prices and ever-increasing fuel costs.

Some loggers in the area have also struggled because of the corporatization of logging which includes a shift from small and medium sized operations, in both logging and sawmilling, to a larger corporate structure. The largest company in the area is Tembec. Tembec employs approximately 4000 people across 31 manufacturing operations in North America and France, managing 25 million acres of forest throughout Canada, with annual sales of approximately $2 billion (Tembec 2012). In the Almaguin area today there are roughly 20 operators; Tembec is the largest, accounting for 40% of harvested logs. The presence of larger operations poses a challenge to some smaller operations. Scott Muller told me, “Right now you have a few large end users that are trying to maintain control of fiber supply at a low cost…You almost need to have that political clout that size to survive… The prices are so high to operate, and the commodity prices are so low. It makes it so difficult to elevate to a point where you can make money” (2011, interview).

One of the reasons that these smaller operations have trouble competing is because they cannot afford the equipment that has accompanied increased mechanization. For example, the price of a new basic skidder is between $200,000 and $300,000, and a feller buncher is between $350,000 and $450,000 (Equipment Trader 2012). As Scott Muller noted, if an operator can only utilize this machine six or seven months of the year for eight to ten hours a day, it becomes challenging to make the payments. Furthermore, in addition to requiring skidders and feller
bunchers, logging operations also require bulldozers, various trucks, and other equipment. Scott told me, “A million dollars is kind of a drop in the bucket just to get started” (2011, interview).

A more recent obstacle has been the U.S. housing crisis, which became widespread by mid-2008. For one lumber business in the Almaguin Highlands, prior to the recession, 80% of their market was American. For a small period of time immediately following the crash, their American market went down to nearly 10%. Today that number is still less than 50%. Prior to the recession, between 1996 and 2008, a booming U.S. housing market, and a favorable exchange rate was great news for Canadian lumber business (In the mid-2000s the exchange was $1 CAN to $.80-85 U.S. As of January 2013, that rate was $1 CAN to $1.02 U.S.). The nearly equal exchange rate has meant that purchasing Canadian wood is no longer economically advantageous for American builders. Mark Adams, a constituency manager for a local politician told me, “Wood isn’t any good anymore. It can be for artisan type stuff and the biomass industry, but generally speaking forestry isn’t on the top of the list anymore, and won’t be, at least until your home country [the United States] starts building houses again” (2011, interview). Bill Rogers, a former provincial employee, added, “The lumber industry in Canada, and certainly here in Ontario, is depressed big time with no building going on in the States” (2011, interview).

As a result of these abovementioned factors, beginning in the 1980s and continuing to present day, many mills in the Almaguin Highlands have either closed or decreased operations. Mills that formerly operated at least two shifts per day are now down to one or less, and in some mills, employees work only three days per week, while they spend the remaining two days on employment insurance through an adjustment program called “Work-Sharing.” According to the federal government, “Work-Sharing is…designed to help employers and employees avoid
temporary layoffs when there is a reduction in the normal level of business activity that is beyond the control of the employer” (Statistics Canada 2012).

Another recent challenge for those working in forestry is the need for third-party forest certification. It is relatively common for non-governmental organizations to attempt to influence environmental regulations (Klooster 2005), and one way in which this occurs in forestry is through the environmental certification of forests, in which a third-party provides assurance that forest products meet specific environmental standards (Taylor 2005). Forest certification began in the 1980s, and has since challenged the historical sovereignty of forestry management (Mather 2001). Today, the reduction of power for those in the forest industry who had previously been the dominant voices in forest policy, and the increase in power for third-parties and retailers, is a hallmark of 21st century North American forestry (Mather 2001).

In the 1980s many environmentalist organizations began boycotting large wood companies and logging operations for their environmentally unfriendly practices. Following these initial boycotts, environmental organizations often teamed up with retailers and governmental organizations to create the certification process as an alternative to the boycotts – a market-based means for change. Next, NGOs and governmental organizations worked together to pressure retailers to only purchase wood products from certified suppliers. The certification process has allowed wood retailers and forest managers to eliminate any consumer uncertainty regarding unsustainable practices (Klooster 2005). Today, although not required, certification is crucial producers in North America to succeed.

Globally, the largest and most rigorous certifier is the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) (Taylor 2005). FSC is an international not-for-profit organization that was established in 1993. At that time, 130 participants from 26 countries came together to promote responsible forest
management worldwide (FSC Canada 2012). Current members of the FSC include Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund, as well as many large corporations including IKEA and Home Depot. The major logging area in the Almaguin Highlands received its FSC certificate in 2002. According to Paul Harrison, certification has meant fewer challenges from various environmental organizations (2011, interview). Generally, most forestry managers and provincial employees I have met with agree that the goals of FSC are noble, have improved worker safety, and have increased environmentally responsible practices; however, some also feel it is unnecessary. One logger I spoke with sees third-party certification as another hoop that those in the forestry business need to jump through in an area where they already practiced responsible forestry:

> You know, that’s a lot of politics. We as loggers and lumbermen just shake our heads and go, “Okay, we’ve got to do the certification.” People don't want to believe us that we are really trying to just make a living and make it sustainable…You know, we are common sense people for the most part, and a lot of this hocus pocus and bullshit from the international front is kind of, “Okay, whatever, we are trying to make a living here.” (2011, interview)

At the same time, those critical of North American forestry have suggested that the previous autonomy and self-regulation possessed by those working in forestry was in dire need of regulation, particularly in an era when ever-increasing competition for business may lead to increasingly irresponsible forestry practices (Mather 2001).

Regardless, every individual involved in forestry with whom I spoke agrees that the costs associated with certification are excessive. Scott Muller emphasizes that although most logging businesses do not mind being certified, it is an expensive undertaking that does not provide any additional perks. The certification process obliges participants to follow specific standards, undergo and cover the costs of evaluations, licensing, and audits, and to enact tracking procedures that allow FSC to verify certificates (Klooster 2005). However, unlike certain
certifications which, in theory, provide the producer with an economic benefit that accompanies certification (e.g. Fair Trade and Organic), this are no price premiums that accompany forest certification. As Klooster (2005) notes, “Certification is costly...especially for small-scale producers. Forest managers must cover the costs of audits [and] certification fees” (408). He adds, “Retailers are the most powerful actors in wood commodity chains, and they have little interest in either increasing the cost of the products to consumers or in passing any increased revenue back to their certified suppliers” (2005: 412). As a result, the certification process tends to favor large enterprises over smaller ones.

These recent changes in forestry have resulted in new conflicts throughout the Almaguin Highlands. Conflicts between those who log the forest and those who use it for recreation are not new, nor are they unique to Almaguin Highlands; however, these recent changes have added new complexities to the disagreements that occasionally arise between these two groups. How nature is used as a commodity varies in time and space. For example, when logging is good for the economy and when trees are in abundance, a natural area may be seen as appropriate for extraction. However, when trees are in short supply certain groups may attempt to protect these resources. When this happens the value applied to that land may change (Magnusson 2003). Furthermore, natural areas may be seen by some populations as in need of protection while other groups may wish to utilize these same areas for extraction (Magnusson 2003). William Cronon (1996: 39) refers to the disagreements that arise in such scenarios as the “conflict over Eden.” For example, groups like the Nature Conservancy may see the privatization of nature as a tool to preserve land, but they often fail to see how these “fixes” impose control over nature (Heynen et al. 2007). As Berglund (2006: 98) notes, “Many forms of environmentalism support conservative as well as exclusionist agendas, which can further disempower already marginalized people.”
Thomas Richards, who manages a Community Futures Development Corporation (CFDC), a federally funding economic development organization further discussed in Chapter 6, argues that conflicts have increased in recent years due to the forestry sector losing power and sovereignty, as I discussed above. He suggests that after many generations of independence and control over forests in the area, changes in regulations, public conscience, and markets have shifted the power dynamic (2009, interview). Today, those in forestry, who used to “call the shots,” are subservient to the environmentalist/third-party/tourist groups (Mather 2001). Similar conflicts also apply to industry in the area.

5.2.2 – “Post-Productivist” Philosophies and Industry

Much like how many individuals want to use the forests of the Almaguin Highlands recreationally, there are individuals who feel that the presence of industry also takes away from the “natural” appeal of the area. Paul Harrison, interestingly, stated, “We are more of a tourist area, so trying to get small industry in here is difficult at times. Nobody wants large industry because it sort of wrecks the landscape, you know?” (2011, interview). Scott Muller adds, “We don't need any big Honda plants up here or anything, we just need to make better use of what we have right in front of us” (2011, interview). Paul and Scott are not alone in their beliefs that industry is wrong for the area, as I discuss below. However, in many ways, in the current economic environment, they do not have much to fear.

Manufacturing in the Almaguin Highlands has never existed on a massive scale; however, beginning in the 1950s and 1960s the federal government made funds available to manufacturers who located themselves in Ontario’s north (2009, personal communication). The manufacturing operations that came to the area, and those that still exist, are small to medium sized, and jobs in these factories are highly sought after. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, there
was massive deindustrialization in central Canada as result of monetary policies keeping Canada’s dollar artificially high, as well as a result of free trade agreements. Industrial plants moved to places with cheaper labor, devastating single industry towns (George, Mair, and Reid 2009). Between 1989 and 1992 Canada lost 340,000 manufacturing jobs (Williams 2004).

In recent years a number of small industries have left the area, including Nelson Muffler in Burk’s Falls, Standard Chemical in South River, and Anderson Windows in Sundridge. According to economic development officer (EDO) Peter Cook, the only reason many of these factories came to the area in the first place was because of the abovementioned governmental incentives: “They got huge government incentives to build the building, and they had to stay for a couple of years and then they left. They had to leave because it wasn’t profitable” (2008, interview). Peter recently took a group of people to look at some real estate in the area, and they happened to look at some old factories in the Muskoka area, “We went through all the closed factories, and it was so depressing. It was so bloody depressing: huge monster buildings, all absolutely empty. Two or three hours of that is all you can take” (2009, interview). Peter further suggests that any attempt to attract industry in our current global economy is a waste of time. He stated, “Lofthouse [a brass fitting company in Burk’s Falls] eventually will go, for example, to China. They can make those things much cheaper in China than Ontario can. Industry is leaving Canada. What is sustainable here? Not smokestacks” (2008, interview). Local business owner Ted Hollingsbrook echoed this sentiment, “There isn’t going to be a resurgence of smokestacks, not as long as you have countries where the wages are low and the environmental regulations are low” (2009, interview).

One reason for this cynical outlook on attracting industry is that the area does not have the infrastructure to serve large manufacturing – for example, South River has town water but
does not have a municipal sewer system, and Sundridge has no town water but does have a municipal sewer system. As realtor Ryan Torgen told me, “There isn’t the infrastructure for factories. In Sundridge the sewage system is at its capacity, needing replacement or updates in order to accommodate any further development” (2011, interview). Others feel that even if industry were to locate to the Almaguin Highlands, the area lacks the skilled labor force that would be needed to fill the jobs.

Regardless of these obstacles, there are still many people who feel that industry is essential for the well being of the area. Municipalities across Ontario are offering companies tax incentives, long-term access to natural resources, inexpensive labor, and relaxed environmental standards in the hopes of attracting industry. In this context, the governments, municipal, provincial, and federal, are taking part in the “race to the bottom.” (Epp and Whitson 2001). A June 1996 advertisement that the Ontario Conservative government placed in The Globe and Mail announced: “Ontario isn’t just open for business. In Canada, Ontario is business…we’re reducing taxes, removing regulatory barriers, creating jobs, and encouraging investment” (quoted in Krajnc 2000: 124). Both the provincial and federal governments have created programs intended to prepare municipalities for the arrival of industry (I discuss these in detail in Chapter 6). For example, the 2011 Northern Communities Investment Readiness (NCIR) initiative is a program sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Northern Development and Mines that assists communities in attracting private investment, including industry. The brochure states, “Northern communities must compete for the attention of sophisticated investors who make decisions based on their business needs, available infrastructure and the flexibility and ease of local planning and development processes” (Ontario Ministry of Northern Development and
Mines 2012). Member of Canadian Parliament, Tony Clement, agrees that attracting industry is both important and plausible:

I am still a believer that we cannot give up on our manufacturing – [specifically] small manufacturing operations. I have done the plant tours in Burk's Falls at [Lofthouse Brass] and Kent Trusses [in Sundridge] which still has exports to upstate New York and other places. I definitely want to be supportive of those kinds of things because those are places that do supply good full time jobs…My view of manufacturing is that we have been through this whole China outsourcing trend. I am not entirely convinced it is going to continue. There will be a role for manufacturing in North America. As a former Minister of Industry I firmly believe that. I see evidence of that. So you don't want to denude your economic infrastructure just as the trend might be going in a different direction. (2011, interview)

As this section demonstrates, the future for industry in the area is uncertain. In many ways, this is also the case for forestry.

5.2.3 – The Future of Forestry

Despite significant challenges, there are still opportunities for those in the logging industry in the Almaguin Highlands. One market that local operators are currently attempting to utilize is product specialization and value-added products. Accessing these new markets is increasingly common in the 21st century “postindustrial” forest (Mather 2001). Historically, Ontario has focused on selling wood as a raw material; however, many in the forestry industry feel that the only way the area can compete is through value-added manufacturing (Suthey Holler Associates 2003). This includes utilizing all parts of the trees. For example, Scott Muller explained that in the 1980s pine boards that were less than five feet long often went directly into a chipper and were then sent to a pulp mill. Today those short boards, which are often lower grade, are processed into pieces for furniture.

Another route that is becoming increasingly common is biomass. With biomass, operators take wood that would have historically been refuse, and use it to produce energy. In
many cases, this wood is manufactured into pellets which are burned in furnaces. Scott Muller suggests that owners of lumber yards, for example, could set up central heating plants at their yards, run them on wood pellets, and use the waste-heat to dry materials. A local lumber company has saved tens of thousands of dollars annually since they started burning wood pellets from their own refuse (2011, interview). Wood pellets, however, can only go so far. It is not feasible at this time to heat large parcels of homes with wood pellets. As Paul Harrison told me, “To heat all homes with wood pellets would take all of the wood in Ontario” (2011, interview).

All of these abovementioned changes (mechanization, free trade, increased costs, larger companies, regulations, certifications, conflicts, and new opportunities) play an important role when considering the future of forestry in the area. Scott Muller, for one, feels that the immediate future is a tenuous one. He told me, “It is very cautious, very tenuous; everybody is on eggshells – suppliers and users” (2011, interview). Some go so far as to suggest the end of forestry in the Almaguin Highlands. Carly Grant, an economic development consultant, had this to say: “Forestry has been going down the tubes for the last ten years; this is not new news. But until some communities completely lose every last job they won’t let go of that” (2009, interview). CFDC manager Thomas Richards added, regarding the rural north in general, “We used to call it almost like a third world situation. It is pitiful. There are masses of rural areas that are similar. What do you do? Everything is gone, and it is very unlikely that things will ever be the same. It is really, really tough” (2009, interview). As this section has demonstrated, forestry and industry have undergone significant changes since the late 1970s. In the next section I examine how similar changes in legislation have affected agriculture.
5.3 – Agriculture

Despite its poor farmland, the Almaguin Highlands has been attracting farmers for over 150 years (see Figure 18). Throughout much of the 20th century many farmers in the area practiced polyculture, growing hay, alongside a range of vegetables including turnips, potatoes, and certain greens. Much of the food grown was for subsistence purposes, and what remained was typically sold locally. Livestock and dairy farms were also quite common, particularly after WWII and into the 1980s (Personal Communication 2013).

In autumn of 2011, I was interviewing Ron Buxton, a retired farmer in the Almaguin Highlands. I have been interviewing Ron since I started conducting fieldwork in 2008. He was one of the first individuals to bring me into his home and into his life. Typically Ron and his partner Molly would invite me to their home for lunch, a few beers, and hours upon hours of stories. Ron, originally from England, came to the area in the 1970s to farm. Since then, Ron’s diverse career has led to him serving as president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, owning a local hotel and restaurant, and currently chairing a local economic development committee. During one of my many visits to Ron and Molly’s home, Ron shared this story with me regarding the decline of agriculture in Ontario:

I was on a task force that made its way around northern Ontario some years ago. We went to this one outfit up here where a farmer was caught up in this whole interest rate thing. We started talking with him, and he looked out the window, and then he pulled a photograph off the shelf. It was of a couple of his boys, and they were young, playing in the farmyard. Then he takes this photograph and he goes to the window, and takes the chairman of the commission over there to the window and he says, “See all that land there? My grandfather, my father, and I, we cleared all that land with our bare hands, but I am not a cruel man.” And he holds the photograph up and he says, “These are my boys, and I am not going to put them through the agony of having to farm the next generation here, because it is not worth it.” And he started to cry. And he is holding this picture of his kids
and showing them all this land that three generations have cleared, knowing that he was going to have to sell it. There wasn’t a dry eye in the room. (2011, interview)

Not only does Ron’s recounting of this story clearly demonstrate the challenges and hardships that Ontario farmers have faced in recent decades, it also demonstrates the ways in which people often critique the present by romanticizing the past (Fink 1998). North American farmers facing hardship is not a new phenomenon, in fact, it seems that these two things often go hand in hand. However, prior to the neoliberalization of Canadian agriculture, farmers faced an entire host of other problems. For the purpose of this project, I focus on the challenges associated with farming that began in the early 1980s. But first, I want to provide some historical background.

Figure 18. A farm in Powassan
5.3.1 – The Farm Crisis

Following WWII, countries that were part of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), including Canada, designed and implemented agricultural policies to protect farmers. They did this through Keynesian border protection policies, subsidized credit, administrative control of market forces, and income and price support programs (Friedmann 1995; Knuttila 2003; Montpetit and Coleman 1999). At the same time, however, governmental agents sought ways to increase productivity, scale, and efficiency. For agriculture, this meant a focus on “high-modernist” agriculture which emphasizes monocropping, the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, specialized feeds, capital intensiveness, as well as increases in mechanization (Scott 1998). In North America, when high-modernist agriculture began to take off in the late 1940s the government dispatched thousands of “expert advisers” throughout the countryside. These advisers spread the high-modernist agenda across the continent and eventually the world, with the incentive of loans, assistance, and subsidies (Scott 1998).

With these Keynesian protections, alongside the high-modernist developments in agricultural sciences, by the 1970s, Canadian Minister of Agriculture Eugene Whelan encouraged farmers to plant as much food as they could grow, suggesting that there would be a market for it throughout the world. During this period, the provincial government also attempted to attract farmers to Ontario, in part through the availability of interest-free loans on farmland. The Canadian government was not only luring farmers from Canada, they also offered these opportunities to farmers in England. Like Ron Buxton, local farmer Darcy Engel’s family immigrated to the area from England after her father, who went to agricultural college, decided to make a new start in Ontario (2011, interview). During this time many farmers bought more land and machinery on credit to increase productivity. Ron Buxton shared his experiences, which
are illustrative of the policies that led to an eventual increasing farm concentration, during this time:

That was a lot of money back then [1980], and between me and the banker and the enthusiastic government, we parlayed that $45,000 [I made in profit in 1979] into about a $300,000 debt because it was said, ‘This is great and you just got to keep reinvesting in this.’ And the banker said, ‘You had a great year, why don’t you buy the farm next door?’ The ag rep said, ‘You can’t go wrong buying the farm next door,’ Ministry of Agriculture is saying, ‘Plant everything fencerow to fencerow, grow all the pigs you can get, and god knows what you’re going to do here.’ So we bought the farm next door and another little piece besides that, and bought all our new machinery and built a Harvester silo and did all those wonderful things that just led up beautifully to the high interest rates of ’81. And bit by bit all the shiny toys went… Then in ’79 or ’80 not only did we see commodity prices go down, we saw interest rates skyrocket, so we got trapped in the 21% interest in ‘81. When I looked at my farm loss in the first year where we were paying humongous interest rates – it was almost usury – my interest payment was almost identical to my farm net loss. We paid $50,000 in interest. (2008, interview)

These rising interest rates were part of an attempt to combat mounting inflation; however, these changes initiated a crisis for indebted farmers who had taken out huge loans to purchase more land and equipment in the 1970s. Furthermore, as indebted nations across the globe could no longer afford Canadian goods, demand decreased and overproduction ensued (Schaeffer 1995). During this time, not just in Ontario, but across the globe, many farmers had to make serious decisions which included one or more of the following options: alter the scale of the farm, diversify, reduce expenditures, decrease paid labor and rely more upon unpaid labor, increase off-farm income, or withdraw from farming altogether (Johnsen 2004). For many, the only option was to withdraw. In fact, in the 1980s with the emergence of an increasingly global system of corporate food production and distribution, small farmers in Canada were encouraged more than ever to leave their profession (Epp and Whitson 2001; Knuttila 2003).

It was also at this time that the Canadian government strongly encouraged the remaining small-scale farmers to think more like businesspeople (George, Mair, and Reid 2009).
Agriculture Canada stated: “[We] need to work at ensuring that Canadian farmers have the highest levels of management skills…to allow them to be as efficient and competitive as possible” (quoted in Hall 2003: 215). As more and more farmers withdrew, across Ontario between 1981 and 2001, the average farm size increased 24.9%, from an average of 181 to 226 acres (Statistics Canada 2003). Ron explained:

The guys that had been doing okay milking 30 or 40 cows, time went on and each year it got tougher for them. And they didn’t have the equipment or new barns to take on more cows. So they were getting squeezed because our supply management system rewarded the top 10 percentile, so anybody who wasn’t really efficient was not going to get the same amount of profit per liter of milk as these other guys were getting…We used to think anybody who was growing 1000 acres of corn was huge, then it got to be if you weren’t growing 5000 acres you couldn’t afford to run a combine. And that is the same all over. It has just been a slow decline…When I was president of OFA I think there were 9500 dairy farms, which was probably down from 12,000 when I started. So in five years we lost 20% or more. We didn’t lose any milk production at all. (2011, interview)

Locally, in the early 1980s there were over 60 dairy farms in Powassan; today there are less than ten (Ron Buxton 2008, interview). Jack Grant, a mayor in the Almaguin Highlands told me:

“There used to be a lot of full-time farmers here…Then the government came in and said that they needed the big manufacturing farms instead. It went from 1000 to 10,000 head of cattle on 200-300 acres….You used to have milk manufacturers on nearly every corner up here” (2008, interview). These changes continued over the next 30 years. For example, between 1996 and 2001, Ontario witnessed an 11.5% decrease in the number of farms (Statistics Canada 2003). Across Canada, in 1995 512,000 Canadians worked in agriculture. By 2007 that number was down to 330,000 (Hurtig 2008).

Adding to challenges for small-scale farmers, between 1989 and 1995 Canada implemented three free trade agreements that have significantly changed the face of farming in the country: the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (1989), the North American Free Trade
Agreement (1994), and the World Trade Organization’s Agreement on Agriculture (1995). These trade agreements, like most free trade agreements, have specific neoliberal qualities including skepticism and antipathy to the state, and a view of the state as inherently inefficient. Trade agreements attempt to eliminate government subsidies, and try to move state functions to the private sector (McCarthy 2007). During this time, Canadian agricultural policy came under attack from neoliberal politicians because of its high costs, its incompatibility with international free trade, and its inability to remain competitive in a global market (Knuttila 2003). As a result, by the time Canada signed NAFTA in 1994 much of Canadian agriculture had been “liberalized” (Montpetit and Coleman 1999). The neoliberal model of agriculture focuses on being cost-efficient, catering to global markets, and reducing governmental supports (Hall 2003). The liberalization of agriculture has meant that the livelihoods of farmers are often more dependent on decisions made elsewhere, for example in corporate headquarters around the world, than they were in the past (Adams 2003; Epp and Whitson 2001). Since the implementation of NAFTA, exports have tripled; however, so has farm debt (Union Farmer Monthly 2010). Monopolies have also increased – for example, two corporations, XL Foods and Cargill, control over 80% of Canada’s beef packing industry (Union Farmer Monthly 2010). Essentially, free trade agreements, which have removed tariffs, quotas, and duties, have corralled the world’s farmers into one competitive market. This has been extremely profitable for a few multinational corporations, but it has been devastating for family farms.

According to many long-time residents in the Almaguin Highlands, as the driving economic forces have shifted in relation to larger changes in the economy, local villages have undergone changing social dynamics. The Almaguin Highlands is not alone in such transformations. In Johnsen’s work in New Zealand she noted the “disintegration” of inter-farm
and community support networks in the context of the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1980s (2004). Many people whom I have spoken with over the last few years have stated that the downtowns of villages in the Almaguin Highlands used to be commercial and social centers for local residents. A retired farmer mentioned that in the early 1970s Powassan, a village of around 1000, had four hardware stores, four tractor dealers, three feed stores, welding shops, machine shops, and other businesses that serviced the agricultural community. Farmers would come into Powassan from a 15 to 20 mile radius to get their supplies. He stated, “Powassan was a hustle and bustle place, and they had late night shopping and all those sort of things” (2008, interview).

The changing rural economy, along with easier access to nearby urban centers provided by the new four-lane highway, has altered these dynamics. The new highway, in addition to making the Almaguin Highlands more accessible to new residents and tourists, is also making the trip to the nearby hubs of North Bay and Huntsville faster and easier. As a result, many people in the area do the bulk of their shopping in these areas. Both Huntsville and North Bay have large shopping centers that include Wal-Mart and Canadian Tire. Farmer and lifelong resident Darcy Engel stated, “When I grew up here [in the 1980s] it was an intact community, and I feel that is now missing” (2011, interview). Essentially, when the farms suffered, so did the local businesses that met the needs of the farmers. Today many of the towns in the Almaguin Highlands are home to empty storefronts and struggling small businesses (see Figure 19). Many feel that the community aspect of the villages has disappeared. Aaron Sinclair, a farmer and lifelong resident has this to say:

It is kind of hard to know the community now. It is too easy not to, because you are not forced to deal with your neighbors. Most people who are living in the country now are driving to the city for work anyway. If you don’t like your neighbor you don’t ever have to talk to him. It is not like you need to go to him to buy your potatoes or to trade for a lamb, or whatever interdependence that knit communities together in the past, that does not exist. (2011, interview)
Because of these abovementioned changes, many young people are unable to accumulate the capital to enter farming or are unwilling to take the risks that come with it. As a result, the next generation of farmers has instead moved to urban areas for work, as the family-farm sector continues to decrease (Hay and Basran 1992).

![Image: Downtown Burk’s Falls](image_url)

**Figure 19. Downtown Burk’s Falls**

In the context of these changes, Anthony Lombardi, who recently moved to the area from Toronto to live on a former farm, noticed an interesting trend. Up until the early 1990s, most people who lived in the countryside were farmers, with only a few exceptions. Today, there is a
large group of people who move to the area to live, but not work in the country. He told me, “When we moved out there, it didn’t seem that far out of town. But here local people say, ‘You live way out there?’ Now I kind of get it, because it is not on its way to anywhere. There is still that thought that if you are someone who chose to live out there and you are not a farmer, what are you really doing?” (2011, interview). In the township where Anthony resides, much of the land used to be working commercial farmland; today, however, it is home to many people like himself, who moved to the area to live in the countryside with no intentions of commercially farming.

5.3.2 – Current Challenges

Today, the remaining small-scale farmers face many challenges. As mentioned above, the removal of agricultural input subsidies and price supports have exposed Canadian farmers to the unpredictability of the global market. Additionally, as with forestry, influence in the food economy, which was formerly in the hands of farmers, has shifted to corporations (Friedmann 1995); these changes in policy increasingly support corporate food processors over the family farm, in part because agribusiness is powerful in provincial and federal agricultural lobbies (Adams 2003; Epp and Whitson 2001; Lawrence, Knuttila, and Gray 2001). For example, in recent history, at both the federal and provincial levels, legislation has raised caps on farm support programs, leading to increased opportunities for corporate farms to write-off losses, as opposed to small farms which are on their own (CNFU 2010). Essentially, the provincial and federal governments are further facilitating the ongoing trend of large corporate farms. This facilitation has led to the creation of massive individual investors owning huge acreages, leading to an increase in monopolies. For example, one investment management company, Assiniboia Capital of Saskatchewan, manages over 100,000 acres of farmland in Canada (CNFU 2010).
These changes have led to a shift from family farmers who own their own land and livestock to corporate owned farms that are tended to by hired hourly labor (CNFU 2010).

Recent agricultural policy has also brought forth regulations that are particularly challenging for small-scale farmers. As mentioned in the introduction, the neoliberal era is often regarded as re-regulatory rather than deregulatory. New regulations often work in favor of larger corporate entities. These regulations are often frustrating for small-scale farmers. One of these frustrated farmers is Darcy Engel. In 2011 I spent an afternoon on Darcy Engel and Aaron Sinclair’s farm in the Almaguin Highlands (see Figure 20). As I pulled up to the old farmhouse, Aaron was bringing in wood for the woodstove in the kitchen. I grabbed a few logs and entered the house with him. The three of us, along with one of their three children, sat down in the old kitchen for lunch and a lively discussion regarding farming in the area. Darcy and Aaron are in their 30s, and they recently purchased this 100 acre farm after living in North Bay for the last few years. Both Darcy and Aaron grew up on farms and had been planning to have a farm of their own for some time. Early in our chat, I inquired with Darcy about the role of regulations on small-scale farmers. Darcy did not mince words:

I resent that I have to compete with someone who cuts greens with a laser level and has no dirt on their greens. I have to compete with someone who never steps into a field, and who is managing slave labor, essentially. I think that I deserve more respect than that…They [larger farms] have huge advocacy powers as well. The mesclun growers are now advocating that any person selling greens should have to have bacterial testing on the greens. That is a way of keeping out small farmers. I couldn’t afford to do that. (2011, interview)

Darcy is not alone in her frustrations. Over lunch and tea at the Blue Roof Restaurant in Sundridge in 2011, farmer Heidi Murphy informed me that provincial regulations are challenging for smaller farmers, stating, “There is definitely a sense with some farmers that provincial regulations are somewhat limiting on smaller farmers. Definitely. It is not like we
have that much of a dent on their sales. But [a large-scale farmer] actually admitted to me that they were threatened by us [small farmers]” (2011, interview). Mara Pierce, who sells eggs to supplement her income from her full time job, believes that regulations are particularly challenging to small farmers who cannot afford to follow provincial regulations that appear to favor large-scale corporate farms, stating, “It makes it really hard to even try being a farmer when there are all of these hyper-regulations” (2011, interview).

Figure 20. Darcy and Aaron’s farm
What are some specific examples of these inhibiting regulations? Heidi Murphy specifically discussed butchering as a regulatory challenge faced by small-scale farmers. Any meat that a farmer sells must be provincially inspected. Particularly for small farmers, the extra costs that accompany butchering make it nearly impossible to compete with larger producers. One animal costs anywhere between $300 and $600 for processing. Heidi stated, “Do I think there has to be some regulations to guarantee that food is safe? Absolutely. There is definitely value to that. It doesn’t necessarily need to go to a provincially inspected abattoir. There are other butchers who know how to slaughter animals. I think people should have a choice. We should be able to have the choice. Ken’s Quality Meats down on Seymour can slaughter a cow just as well at half the cost” (2011, interview). Farmer Aaron Sinclair agrees that animal butchering is cost prohibitive for small-scale farmers. He told me, “If you have to truck 500 chickens for an hour that is one thing, but if you are only taking 30, it is not going to be worth it” (2011, interview). Aaron has to drive 70km for the nearest provincially certified abattoir, where he then spends much of the day waiting. Because of the costs, he ended up losing money and has since stopped selling chickens. Mara Pierce also explained that farmers are not allowed to sell their eggs outside of the property line of their farm unless they have their eggs graded. Unfortunately, there are no grading stations in the area, and having eggs graded adds another cost. Mara has responded to this regulation by redefining her farm boundary, “I consider my farm to include the trunk of my Civic [laughter]!” (2011, interview).

Along with changing policies at the federal, provincial and municipal levels, the rezoning of farmland has also brought forth new challenges for farmers in the Almaguin Highlands. In recent decades land owners throughout North America and the globe have attempted to rezone land formerly designated as rural or agricultural in the hopes of subdividing the land for
commercial and residential development (Johnsen 2004; Robbins et al. 2009). According to Heidi Murphy, one major challenge that accompanies rezoning is an increase in incompatible uses. Newly subdivided rezoned lots that are adjacent to farms may have significantly different uses, leading to disagreements between landowners. In one recent case a farmer’s barn is only 100 feet away from a new neighbor’s well. The farmer is now receiving complaints because of the proximity of the barn to the well and the potential for runoff into the neighbor’s water supply. Interestingly, the farmer firmly believes that the blame for this conflict is in the hands of the municipality, because it was the municipality who approved the severance (2011, interview).

Heidi Murphy agrees, and she suggests that because local municipalities are so taxed for money, they are approving severances with less critical examination than in the past (2011, interview). Many municipalities are in debt and they are well aware, for example, that a new $250,000 home will increase their tax base.

The increase in rezoning has led some residents in the area to take steps to ensure that their land remains zoned rural. Thirty years ago, Linda Kelly and her husband bought a 100 acre farm from a retired farmer. The retired farmer requested that the new owners keep the land zoned rural and non-severed. Since purchasing the acreage Linda and her husband are using the farm as a “hobby farm.” She told me, “We are not farming, per se, because it is not a valid thing these days, but it is a hobby farm and it is a place to raise your kids” (2009, interview). Interestingly, around 15 years ago Linda discovered that the township had changed the designation on their property from rural to community. Immediately after making this discovery Linda demanded it be rezoned as rural:

The gentleman [at the village office] thought I was crazy, because this property is potential expansion for the village, and it is worth more money when it is zoned community. I told him that money was not what we bought it for, and that I wanted the rural designation back, and we got it back… We stayed rural because I
have donkeys and goats and horses and roosters. If it had been designated community our neighbors could complain. Also, we had no intention of dividing this up, that is why we stayed rural. (2009, interview)

Much like Linda’s case, Heidi Murphy’s farm was also rezoned without her knowledge from agricultural to rural-residential. In her case it occurred over the Christmas holidays. The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) conducted an analysis of land in the area, and made a decision that any farms that did not classify as soil-type one or two were no longer prime agricultural areas (farms are classified based on their soil type, ranked classes one through five, with one being the highest). As a result of OMAFRAs analysis, the township did what they called “housecleaning,” and rezoned over 250 farms to rural-residential over the Christmas holidays. If farmers wanted to appeal the change they were able; however, it took time, money, and lawyers. Heidi’s husband, Sam, was insistent that the land remain zoned as agricultural, in part because of the reduced taxes. Furthermore, when land is rezoned as rural-residential there are limitations, including, for example, the number of animals allowed on the land. Heidi recalls, “When Sam went in and challenged it, they said, ‘No, this is great because now you can cut four lots on your property!’” (2011, interview). According to Heidi, “The municipality made it seem as though that is what is supposed to happen to farmland now.” Heidi said, regarding the change, “It is strange because [this township] was an agricultural community. It is like you are killing your heritage for money, for that short term gain. And no disrespect, but the leadership, they need someone to stand up there...It is an agricultural community and provides a certain lifestyle, and if you are going to turn it into a rural residential community I am out of here” (2011, interview). Not all farmers are opposed to rezoning, however. Ron Buxton told me:

I'll trade off a couple of acres of agricultural land for an economic benefit. I remember getting in a fight when the Ottawa Senators were looking for a new
piece of land for the stadium, and they found a 120 acre farm on the outside of the city. The provincial Ministry of Ag protested the zoning. I said that if you are going to put a $50 million stadium and all the jobs an NHL team will create, I would happily sacrifice that farm for the economic benefit, and I would do the same thing here, provided I am still sure that this is not the last piece of land in the world. I am not going encourage a subdivision on a piece of prime farmland if there are other options here, but, you know, sometimes there aren’t other options. (2011, interview)

Other farmers have expressed their openness to rezoning because it allows them to sever a piece from their property, allowing other family members to build a home on that newly severed piece of property. Finally, for some who have retired or chosen to leave farming altogether, the rezoning made it easy for them to subdivide their lots and sell them as either commercial or residential properties (see Figure 21).

![Subdivided and rezoned former farmland sold as residential lots](image)

Figure 21. Subdivided and rezoned former farmland sold as residential lots
As some residents are fighting for their land to remain zoned agricultural, there are others who are seeking to rezone agricultural land. Local developer Brandon Morgan has clients who have been attempting to purchase vacant lots and develop them; however, some municipalities, according to Brandon, make this process “unnecessarily challenging” by requiring large amounts of paperwork and what he feels are excessive fees. The result, in Brandon’s eyes, is a loss for all parties involved: “At the end of the day either the farmer’s field sits there and they get farmer’s field taxes, or we put up a $750,000 building and do $400,000 worth of improvements to the property, and now you have a property that is worth $1.1 million, and now they get the tax on that. So it is frustrating” (2010, interview). Brandon’s frustrations in comparison to the abovementioned protests from farmers illustrates the disagreements that currently exist in regards to proper uses of rural land and what constitutes “proper” development in the 21st century. Regardless, farmers do remain in the area. In this next section I examine the ways in which they are able to survive.

In order to make ends meet, most farmers in the area, like many farmers across the globe, rely on off-farm income. The need for farmers to have income from off the farm is not new – Canadian agricultural historian James Murton informed me that rarely have Canadian farmers been able to sustain themselves without off-farm income of some sort (2011, interview). The prevalence of Jeffersonian visions of rural North America as a place of self-employed prosperous farmers and loggers is a flawed one (Fink 1998). Relating specifically to the Almaguin Highlands, reporter Gerry Robinson cannot remember there ever being a “proper farmer” [meaning a farmer with no off-farm income] with the exception of a few of the dairy farmers in Powassan. Gerry grew up on a farm in the area, and he told me, “To be honest, growing up I remember doing a bit of everything to get by. Dad worked in the park in summer and ran a little
backhoe business on top of raising his beef cattle and selling firewood and going logging… I could take you to all my dad's friends and tell you all of their other jobs, from mechanics, to bricklayers, to railroad employees” (2011, interview). Heidi Murphy and her husband both work full time jobs in addition to farming. She told me, “It takes an income to have a farm. The farm is definitely not self sufficient on its own. Will it ever be?… I am not sure that it can be self sufficient at the level that we are doing it” (2011, interview). She was only able to think of two or three farms in our area that are self sufficient, but they are large third generation monoculture operations. Although the need for off-farm income has been constant, the regularity, the amount, and the social acceptance of off-farm work has increased since the 1980s (Johnsen 2004). Ron Buxton concurs, noting that beginning in the early 1980s many commercial farmers, people who historically would have had a large enough farm to earn a living, were forced to find off farm work: “A lot of people who managed to save their farm, if they had debt, they paid it by getting off-farm work and working all hours on the farm as well. They'd work in factory for 8 or 9 hours and then come home and work all night until midnight and struggle off to work the next morning. The kids and wife would be doing the work too” (2011, interview). This is in part because of the abovementioned significant rise in farm debt that began in the early 1980s.

According to Canada’s National Farmers Union (2010), for each dollar a farmer earns, he or she must take on approximately $23 in debt. In the 1970s debt to dollar earned was around $3.50. In the context of these changes, Gerry Robinson states, “There is no incentive to farm - you have to love farming” (2011, interview). Darcy Engel adds, “It’s interesting, because farmers don’t make any money. Most farmers in our area aren’t able to pay into a pension fund. I think people take for granted those things. If you are a farmer in an area with no community, no pension, and children far away, it is not a bright future” (2011, interview).
What have been some of the cost increases that have led to the staggering increase in debt? In addition to mechanized equipment, some of these costs arise from the “day to day” operations on a farm, for example, fuel for tractors, and barn and livestock insurance. According to one small-scale farmer I interviewed, her home insurance on one acre went from $650 to $2500 as soon as she began raising chickens. Farmland is also becoming more expensive in the Almaguin Highlands. For example, Gerry Robinson noted that Magnetawan has pockets of high-quality farmland, but a 200 acre farm with 80% cleared fields is $450,000. According to Gerry this is approximately triple the price of a similar farm in Southern Ontario (2010, interview).

Mayor Jack Grant points out that farm values are determined by their potential for redevelopment, making location more important that qualities such as acreage or fertility (2009, interview).

Some small-scale farmers in the area are able to supplement their incomes by offering other services on the farm, such as selling value-added goods like jams and honey, providing workshops, and offering farmstays (where guests pay small farmers to stay on their farms as they would at hotels or bed and breakfasts). Although some farmers embrace this opportunity to supplement income from their farm, others feel it takes away from the service that farmers already provide. Darcy Engel had this to say:

I don't necessarily want to prostitute myself to the market. What I see with farmers is they have this gift and they have this heritage of growing things, and yet if they want to succeed the expectation is that they also become marketers, value added designers, and come up with innovative labels. As a person who loves working on the land, I don't really want to do that, or feel pressured for that….Farmers should feel resentful when they sort of have to turn their farm into a carnival to make money, if they have to make jam, or do jerky. If that is your passion, then have at it, but to feel that it has to go to that, the idea that the value isn’t in the product, but in how it is presented [is a problem]. (2011, interview)
Mara Pierce suggests that the best way for farmers to build self-reliance and resilience is through Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects and other forms of small scale growth: “There is that old guard perspective that the only way to do well on a farm is to go big on that grand scale, but I think there is an emerging generation of us who want a modest income and to live closer to your values” (2011, interview). One example is Heidi Murphy. She and her husband have a small diversified farm that includes pigs, horses, cattle, produce, and eggs. Their goal is to provide both a CSA and a “one-stop shopping” experience, where customers can come to their farm and purchase all of the produce and meat that they need. At the moment they have a one-season CSA, but their ultimate goal is to extend into three or four seasons. They are not currently certified organic, but their crops are chemical-free. Yet Heidi struggles with the costs she must charge her customers: “There is a movement of people that can afford to pay, and with them you can charge more accurate costs associated with growing food, but there is an elitism there, and it is kind of too bad. There are people who want to do the same thing and they can’t afford it, and I feel bad about that” (2011, interview).

Regardless, in the context of these changes, Ron Buxton is convinced that there will continue to be an increase in small-scale agriculture in the area, particularly in what he calls “backyard” (subsistence) agriculture. Specifically referring to farmers in Powassan, Ron suggests that the increase is due to the particular type of farmer: “We’ve probably got as many farmers now as we had as I was talking about in the heydays when I was here in the ‘70s. But those farmers wouldn’t be producing anything like the volume” (2011, interview). The trend, he feels, will be an increase in 50 to 100 acre farms where farmers can grow enough food to feed their families and have an option to sell the surplus locally.
The growing interest in organic locally grown food may also prove beneficial to these small-scale farmers. Heidi Murphy states, “The organic movement and 100 mile diet have definitely been a plus for farming, and I think it has the potential to create a discussion and open people’s eyes” (2011, interview). Member of Parliament, Tony Clement, agrees: “I just see that consumers are more discriminating now with their food sources and they want more locally grown foods for either environmental reasons or food safety reasons. So agriculture is making a comeback” (2011, interview). Jonathan Belden, agricultural historian and recent transplant to the area was struck by the size and popularity of the local food movement in the area:

I moved here not by choice, and coming here as an agricultural historian, I thought, ‘You can’t farm here, and there is no farming here.’ But the more you peel away at it, the more you see… So it seems to me there is quite a bit of it and there is a lot of interest. People want to deal with small farmers, they want that connection. The CSA process has a great social aspect, when you go and pick up your produce you meet with people. (2011, interview)

Another positive aspect for small-scale farmers in the area has been the emergence of a handful of local food groups that promote eating locally grown foods. One group, the Near North Locavores, brings together farmers and consumers interested in promoting local food. Another group is Transition Town North Bay, which focuses on preparing communities for self-sufficiency in a post-peak oil world.

One successful example of the local food movement has been the Savour Muskoka program. The goal of the program is for local farmers to provide food for local resorts and restaurants. Although the program is primarily to the south of the Almaguin Highlands in Muskoka, a number of farmers in the Almaguin Highlands take part in it. According to the former chairperson of the Savour Muskoka program, Allan Boddington, the originators of the program felt that, in addition to creating relationships between farmers and restaurant owners, tourists who frequent the area would be attracted to the idea. He explained, “If you build a strong
community, for example in this case around local food and farming and buying local, tourism will generally develop out of it because you now have these experiences and tourism outlets” (2011, interview). For Allan, the first step was to market the program, and then work on building relationships between farmers and chefs. Although many local farmers were already working with restaurants via farmer's markets, this program offered a new and more personal relationship. During the first year the program went from 20 to 70 members. By the second year they had 100 members. This program has been positive for local farmers, but Alan emphasized that they did not want the farmers to see the program as charity: “Over the last three or four decades the farmers have had a rough go at it. They've lost faith in the system…We didn’t want to come across as talking down” (2011, interview).

Not surprisingly, there are occasional disagreements between the “old guard” of farmers, and the younger generation in the Almaguin Highlands. Unlike the previous generation of farmers in the area, many of new farmers are practicing polyculture and organic farming. When I asked Heidi Murphy, a local farmer in her mid-30s, if there are any similarities among these new farmers, she responded: “We're all hippies! [laughter]. Just joking. We are all pretty minimalistic and rooted in environmental issues and trying to live a certain way. We are back-to-the-landers. Living a good clean life and passing that on” (2011, interview). Heidi has always wanted to be self-sufficient and “off-the-grid,” and her farm allows her to realize these goals. She stated, “My expectations were to grow my own food, live healthy, and share that love – show people how to do it. For me it was always about living a certain way” (2011, interview).

I asked Darcy Engel on her thoughts on overall communication between the two groups. She responded, “I think there is a reasonable amount of disrespect [from the old guard toward the new]…And some of that is experience snobbery” (2011, interview). When I asked Aaron
Sinclair if he has approached the older generation for suggestions or advice, he replied, “I think maybe I wouldn’t want to learn from the old guard, because that is a model of agriculture that had its day and is done. I wouldn’t want to learn to do a monocrop and spray it ten times and spray nitrogen and potassium. I don’t know that Darcy’s dad would have a lot to teach us about farming. He wants to come and work, but he will want to spray Roundup on weeds… he talks about Roundup the way you’d talk about wines” (2011, interview). To which Darcy half-jokingly replied, “Or God.” Heidi Murphy somewhat agrees; although she believes that building off of the experiences of older farmers is important, she also suggests that some of the older farmers are stuck in a high-modernist mindset. Darcy Engel suggests that the high-modernist mindset makes it challenging to bridge the gap with the younger farmers who are practicing diversified organic farming (2011, interview). Heidi Murphy further suggests that the differences between these generations go beyond how they grow food, and also relate to their philosophies and lifestyles (2011, interview).

5.4 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the massive economic and regulatory changes that have occurred in forestry and agriculture in recent decades. In the context of these changes, many parts of the Almaguin Highlands have become sites of new kinds of production, as former forestry and farmland have been recommodified as land for residential development. The consequences of these changes in the countryside include increased youth outmigration, fewer full-time employment opportunities, and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

The shift to these new forms of production has also meant the rezoning of former farmland to residential status. Much like how gentrified space in urban areas is often rezoned to meet the needs of developers and investors, similar processes occur in rural areas. As I
demonstrate earlier in this chapter, this occasionally occurs without the landowners’ knowledge. What I find most telling about these cases is what they say about the current state of farming in the Almaguin Highlands: in both examples, which occurred in separate municipalities, the municipal offices were shocked that anyone would want their land to remain zoned as rural/agricultural. The municipal officials simply assumed that it was in the best interest of most landowners to have their land rezoned so that they could take advantage of the espoused benefits of rezoning.

As new residents arrive and purchase parcels on rezoned land, we can once again see characteristics of the bourgeois ideology of nature coming to fore. For example, in cases where new residents may find the smells of hog farms or the noise of buzz-saws antithetical to their expectations regarding the rural idyll, they use their power and influence to regulate these industries, allowing them a more pleasurable experience. As noted above, as farmers and loggers have decreasing influence, and as more upper-class recreationalists come to the area, the power-dynamic is greatly shifting in favor of recreationalists, cottagers, retirees, and other individuals using the area for leisure purposes.

Finally, in this chapter I also demonstrate the ways in which neoliberalism can be understood as a regulatory process, where new regulations, at the municipal, provincial, and federal levels, often work in the interests of large corporations and the elite. This is occurring in Ontario for both small-scale farmers and loggers. Many farmers I have met are now unable to compete with large-scale farmers because they cannot afford, for example, provincially certified abattoirs or egg grading services on a scale that allows them to realize any profit. Similar challenges occur in the logging industry, where, because of scale, small operations are unable to make profit hauling logs outside of the area. As larger farming and logging operations are able to
sell commodities at lower prices, smaller operations are simply unable to compete. One reason that many larger operations are able to sell at such low prices is because of new regulations that work in favor of large scale farming and logging.

Regardless of these challenges, there are still small-scale farmers and forestry operations in the area; however, these individuals face tremendous challenges to make a living. As a result, there are constant attempts to boost the wellbeing of impoverished rural villages. In the next two chapters I specifically examine recent economic development initiatives. By examining these in detail, I hope to provide a better understanding of what the future economic and social landscape of the Almaguin Highlands has in store.
6 – ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

“It’s really scary when you care”

6.1 – Introduction

In summer of 2009 I was meeting with Community Futures Development Corporation (CFDC) manager Thomas Richards. We were discussing the current state of rural North America and he stated, “It is stagnant. It couldn’t go much further down. It does not have to overcome a situation where hundreds of families have to face a huge outmigration; that has already happened” (2009, interview). A decrease of jobs in agriculture, forestry, and industry, and increasing regional competition for attracting jobs of any sort has led to a “survival of the fittest” mentality between many rural areas (Jenkins, Hall, and Troughton 1998; Reid 1998). As mentioned in Chapter 1, the “corporatization of the city,” where cities act as marketers and behave like businesses in what David Harvey (1989) refers to as the “entrepreneurial city,” is proceeding in rural areas, leading to a “corporatization of the countryside.” With an increase in neoliberal policies, city and municipal governments today “act less as regulators of markets to protect marginalized residents and more as entrepreneurial agents of market processes and capital accumulation” (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008: 49; also see Cloke and Goodwin 1992). In response to these changes, many rural municipalities have formed economic development committees (EDCs) with the hopes of devising strategies that will improve or attract economic growth. Even in the 21st century, many economic development initiatives follow in the oft-critiqued footsteps of modernization theorists of the mid-20th century. Put simply, modernization theorists set out to make “traditional” and “undeveloped” peoples more “modern” and “developed” (Cooper and Packard 2005). As Ferguson notes, this perspective has led to a profitable “development industry” that employs “experts” who create plans in order to bring
“development” to “underdeveloped” peoples and places (1994, 2006). Whether in the context of Ferguson’s work in Africa, or in the Almaguin Highlands, the development industry shares a common discourse in which experts intervene and “solve problems” via the implementation of strategic plans (Ferguson 1994). To better understand these processes, in this chapter I explore the formation of economic development committees, the hiring of “expert” consultants, the creation of strategic plans, government funding for economic development, and the provincial and federal encouragement of “working together” between the various municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands.

6.2 – Organizing for Economic Development

Increasing economic woes throughout the countryside have led to a sudden increase in economic development committees (EDCs) in the Almaguin Highlands. The region, with a total population of around 20,000 individuals, has four separate EDCs. One of these, the Almaguin Highlands Economic Development Committee (AHED), represents the entire area. This committee, however, mainly serves as an information sharing group and does not take on economic development projects. Unlike the other three committees, AHED has no budget. The main purpose of AHED, whose members include members include municipal councilors, mayors, employment agencies, tourism operators, forestry representatives, as well as representatives from provincial and federal agencies, is to keep people “in the loop” regarding activities throughout the area.

The other three committees are locale-specific, and all three actively undertake projects to promote development. Typically, most committee members are volunteers, with the exception of the economic development officer (EDO), if there is one. These volunteers, who may or may not serve on local council, spend their free time on these committees with the hopes of helping
the area prosper. In addition to producing reports and strategic plans, EDCs in the Almaguin Highlands have been responsible for initiating farmer's markets, organizing community garage sales, developing plans for future commercial development projects, and helping to sway provincial and federal agencies in their policies. They often meet with provincial agencies, funders, businesses, and residents, holding “business breakfasts” and “economic development days” in the hopes of increasing commerce and jobs in the area.

The southernmost EDC is the Southern Almaguin Highlands Economic Development Committee (SAHED). This committee comprises representatives from Burk’s Falls, Ryerson, and Armour, and includes both municipal councilors and volunteer members from the community. SAHED meets monthly, and the major goals of the committee are to devise strategies to improve the visibility of the area, assist with business retention, and attempt to decelerate the outmigration of youth. Of the three major committees, in my observations SAHED is the least productive. SAHED, as is the case with all four committees, has lost many members over the years, particularly because the implementation of proposed projects is often a slow or fruitless task. The Central Almaguin Economic Development Association (CAEDA) includes representatives from Sundridge, Strong, Joly, Machar, and South River. CAEDA is unique in that, as of 2012, all members were municipal councilors.

Finally, furthest north is MoPED – the Municipality of Powassan Economic Development Committee. MoPED is perhaps the most proactive and successful of the EDCs. A local newspaper reporter told me, “Powassan is starting to put things into high gear. It would be really nice if the other municipalities started paying attention to what they are doing up there. I think the biggest thing is a competent qualified staff member looking strictly at economic development [at this time they were the only EDC with an economic development officer]. The
stuff they are working on is head and shoulders above” (2011, interview). Part of MoPED’s key to success is that they have had longstanding volunteers, their meetings are well organized and well attended, and they typically have long-term projects in the works. For example, in 2011 MoPED hosted an “economic development day” which was well attended by local business owners, real estate agents, developers, potential investors, and representatives from provincial and federal funding agencies. There were various presentations throughout the day which included: 1. Incentives for developing in Powassan, 2. Funding programs for a changing market, and 3. “Green” development in Powassan. MoPED has also been involved in the creation of a Family Health Team (as I discussed in Chapter 4), and is currently working on a project called The Road Ahead. This project aims to bring a future gas-bar, hotel, and restaurant development alongside a new highway interchange. MoPED has already begun the initial feasibility studies, hired an architect for preliminary plans, and secured funding to continue with developing the project.

Regardless of their productivity, some residents are skeptical of the effectiveness of EDCs. Motel owner Ted Hollingsbrook stated, “This economic development business, it’s a scam, right?” (2008, interview). Ted was on a chamber of commerce for 10 years and during that time he witnessed many incarnations of EDCs. Ted, along with countless other individuals I have met with, commented on the cyclical character of EDCs: 1. The committee forms upon receiving funding from the provincial and/or federal governments. 2. The committee uses much of the funding to hire “expert” consultants to devise strategic plans. 3. The committee hires economic development officer (EDO), which is often top recommendation in most strategic plans. 4. The EDO along with members of the EDC looks for ways in which to implement the strategic plan.
5. Finally, once the goals of the strategic plan are deemed unattainable, the funds run out, and the EDO’s position is eliminated, the plan is put on a shelf next to previous strategic plans.

A local mayor suggests that one inherent problem is that type of development that strategic plans call for (which I discuss throughout this chapter) is unrealistic for small Northern Ontario communities:

I don't know how we can expect to attract something to every little town. You just can't do it, and when you say that, you are not very effective for your own populous. And that is what I struggle with. I want to go to these meetings and say ‘Guys, let’s really fish where there's fish.’ People can't see that. They want another brochure...And I don't know what the answers for little communities are. Maybe this is how it is going to be. (2011, interview)

One major challenge for EDCs in the Almaguin Highlands is a shortage of funds and resources. The villages and townships operate on limited budgets, and, in recent years, have faced increased costs as a result of the downloading of services from the provincial government, for example road maintenance. Receiving municipal contributions, therefore, is a constant struggle. Regarding this process for MoPED, Ron Buxton states, “We have to argue with council for every penny in our economic budget. And I’ve gone as far as to say that, you know, you’ve got to stop treating economic development as a petty cash item here. It’s got be a line-item in the budget, as opposed to saying, ‘Well we’ll give you a few hundred dollars if someone wants to go to a conference’ type of thing” (2008, interview). For Ron, the economic development committee is one of the most important components for a small municipality in 21st century rural North America.

Because of these challenges, all municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands depend on provincial and federal funding to assist in economic development. As Ellis Butler told me, “As far as economic development is concerned, provincial and federal governments are necessary evils. You have to dance with the devil. Initiatives are expensive and small municipalities can’t
afford everything” (2009, interview). As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, one of the first things municipalities do with these funds is hire an “expert” consultant to assist them in economic development. These consultants and their strategic plans are the focus of the next section.

6.3 – Expert Consultants and Strategic Plans

Most any municipality in rural Ontario that is seeking economic development and outside investment creates a strategic plan. Municipalities nearly always hire outside consultants to create them. A consultant’s credentials vary, but common degrees include marketing, communications, business, and finance. These consultants come to the area, meet with individuals, and devise plans that will map out the necessary steps to bring economic growth and prosperity to the region. This process is not unique to rural Ontario. In The Anti-Politics Machine, Ferguson (1994) gives an example of local development officials in Lesotho bringing in an “expert” development consultant from outside of the region. The expert knew nothing about the area, but he knew “development.” This same logic applies to the development process in many rural areas throughout Canada. In this section I examine both consultants and strategic plans, paying particular attention to the pros and cons, and the ways in which consultants and plans are interpreted and utilized.

Briefly, after a municipality is awarded funds for creating a strategic plan, the municipality searches for a consultant whom they will hire to write the plan. The costs for hiring a consultant vary, but they typically range between $10,000 and $40,000. For example, in 2011 the Municipality of Powassan hired McSweeney & Associates out of Ottawa for $30,000. In 2009 the Almaguin Highlands Council for the Arts hired the Ben Farella Group out of North Bay to create their strategic plan, paying the consultant a total of $33,000. For this particular grant,
the Council for the Arts was awarded $25,000 for consulting and $8,000 for marketing. This amount happened to be exactly what the Ben Farella Group charged. As is evident in these costs, municipal consulting is a large industry, and it can be incredibly lucrative. As a result, it is also a competitive industry. When I asked Ellis Butler how SAHED went about choosing a consultant for a 2009 study he told me, “He came to us, probably because he found out that everybody had G8 money and figured, ‘You have free money to spend. You can hire me’” (2010, interview).

Once hired, a consultant provides many potential services, including the creation of business plans, labor market studies, strategic plans, feasibility studies, investment readiness studies, site selection plans, community profiling, and marketing plans. As consultant Carly Grant told me, she does “anything with a planning and research component” (2009, interview). Carly begins the process by collecting all necessary demographic and economic information. Many consultants access this information from the federal government’s Statistics Canada website. All data on Statistic’s Canada is available to the general public at no charge. Following data collection, the consultant then meets with community members – typically village councilors or EDC members. The public consultation phase is important, because it is during this phase that the planner learns of the wants and needs of the community. For example, for a “revitalization study” that took place in Burk’s Falls in 2009 the planner spent the better portion of a month in the village meeting with various residents, particularly business owners (Butler 2010, interview). Next, the planner writes the plan, and then presents his or her findings to municipal councils, EDCs, and any interested residents. What follows are some of the perceived pros and cons of consultants.

Because consultants are such a large factor in the economic development process, residents have formed strong opinions regarding their effectiveness. For some individuals,
consultants are essential. According to those of this opinion, consultants provide expertise, experience, and, importantly, objectivity. According to Ron Buxton, the Municipality of Powassan is “certainly a lot wiser for having met with [consultant] McSweeney and having paid him $30,000” (2011, interview). From Ron’s point of view, McSweeney brings experience and knowledge that will allow the municipality to attract developers – this knowledge and experience is something that no one in the area, in Ron’s opinion, is able to provide. For example, McSweeney informed the municipality about the site selection process and how to actively seek investors. Ron hopes to continue to get “people from down south to help out. In other words, bring in outside expertise, because we certainly don’t have a monopoly on intelligence here, in fact we don’t necessarily have necessarily a great circle of worldly intelligence to start with” (2011, interview). For Ron and MoPED, not only are outside consultants valuable because of their experience in economic development, but also because they have spent time outside of the area.

Ontario Tourism Marketing Partnership (OTMP) representative Brian Harrison also sees the positive aspects that consultants bring to the table. For Brian, however, it is important to hire a consultant who knows the area and understands the needs of the communities, rather than an outside firm that may approach the process in a less personal fashion. The most positive aspects of consultants, in Brian’s opinion, are bringing committees together to work on common goals, facilitating discussion, and explaining how to best implement a strategic plan (2011, interview).

Yet for many people I have spoken with, consultants do not provide the new information or useful services they claim. Many residents suggest that consultants far too frequently use what Ferguson (1994) calls “blueprint development” when writing their strategic plans. Blueprint development is when a planner uses a template to create strategic plans and other planning
documents. Ted Hollingsbrook suggests that planners simply select templates that best suit the demographics of a particular area: “Someone comes in and says, ‘Small town loses its main business, you need to now concentrate on tourism … We get an alphabet soup of plans and agencies sweeping in to help us. They come in from outside and say, ‘We can help you. We’re not like those other guys who didn’t help you. You don’t understand, that old plan was all just politics, this is the plan.’ It is like a witch making a brew. ‘We’ll give you a number seven because you don’t have a beach’” (2009, interview). This outlook on consultants has become so widespread that when working on a committee in 2008, retiree Doris Atkins, who was informed of the possible “rehashing” that consultants are accused of, was “on them like a dog on a bone. They were not happy” (2011, interview). The final product, according to Doris, however, was excellent, but only because they constantly made sure the consultants were doing their job.

Others feel that, because many consultants are not from the Almaguin Highlands, they lack the necessary understanding and expertise to be able to plan for the area’s future. Regarding this, political advisor Mark Abrams said, “Hiring a non-local consultant – no. You need someone local or local-ish” (2011, interview). Local resident Linda Kelly agrees. Unlike Ron Buxton, she particularly objects to hiring consultants from “the south” [Southern Ontario], stating: “They do not have enough information on the north. We are different” (2009, interview). In addition to not understanding the area, local business owner Darlene Peterson suggests that outside consultants are not committed to the area (2011, interview). Ministry of Northern Development and Mines (MNDM) representative Andy Ronson acknowledges that outside planners may not always be the best choice; however, the province does not allow internal costs to be eligible for grants, so funds must be external, essentially forcing a municipality to hire outside consultants. Andy
added that consulting firms are obviously aware of this regulation, and, at times, they exploit it, “oftentimes to the detriment of that community” (2011, interview).

Doris Atkins further critiques consultants because, in her opinion, many of them are not qualified: “You don't even have to be smart to be a consultant. All you need is a great visual. Call a community meeting and you have 20,000 grants handed to you…Maybe we should be consulting people!” (2011, interview). For others, although consultants are able to write hundreds of pages of reports, they lack the skills to put the theory into practice. CFDC manager Ron Varney told me, “There is a lot of academia surrounding economic development. You can now get a degree in it. And I took a few courses, and there were some practical useful tips…but economic development takes two things to really be effective: money and power” (2011, interview).

For retiree Jason Adelman, consultants waste the time and resources of community members. He reflected on the presentation of a recent consultant in Sundridge: “The consultant that they had hired for $75,000 wrote a review of the impact of the highway, and what was needed for the area…At the end of it we did little games and scenarios, and I thought, ‘This is crazy. This is unbelievable. You’re being paid $75,000 for this? This is downright disgraceful.’ I walked out afterwards and I went home” (2009, interview). Afterward, according to Jason, the consultant “vanished, the guy just evaporated.” EDO Laura Jenner agrees that consultants tend to complete plans and then leave the area. She told me, “I would love to consult…Think about it, you don’t have to deal with all the bullshit of actually working with a municipality. You get to choose your projects of what you bid on, and when you are finished with something you don’t own it – it is somebody else’s!” (2011, interview).
When I told MNMD representative Andy Ronson about this view of planners, he called it “unfortunate,” but he also suggests that municipalities need to hold consultants accountable to make sure that the document meets their needs. Andy told me, “If you are investing 20, 30, 50 or 60,000 dollars on a study that you want to use for your future, and if it doesn’t provide that information, then they didn’t provide what they said they would” (2011, interview). He also notes, however, that municipalities may be unaware of the lack of quality until after the report is complete. He has observed many cases of consulting firms “exploiting their relationship” with municipalities:

They go in and they say that they will be able to fix a community's problem...And then they will do the study, which is a duplication of something they have already done in another community. It is just a cookie cutter approach. So some may not have the interests of the community at heart. They are just in it to make money, and the communities don't question it because they feel the consultant knows better, and it never goes anywhere. (2011, interview)

In order to promote more effective consulting, the province does require that a municipality get at least three quotes from different consultants before choosing one. However, some consultants are creative, and will begin the process by completing a funding application on behalf of the community. In these cases, according to Andy, that particular consultant nearly always receives the contract because they have already established a relationship with the municipality.

A former consultant provided me with some fascinating insights into the world of consulting. She told me:

You know you can get a consultant to do just about anything, right? When [a colleague] was working on a study, he basically found that the tourism industry did not provide the economic benefit and spinoff that everybody always espouses that it does. And everyone that read it, including the local tourism association, went, ‘Oh my god, we can't put this in there! We can’t - we'll never get any funding, we can't possibly do that!’ (2011, interview)
As a result, he rewrote the section, “tweaking” the wording and giving the results a more positive spin. The consultant concluded, “I remember him clearly sitting in the office going, ‘Wow, these people would be shocked’” (2011, interview).

In the end, when consultants do exploit municipalities, they are the only ones who benefit. The process is a money losing venture for the funders, both federal and provincial, and the municipalities, who also contribute funds and many hours for these projects. Andy adds, “And when the plans do not go into place, the volunteers lose hope. And I think that is where most of these communities are right now. They have studied everything to death. They don't want to study anymore, because they don't see the benefit in it” (2011, interview). In this next section I explore in more detail the actual content of the strategic plans.

It is important to note that although many strategic plans make similar recommendations, the format in which the data is presented and the length of the plans vary significantly. For example, the entire Almaguin Highlands region received funding for a strategic plan in 2002. Lawler & Associates Consultants from North Bay wrote the plan. The main content of the plan is 44 pages; however, the plan also contains over 200 pages in appendices. At the other end of the spectrum, a 2009 strategic plan for CAEDA written by Precision Management of North Bay is only 20 pages, and a 2006 Municipal Plan for Powassan by Harriman & Associates and Saad Consulting is only 24 pages. In 2009 Pete Otte told me that CAEDA wants to avoid “these 500 page documents. We’ve been studied to death, let’s get to work” (2009, interview). Consultant Carly Grant is also a proponent of concise and accessible plans. She suggests that long plans become intimidating and challenging to read in their entirety. She also suggests the concise plans make it easier to get funding for future projects. She had this to say regarding a plan she was writing in 2009: “When we are done, because we’ll have a nice concise plan, FedNor and
NOHFC will fund everything that we put in there, because we’ll have done the homework and show that it is feasible…I am not going to put a wish list in there; I want them to be successful, so it won’t serve my interests to throw everything and the kitchen sink in there” (2011, interview).

The items discussed in a strategic plan also vary. Most strategic plans begin with a summary of the demographics of the particular region the plan represents. This is followed by a statement of purpose and a mission statement. This is an excerpt of the 2009 CAEDA mission statement: “Central Almaguin’s purpose is to serve the best interests of the community by respecting its special, small town character and quality of life…fostering business development and proactively attracting businesses and industries…[and] fostering tourism development by actively marketing the area” (Precision Management 2009: 6). Strategic plans then go on to analyze specific areas of potential economic development. For example, a major focus of the 2009 strategic plan for CAEDA was marketing, which the planner felt was the most pressing need for the area. This particular plan also includes recommendations to hire an EDO, create a regional website, and rename the area. Strategic plans often conclude with a plan for action.

A strategic plan may be designed for as little as one village, as was the case with a 2009 plan for Burk’s Falls, or as large as the entire region, as was the case with the 2002 report mentioned above. Currently, the federal government is encouraging villages and townships to create regional plans. Adam Brandt from FedNor told me, “We kind of force areas to do strategic plans, but I like to do them on a regional basis. We are trying to cluster the plans” (2011, interview). I will discuss the governmental encouragement of regional planning later in this chapter.
It is also important to note the frequency of these plans. When I asked Betsy Hauser about the prevalence of strategic plans in the Almaguin Highlands, she jokingly replied, “Oh, they do [strategic plans] down in the Almaguin Highlands just for sport! They do!” (2011, interview). For example, the 2006 Powassan strategic plan has since been replaced by a 2011 plan from a different consultant. Carly Grant suggests that a successful strategic plan should last for five years, at which point a municipality needs to analyze what they have accomplished in the original plan (2009, interview). In 2010 Marcy Helner did that with the 2006 Powassan strategic plan, and she told me, “There’s a lot that hasn’t been addressed, mostly around marketing and communications” (2010, interview). With this understanding of the role of strategic plans, in the next section I examine the various interpretations of the effectiveness of these plans.

Many individuals have informed me that a well-crafted strategic plan is the most important and valuable document a municipality can possess. According to EDO Peter Cook, more than anything, strategic plans set the direction of a community in a cohesive manner, and by establishing that direction, municipalities are able to map out a course of action (2009, interview). MNMD representative Andy Ronson adds, “I strongly personally believe in having that kind of document. Not only from the point of providing economic continuity, because leadership and opinions change, but at the same time it provides a shared vision and mission as to what they would like to see happen…A strategic plan provides a map to make things less daunting” (2011, interview). Take, for example, Powassan’s Road Ahead commercial development project (mentioned earlier in this chapter). Their strategic plan has played an essential component in funding this project. EDO Marcy Helner stated, “The funders basically said, ‘If you do a strategic plan, you’ll get the money’” (2010, interview). The federal funders went on to tell her to make absolutely certain that the strategic plan emphasizes the need for the
project. The plan included this emphasis and the municipality received additional funding for a functionality report and a business and marketing plan. As Peter Cook notes, once the strategic plan is in place and adopted, it serves as a “checkbook.” He argues, “The government is the only one that has any money these days…Usually if the government gives you money to develop a plan they will then support implantation of that plan” (2008, interview).

However, for many others, including volunteers, councilors, mayors, provincial and federal governmental employees, and planners themselves, the strategic plan is often ineffective. Political advisor Mark Abrams goes so far as to state, “I almost hesitate to use the word ‘strategic plan’ because it has so many negative connotations” (2011, interview). These negative connotations are tied to the general knowledge that strategic plans, once completed, are rarely followed. Community volunteer Edna Riverton explains, “They all get shelved…I don't know how many I have on my shelves in there…Been there done that. Didn’t work” (2011, interview). Doris Atkins experienced the shelving of a plan firsthand:

I remember dropping off the feasibility study we had done for the high school to the councils, and people just put it on the shelf. There were feasibility studies all over the place. You know they are not going to read it. I was not a happy camper. I was really disappointed…It was a good study, but it didn’t get us anywhere [laughter]. But all these reports look the same on the surface. It really is scary if you care. (2011, interview)

One reason that the plans are not used is because the suggestions in the plans are often unattainable, either because the area lacks the infrastructure, the funds, or the need/want for the proposed development projects. For example, the 2009 CAEDA commissioned strategic plan recommends that the area build a new information center directly off of the new highway interchange. The plan further suggests that the center include space to house a newly hired EDO/tourism officer, and provide visitors with computers and internet access. The plan does not,
however, address how the municipalities will purchase the land, build the center, fund its operation, or pay employee salaries. As Ted Hollingsbrook notes:

There is no money to execute the plans. There is always money to make a new plan. That involves hiring a consulting firm from Toronto who had lunch with me last week, and who suggested off hand that we need a plan. The plan doesn’t include the fact that half of the people in the area don’t like the plan…and they don’t want economic development. They didn’t want to rain on your parade, but when the plan comes out they’ll make sure it doesn’t go through. (2009, interview)

The consistency in plans including development strategies that are unattainable has led me to wonder why this trend is prevalent. When I asked consultant Betsy Hauser she explained:

[Consultants] want it to look like there is feasibility for [anything], because if they don't make it sound like that, they are not going to get the funding they want. So these reports have to look a certain way. Why do you think my tourism study ended up looking a different way than it realistically should have? Because it had to. It is a vicious circle. If someone actually came out and said, “You know what? The chances of you getting a manufacturing facility is nil.” then there goes all of the opportunity for government funding and subsidies and everything else. (2011, interview)

Andy Ronson from MNDM adds, “[The strategic plans] are more a vision and confirmation of their dreams, and it doesn’t seem to outline the necessary steps or measures they need to get to that dream…In addition to that, the plans often lack actual evidence, and are instead a confirmation of their wishes” (2011, interview). For Andy, the problem is that consultants will say anything is feasible in a feasibility study: “A community may say that they want to establish a large multi-use facility, and they apply to get a consultant to see if it is feasible. Of course the consultant says that it is feasible. But how is it feasible? That how part is often missing…It is the how that needs to be there, rather than a confirmation of a wish list” (2011, interview). Municipal councilor Andrea Taylor concurs: “I think that is a piece that a lot of people don’t want to look at in economic development. They want to look at the vision. That’s nice, but how will sustain your vision afterwards?” (2009, interview).
Gerry Robinson, however, proposes that it is not the plans that are necessarily flawed. Instead, Gerry suggests that the people in the area who are expected to implement the plans lack expertise to do so: “We can develop all the plans in the world, but we have zero bodies, zero individuals, and zero organizations that will pick that plan up and say, ‘Off we go’” (2011, interview). Consultant Carly Grant agrees, suggesting that strategic plans sit on shelves because the municipalities lack the leadership to initiate them (2009, interview). MNDM representative Mara Pierce further suggests that many individuals may feel that the completion of the strategic plan is the end of the task, where in reality the work is just beginning (2011, interview). One aspect of this work is the hiring of an EDO.

According to Carly Grant, as soon as the strategic plan is complete, the first step is for the municipality to hire an economic development officer (EDO). Once the appropriate EDO is hired, according to Carly, everything else will fall into place (2009, interview). The expectations of the role of an EDO range from municipality to municipality. Generally, this individual must be dedicated to building relationships with provincial and federal funders and the business community. A 2011 draft of a job description for an EDO for CAEDA (which paid an annual salary of $50,000) required, among many other things, the following expected skills and knowledge: An understanding of the economic, political and cultural environment in Northern Ontario, a dynamic personality with strong communication skills, the ability to act as a spokesperson for the region, and working knowledge of municipal legislation, regulations, policies and procedures related to economic and community development initiatives. The required tasks for this position were broken down into three sections: Community development (public sector), business development (private sector), and “general.” Examples of the required tasks included: Implementing priority strategic initiatives related to economic and community
development, researching funding possibilities, assisting local businesses and organizations with funding applications, and managing economic development, promotion and public relations.

In some cases, an EDO may be asked to take part in tasks that are not part of the job description. For example, CFDC manager Thomas Richards told me that it is common for newly hired EDOs to be asked to carry out event management tasks (2009, interview). The result is that the EDO often spends much of his or her time organizing events instead of attempting to increase economic development. EDO Marcy Helner suggests that this problem is particularly common in the North: “And of course in the north…it’s all about doing whatever needs to be done, wearing 18 hats, so I did a lot of that” (2010, interview). For example, Powassan’s 2008 EDO also served as the municipality’s computer/internet technical support staff. In another case, the early 2000s, the entire Almaguin Highlands hired one EDO for 15 municipalities. As Adam Brandt told me, “He was trying to appease everyone…You can imagine having 16 or 17 municipalities, having that kind of geography, and driving all over. At the end of the day there is not much to work with” (2011, interview).

Ultimately, however, the main goal for an EDO is to sell the community and raise funds. As Gerry Robinson told me, “I hate to call someone an economic development officer – what you really are is a sales person, and that is what you really want” (2011, interview). A major goal of this sales position is constantly acquiring funding. EDO Marcy Helner explained to me that much of her time as an EDO involves working through “the cycle:” “You create a plan, and then [you ask], ‘Is the funding available through government sources to do the implementation?’ …And it’s so hard – some people say, you know, ‘Well, you’re just chasing the money,’ and it’s like, ‘Well, yeah,’ and you sort of, basically, have to. You know, when the funder says, ‘Apply
for a strategic plan so that you can get your functionality report for your massive project,’ you say ‘OK, thanks for telling me how to get the money!’” (2010, interview).

One way in which EDOs can attempt to improve economic development in a municipality is by attending “funding forums.” At these forums, which are as brief as one afternoon and as lengthy as multiple days, business owners and municipal governments are invited to learn ways in which they can remain competitive in Ontario's North. These events include a variety of guest speakers, including local politicians and business owners, governmental and private funding agencies, and international “experts.” The Economic Developers Council of Ontario (EDCO) hosted one recent event. The individual admission for the event was $150 for the one day session or $200 for two days. Relating to Harvey’s “Entrepreneurial City” thesis (1989), the theme for this event was “coopetition.” Coopetition is the idea that in order to succeed in the 21st century, municipalities, villages, and townships must both work together and compete against one another to attract economic growth, including industry, commercial development, new residents, and tourism. The advertisement for this event asked: “Is your region ready for growth or will it be left behind?” It goes on to state that attendance at the event will “give you the knowledge and tools to build a data-driven strategic growth plan for your community and region” (EDCO 2011).

Peck and Tickell argue that this logic of competition, increasingly intense in the neoliberal era, “turns cities into accomplices in their own subordination” as they “must actively – and responsively – scan the horizon for investment and promotion opportunities monitoring ‘competitors’ and emulating ‘best practice’” (2002: 393-394). Some residents in the Almaguin Highlands feel the same way, and are increasingly wary of some of the side effects of increased “coopetition.” Edna Riverton, who is an active volunteer on numerous councils in the area, feels
that increased competition ultimately hurts the area by causing unnecessary disruptions and tensions between villages and townships as they compete to attract development (2011, interview).

EDO Laura Jenner attended the EDCO conference, and described the event to me. To inform attendees of the benefits of “coopeting,” EDCO hired two “experts,” both who reside in the southern United States. Their main argument was that for regional economic development, although neighboring municipalities are in direct competition with each other, they also must find ways to set goals together. Laura stated, “So, coopetition is still competing but in a cooperative way” (2011, interview). For example, the experts suggest that in a small region like the Almaguin Highlands, one village would focus on tourism, another on being a bedroom community, and another on industry. Laura’s response: “The problem with this idea is that, again, residential tax base vs. commercial tax base – one is a lot more lucrative than the other” (2011, interview). Furthermore, Laura suggests that because the “experts” were Americans they were “not necessarily in the loop” regarding development challenges in Northern Ontario. Nevertheless, Laura, the only representative from the Almaguin Highlands to attend the conference, was not sold on the idea. Like the abovementioned strategic plan, she feels that the EDCO strategists present ideas, but provide no practical ways to put them into practice.

Interestingly, in the context of all of the abovementioned consulting and strategic planning, between 2008 and 2012 throughout the entire Almaguin Highlands, only Powassan had an EDO. One reason for this, regardless of the recommendations of the strategic plans, is that some municipal councilors feel that there is not a need for an EDO. They argue that paying the salary is a waste of tax dollars, especially when most of municipalities have very little extra money to spare. As mayor Jeff Branson told me, “We just had a debate about an EDO, and I
wonder if that bus has left town, or if that train is even coming here” (2011, interview). Even Powassan, arguably the most aggressive and proactive in terms of economic development, only had a part time EDO, working 24 hours per week. Yet, Powassan has also had some success attracting development projects as a result of their proactive approach, leading one to see a possible link between their prosperity and the presence of an EDO. Regardless, one way in which local municipalities are attempting to increase their ability to hire EDOs is through access to provincial and federal funding.

6.4 – Government Funding

The funding that supports all of the abovementioned ventures typically comes from the federal and provincial governments. In many ways this may appear in contradiction to the neoliberal rhetoric of the current era, yet, as will become clear, much of the funding is dispensed in the hopes of decreasing municipal dependence on the provincial and federal governments. Member of Parliament Tony Clement told me that the role of these funding agencies is “leveling the playing field, making sure that there is equitable access to capital” (2011, interview). The result, Tony hopes, is “helping young people get that first job here in Northern Ontario,” with the goal of slowing down youth outmigration (2011, interview).

At the federal level these funds almost always come from the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario (FedNor). According to the FedNor website, FedNor, which was founded in 1987, “works with a variety of partners, as both a facilitator and catalyst, to help create an environment in which communities can thrive, businesses can grow and innovation can prosper” (Government of Canada 2012). Their mandate is to attempt to stimulate the economy for communities in Northern Ontario. According to Tony Clement, who was formerly Canada’s Minister of Industry, since its inception, FedNor has assisted in creating
or maintaining over 23,000 jobs in Northern Ontario, over 1300 of which have been provided to young adults (2011, interview).

At the provincial level there are numerous funding agencies available for municipalities engaging in economic development. The major ones are: the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines (MNDM), the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF), the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund Corporation (NOHFC), and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA).

One current MNDM funding initiative is the Northern Communities Investment Readiness program (NCIR). The overall goal of the NCIR program is to provide communities with resources that allow them to compete on a global scale. Through this program, municipalities are encouraged to create an online community profile that outlines their available resources for potential investors. This community profile is then listed on the Ontario Investment and Trade website, where private enterprises browse profiles when seeking out land and resources for development. The NCIR program also assists municipalities in completing an “asset inventory,” where they inventory their infrastructure, natural resources, schools, and hospitals. Following the asset inventory, the NCIR guides the municipalities through a target market study where they explore potential appropriate markets for attracting investors. Next, when appropriate, NCIR representatives host “familiarization tours.” On these tours, NCIR takes representatives from interested companies on tours of municipalities across Northern Ontario that possess the infrastructure and resources they require. These potential investors are often recruited by trade investors with the Ministry of Economic Development and Trade. The trade investors reside in different countries throughout the world and their job is to “sell Ontario” (2011, fieldnotes). Foreign direct investment in Canada has been on the rise since the 1985
inception of Investment Canada. The goal of Investment Canada is facilitating and soliciting foreign direct investment. By comparison, as of 2005, approximately 4.7% of private industry in the United States was controlled by foreign firms, in Canada that number is over 50% (Hurtig 2008). According to MNDM representative Andy Ronson, MNDM works fairly closely with trade investors to “make sure they are putting in a special word for Northern Ontario” (2011, interview). Just recently MNDM provided a large group of potential investors with a tour of Northern Ontario. Andy explains that a major goal of the tour was “to show that it is not just massive amounts of snow and just nature. We also have renowned companies with headquarters here” (2011, interview).

Interestingly, one provincial advisor I spoke with is somewhat critical of the program. She is skeptical of the provincial government’s goal of constantly attempting to attract outside investment: “It does concern me that we are always trying to bring in big investment dollars and big investors into small communities. I don't know. I come from a bit more of a smaller local economy. If we are going to survive the next 25 years it is going to based on the strength of local communities supporting each other and having that local economy happening” (2011, interview). This individual was also somewhat critical of the NCIR’s goal of attracting “sophisticated investors” (Ontario Ministry of Northern Development and Mines 2012). She stated: “Who is sophisticated? There is that attitude in provincial government that urban is sophisticated. I struggle with it” (2011, interview).

Regarding available funds, the amount of funds and the percentage covered for a particular project vary significantly. For many current projects, both the federal and provincial governments propose that each level of government (federal, provincial, and municipal) contribute one third, whereas in the recent past municipalities were not typically expected to
contribute significantly. This change means that municipalities are being forced to take on more
debt if they want to partake in the programs. However, in areas facing financial hardship, which
is often the case for municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands, the breakdown of funding may be
changed to 45:45:10, or 50:50 with federal and provincial each contributing half. Former MPP
Monique Smith explained to me, “Oftentimes our smaller municipalities can't come up with 1/3,
so they go to the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, which means the provincial government ends
up helping out more than 1/3.” She adds, however, “It is important that the municipalities still
have some responsibility and some tie into the project…you don't want to just be giving them
funding they can use without a feeling of ownership” (2011, interview).

A recent $100,000 feasibility study for the Road Ahead project in Powassan, for example,
received $45,000 from FedNor and $45,000 from MNDM, with Powassan paying the remaining
$10,000. In cases where the agencies are enthusiastic about a particular project, as is the case
with the Road Ahead, municipalities are often guaranteed that if they apply, they will receive the
funds. Ron Buxton explains, “They pretty well told us what to write. They like it and said we’d
get the funding. They also said that they have a million dollars for future projects if the
feasibility portion turns out. It doesn’t get any better than that” (2011, interview).

Yet, there are some individuals who are critical of the funding process. Newspaper
columnist Lee Carling criticizes federal and provincial economic development funding because
he feels their approaches are shortsighted (2008, interview). Resort owner Nora Maki agrees,
suggesting that although the grants provide opportunities, they tend to focus on short-term goals:
“They open doors, they operate for a few years, they come up with a few studies that mean
nothing, they employ a few people, and then they close the doors. They spend thousands of
taxpayer dollars and accomplish nothing” (2008, interview). Municipal councilor Andrea Taylor
also expresses her opposition to “one-off funding,” suggesting, “People don’t think about the
bigger consequences of projects. They just look at, for example, the creation of temporary jobs.
It looks good on paper, but it is not thinking of all of the other consequences” (2009, interview).
In addition to being short-term, others have critiqued the unpredictability of funding which
makes it challenging for municipalities to plan and create long term budgets. Regardless of the
specifics of a particular program, for both federal and provincial programs, the available funds
are always determined by who is in power. For example, after an election, funding may be
increased or decreased depending upon the platform of the politicians.

Andrea Taylor also suggests that while federal and provincial funders do understand rural
areas, they still tend to use “cookie cutter solutions” that are designed by urban planners for
urban areas (2009, interview). Economic development advisor Betsy Hauser further argues that
although well funded, Northern Ontario tends to be left out of the decision making process: “The
disconnect is that the best choices or decisions that will be promoted or developed don’t always
take the northern needs into consideration” (2011, interview). Local resident Linda Kelly adds,
“There is a lack of understanding of the area from people who come in. They don’t understand
the way of thinking. We don’t think like city people regarding development” (2009, interview).
Reporter Michael Hunter adds, “There seems to be a lack of understanding of rural communities
by the larger governmental agencies” (2008, interview). CFDC manager Ron Varney, however,
argues that higher levels of government do understand rural and northern issues, but they choose
to ignore them because there are not enough votes to sway their policies. MNDM representative
Mara Pierce agrees with some of these criticisms, “The issue with our ministry (MNDM) is that
even though it is the only provincial ministry with a regional mandate, and the only one that
deals with Northern Ontario as a whole, it is still driven from the urban centers, largely from
Regardless of these criticisms, many individuals point to the positive aspects of funding opportunities, particularly the possibility of job creation. Not surprisingly, a major goal of federal and provincial funding initiatives is job creation. Specifically, at both the provincial and federal levels, the focus in recent years has been on funding “shovel-ready” projects. As a result, the funding for “soft” economic development funding has decreased. Regarding FedNor funding, Adam Brandt told me, “We are staying away from health, education, and things that are social in nature. Culture, recreation, hospices – we are not mother and apple pie, we are more the hard services. Does it attract business? Does it attract investment? Does it create jobs? That is the language that they want” (2011, interview). Because of this change in focus, I inquired with Adam about a recent example of FedNor funding that was used to build a gazebo in the area, and how it relates to the “hard” economic development. I asked because the gazebo struck me as a “social in nature” project. He replied, “The gazebo is a borderline project, but it is bringing in the farmer's market as a business opportunity, as opposed to ‘it is pretty sunny, let's go sit under here.’ It's not quality of life. It is about attracting investment and creating wealth and improving tax base” (2011, interview). This change in focus demonstrates how in the neoliberal era, as opposed to earlier periods, development projects rarely mention reducing poverty or public assistance as goals; instead, current development projects encourage municipalities to become better competitors by attracting private investment (Ferguson 2006; Portes 2000). To be fair, however, the goal of these job creation initiatives is to reduce poverty. Another recent example of “hard” economic development was the launching of Carpool Almaguin in 2009. The purpose of this FedNor funded program was to provide individuals with a service that gets them to jobs
outside of their municipality. FedNor accepted the proposal, which was a carpool site, because although it does not necessarily create jobs, it gets people to jobs. As a result of the program there are now ten carpool parking lots throughout the Almaguin Highlands.

This goal of funding “hard” economic development projects also applies to MNDM. In the early to mid-2000s, MNDM was funding what Andy Ronson called, “general economic projects” (2011, interview). These are projects where the immediate and direct economic benefits are not always obvious. Instead, these projects aimed to improve quality of life, which, they proposed, would eventually play a role in economic growth. An upgrade to a public park would be an example of this type of project. Today, these types of projects are no longer funded. Andy explains, “Now there is a lot more focus and effort put into job creation – the direct number of jobs that the application is able to generate for that project…we are looking at direct benefits with job creation and sustainability” (2011, interview).

Another program that has shifted its focus is the Rural Economic Development (RED) program. RED is administered through OMAFRA. Initially the focus of the RED program was general economic development. Regarding funding, as long as municipalities were able to make the argument that a project would develop some sort of economic benefit, the application was typically accepted. In the last few years, however, the RED program has restructured its guidelines, and now their number one focus is job creation (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs 2012).

Andy Ronson suggests that these changes are particularly challenging for small municipalities, in part because they often lack the infrastructure, resources, and funds to spearhead “shovel ready” “hard” economic development projects. Andy told me, “It is hard for communities to try to work with those changes, because they don't have the basic structure in
place to get to that level. Larger cities like North Bay, Thunder Bay, and Sault St. Marie have the infrastructure, and they can use those assets to attract industry and create investment. With smaller communities, that infrastructure often is not there, so it makes it tougher to find projects that will create long term sustainable jobs” (2011, interview). This focus on hard economic development troubles MNDM representative Mara Pierce:

> It bothers me that when we talk about economic development from a provincial ministry that we separate those things. I don't think it should be one and the other, but it tends to be. All of the “softer” development stuff has been taken out of our mandate for the most part…They used to fund all kinds of community organizations, like setting up a homeless shelter in Sudbury. There is nothing to do with that anymore. Now it is all hard economic development. Job creation has to be there. (2011, interview)

Andy does not predict a change to this new funding mandate in the near future. With a poor economic climate in Ontario, funders will continually ask municipalities if their proposals will create sustainable long-term jobs. Furthermore, political advisor Mark Abrams predicts that federal and provincial funding agencies will be much more cautious about what projects they fund because they no longer have the funds that they used to. Mark told me, “I think you’ll start seeing more conditions attached to those checks. They will say you have to spend 10% on so and so. It is more directed funding” (2011, interview).

Not all provincial and federal economic development funding goes to municipalities, however. There are a few programs that exist for individuals as well. In 2009 NOHFC initiated the Northern Ontario Entrepreneur Program for individuals starting businesses in the north. The program provides matching funds of up to $125,000. NOHFC only requires that the business employ at least one person and create one full time job. All residents of Northern Ontario are eligible; however, the venture cannot be an expansion of a previously existing business. Various
businesses in the Almaguin Highlands have participated in this project, including a bed and breakfast and a flower shop.

Another provincial program is the Second Career Strategy (SCS). Initiated in 2008, it is funded via the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities. According to employment agency manager James Mullen, “It is Ontario’s answer to the hemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs. The Ontario government decided that these people losing their $70,000 per year manufacturing jobs need to be retrained so they can get new jobs” (2008, interview). The program focuses on longer-term retraining efforts, particularly two-year college degrees.

According to James, one downside is that the application package is “huge.” I have heard similar critiques regarding nearly all applications for provincial and federal funding programs. Another challenge is that the funding provides only $24,000 over two years, which James describes as “barely enough to get by” (2008, interview).

For some individuals I have talked to, providing funds to individuals instead of municipalities is a wise decision. In fact, developer Brandon Morgan suggests that the lack of funding opportunities for private enterprise is problematic. In a recent development project, Brandon was able to attain funds to assist in the project, but in order to receive them, the municipality had to apply to the federal government for the funds, after which the municipality transferred those funds to the developer. He told me, “In order to get these development dollars that are out there, you need a developer who is willing to work with a municipality, and vice versa. The provincial and federal governments will not give money directly to a developer, and that is a problem” (2009, interview). He continues, “We are lucky that [the municipality] has been very good in helping us get this grant, but I did all the work. I filled out all the applications.” Brandon concludes, “For some reason the provincial and federal governments give
the tax dollars to the municipalities who will hire people to work. It is the creation of a
government workforce, really. Yet in every study you see, the number one employer in Canada is
the small business owner” (2009, interview).

On the other side of this coin, some individuals suggest that provincial and federal
agencies providing tax dollars to private enterprise is problematic. Gerry Robinson told me, “I'm
not a big fan of government grants going directly to business. I think we have seen lots of
examples where business has been started up for the purpose of getting grants, and when the
grants dry up the business dries up and it goes away” (2011, interview). He suggests that if a
business can demonstrate that it will create a specific number of long-term jobs there could be
exceptions, but in his experience, far too many individuals take advantage of the system. He
continues, “They have gotten into directly investing in businesses, and I don’t think that is where
we should be heading” (2011, interview).

6.5 – Working Together and Amalgamating

Another current goal of provincial and federal funders is getting municipalities to work
together. FedNor, for example, will not typically fund individual municipalities. Getting villages
and townships in the Almaguin Highlands to work together, however, is often much easier in
theory than in practice. As FedNor representative Adam Brandt notes, “It seems the closer your
neighbor is, the more you hate them. And you'd rather kill them than lend them anything… It
seems that a win to Sundridge is a loss to South River” (2011, interview). Developer Brandon
Morgan has also noticed the divisiveness in the Almaguin Highlands, “You get a lot of small
minded bickering back and forth, and everyone wants to be the king of their own township, and
there is not a lot of working together for the general promotion of the region” (2011, interview).
Put in other words, the villages are “coopeting” with each other.
There are a number of factors that prevent villages and townships in the Almaguin Highlands from working together. First off, the Almaguin Highlands is comprised of 15 individual municipalities that tend to operate in isolation – there is no central hub. As a result, as developer Tony Dimucci suggests, people in the area are unwilling to “look further than a quarter mile down the road” (2008, interview). Instead, he argues that people are “caught up in the small town mentality and they are not looking at the big picture” (2008, interview). As municipal councilor Paul Lipton told me, “We have 13 municipalities and we are going in 10 different directions.” Paul went on to observe that getting a majority of the municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands to work together on anything “is almost nothing short of amazing” (2011, interview).

The biggest problem according to Paul is that each municipality is always looking out for itself rather than the area as a whole, “and half the time you’ve got two teams of horses pulling in opposite directions. It's crazy. It is absolutely ludicrous” (2011, interview). Paul points specifically to recent examples of various municipalities opting to not participate in region-wide causes. For example, South River and Machar chose not to be part of the committee to preserve the Burk’s Falls hospital. There were also numerous absentee municipalities on the committee for the new regional high school.

MNDM representative Mara Pierce has observed the trend of insular thinking with local EDCs. For example, although she commends CAEDA for attempting to work collectively on economic development projects, she told me, “What is happening at that table isn’t collaboration. There is some degree of cooperation, but there are people that are, for lack of a better term, still sitting in the fiefdoms, protecting their political territory” (2011, interview). Mayor Jeff Branson agrees, telling me, “Everybody thinks CAEDA works so well. I haven’t drank the Kool-Aid yet” (2011, interview). Part of the reason, he feels, is that there are competing agendas, too many
people wanting to take the lead, too many people focusing on their own community, and not
enough people wanting to cooperate. Village councilor Ellis Butler suggests that when
development strategies are proposed, each municipality wants the project to be in their own town
(2009, interview). The municipalities do not necessarily believe that a benefit to one village is a
benefit to the area as a whole – this is a sentiment I have heard over and over. For the
municipalities, the township or village that attracts the business also reaps the benefits to their
tax base. For Ellis, however, whether a development is in Sundridge, Burk’s Falls, or Powassan,
he does not care, as long as it provides jobs and prosperity to the area as a whole (2009,
interview). According to Ron Buxton, another challenge regarding working together is an “old
guard” mentality. He also feels that when one municipality attempts to work with other groups
there is suspicion of a “hidden agenda” (2011, interview).

Local resident Edna Riverton informed me that the insularity of local municipalities goes
back many generations. For example, when Edna was growing up in Sundridge, very few people
associated with individuals from South River – the two villages are only 9km away from each
other. She added that when they constructed the Almaguin Highlands Secondary School in the
1960s, it was purposely built between the two villages because neither village would allow it to
be built in the other (2011, interview). The new high school, which opened in 2011, followed
suit. Cottager Bill Rogers called this decision “ignorant.” This decision, he argues, guarantees
that for the life of the building, every student will have to be bused in, whereas if it was located
in one of the villages a large portion of the students would have the option to walk (2011,
interview). In another case, the lack of cooperation between South River and Machar (also 9km
away from each other) is so great that instead of South River opting to dispose of their garbage at
the Machar landfill, they instead have it transported to Niagara Falls.
Finally, most residents feel that there is a general lack of communication and information dissemination across the region that stands in the way of working together. Municipal councilor Andrea Taylor states, “You hear people speak of the unwillingness to cooperate. It is really not that at all, it is a lack of communication that is enforced when you don’t have access to information. We have no idea right now of what is going on in Powassan. It could be spectacular, we don’t know. You only hear the bad news because that makes the newspaper” (2009, interview).

Yet, once municipalities do begin working together, the chances for obtaining funding increase significantly. As Ellis Butler told me, “The more they work together the more money they can access, as long as they have same vision and there is no in-fighting” (2008, interview). Economic development advisor Carly Grant adds, “FedNor and NOHFC love big projects, so you could get funding for something really spectacular if you have a logical group and a solid plan” (2009, interview).

The federal and provincial governments promote working together, in part, because it decreases the amount of support and assistance these agencies have to provide to individual municipalities. For example, if a collection of five villages and four townships work together, MNDM only needs to send one representative to one collective meeting – it decreases duplication. Andy Ronson told me, “So if we are able to piggyback we are eliminating duplication in terms of projects. We are eliminating duplication in terms of effort that communities are putting forth. So when you work together, we not only eliminate cost, but we are building best practices together” (2011, interview). For Adam Brandt, it is only by working together that municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands will succeed: “The success is going to be continuing to get people to work together and to get municipalities to be able to manage the
requests they are going to be getting for investment… I want them to also be able to say, ‘I can't help you on that, but if you go up to Kearney they have a great opportunity,’ to be able to help each other create wins” (2011, interview).

Andy Ronson also suggests that working together provides the larger group with a collective voice, giving them strength in numbers and more collective resources (2011, interview). Ron Buxton agrees with the “strength in numbers” argument. Ron was the former president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, and during his term a major goal as president was to create inroads with the various groups that were covered under the OFA umbrella. By building coalitions the group was able to increase its influence and lobbying power. Ron suggests that the municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands need to take a similar approach, which would give them a larger, more powerful voice when working with the provincial and federal governments, with developers, and with other municipalities (2011, interview). Gerry Robinson points to the closing of the Burk’s Falls hospital as a time when, had the municipalities worked together as a cohesive unit, they may have been able to prevent it (2011, interview).

In spite of the many challenges of working together, there are many examples throughout the area of cooperation. These examples go beyond the abovementioned economic development committees. For example, many villages and townships in the area share services, including garbage pickup, fire service, and building inspectors. The recent arrival of broadband is an example of the municipalities in the area coming together for a common cause. Economic development advisor Betsy Hauser was able to get 15 municipalities to partner together to share the costs of the new technologies: “It has brought that ability for people to work together in these municipalities, and now they are starting to share some other services. Sometimes a project like this technology project can really help municipalities see the wisdom of working together”
Another example of success via cooperation occurred within CAEDA. By working as a group, CAEDA influenced the Ministry of Transportation-Ontario adjust their highway signage policy, and reassign a former stretch of highway to the province so as not to be downloaded onto the local municipalities. With these victories, according to Adam Brandt, comes more cooperation: “It moves beyond economic development. ‘Can our kids play soccer in your community?’ It becomes sharing back and forth” (2011, interview). Adam further suggests that the best way to get the municipalities to work together is not by forcing them, but instead by encouraging partnerships through funding opportunities or via the acknowledgment of increased power with a larger voice.

One controversial form of working together that gets brought up frequently is amalgamation. Amalgamation is the process of uniting multiple villages and townships into one larger municipality. For some people in the area, the only solution to the many challenges faced in the Almaguin Highlands is amalgamation. Depending upon who I have talked to, this process could begin on a smaller scale by amalgamating three or four villages and townships (for example, Burk’s Falls, Armour, and Ryerson), or on a larger scale by amalgamating all of the 15 municipalities that make up the Almaguin Highlands.

In many circles in the Almaguin Highlands, amalgamation is simply referred to as “the A word.” This is due to the negative connotations that many individuals associate with the process. Peter Cook told me, “I tell them they need to look at ‘working together’ because they hate the word amalgamation” (2008, interview). Peter suggests that for many people in the Almaguin Highlands, amalgamation is threatening because they feel a neighboring municipality will “take over their turf” (2008, interview). In fact, at a steering committee meeting in 2009 councilor Pete Otte was careful in his wording regarding regional cooperation, making it clear that he was not
suggesting amalgamation: “It is time we get rid of this 13-separate-municipality stuff. If we spoke as one unit we’d have more political clout, but I am not saying the ‘A-word’” (2009, fieldnotes).

The reasons that individuals oppose the prospect of amalgamation vary. Broadly, those opposed to amalgamation suggest that the process disempowers communities via a top-down model of governance (Hoggart and Paniagua 2000). In some cases opposition is steeped in disagreements between townships and villages. In Ontario villages are concentrated whereas townships occupy more land and the population is dispersed. Some township residents argue that if they amalgamate with villages they will be paying for services that they do not use (property taxes in villages are approximately double those in townships). For example, someone in Armour Township might ask why, if they amalgamate, they should pay the same taxes as someone in Burk’s Falls. Typically township residents do not use municipal water, sewer, or garbage pickup. Instead, they often have a well, a septic system, and they drive their garbage to the local landfill. Darlene Peterson further suggests that townships do not want to amalgamate with villages because some townships have larger taxbases as a result of waterfront land that includes the many cottages discussed in Chapter 2 (2011, interview). Because of these issues, township Mayor Ed Dugan notes that it is “hard to sell” amalgamation to township residents (2011, interview). Additionally, throughout much of the Almaguin Highlands, the townships are continuing to grow, but the villages are at capacity. This has led to some friction between them. Jeff Branson states, “The other challenge for us is that the townships are growing and [villages] aren’t. [The villages] need to get at our tax base. So there is a lot of friction within local government. We don’t tell people that. We don’t even talk about it with ourselves” (2011, interview). Others, however, see things the other way around. One resident told me that the
townships enjoy being centered around the villages because they “get a free ride…The village pays for sidewalks and street lights and all those other things they love to have when they go shopping, but they don't get stuck with the tab” (2010, interview).

Another argument against amalgamation is the potential loss of well-paying municipal jobs. MNDM representative Andy Ronson told me, “There is the fear of losing jobs when duplication is eliminated. Those are very good jobs in the communities, and no politician wants that on his or her shoulders” (2011, interview). Andy also notes that, in some ways, amalgamation eliminates the power to make local decisions, because all of the small councils are reduced to one. For example if the Almaguin Highlands would be reduced from 15 councils to 1 council, the number of municipal councilors would be potentially reduced from 75 to 5. Another concern is that one part of the Almaguin Highlands would become the central hub, leading the rest of the area to be ignored. Finally, Mayor Jeff Branson suggests that amalgamation is difficult for the identity of an area: “I watched the amalgamation of Toronto and they are still struggling with identity” (2011, interview).

Regardless of these concerns, there are many individuals promoting the prospect of amalgamation. For some, amalgamation is simply the next logical step for municipalities that already share many services, including fire departments, arenas, libraries, and medical centers. Another argument for amalgamation is the reduction in duplication of services and infrastructural costs. For example, Burk’s Falls, Ryerson, and Armour are all within a few kilometers of each other, yet each one has a separate municipal office with a staff, council, photocopiers, and other costs. Regarding the lowering of costs for infrastructural improvements, Andrea Taylor notes, “If a village needs $4 million to replace their septic system, then you hear the word amalgamation from a councilor from that village. What does that tell you? Infrastructure – we all as municipal
councillors can do the math. Almaguin has around 18,000 year-round residents. Amalgamation wouldn’t necessarily be a disaster, but it sure changes the face of our region” (2009, interview). Another pro-amalgamation argument is that the process would potentially put an end to municipalities competing for the same businesses. Instead of worrying about who would reap the taxbase benefits from the arrival of a commercial development project, if amalgamated, the entire municipality would benefit. Retiree Alan Atkins adds, “I think it would be a wonderful thing for the area, because then you are only dealing with one council, and business will think more about coming in” (2011, interview).

Finally, much like the general argument for working together, proponents of amalgamation suggest an increased voice and strength. Councillor Paul Lipton states, “For us not to be talking amalgamation is absolute stupidity…The individual municipalities are so small, they are insignificant, they don't matter to anybody and they have no voice in anything. We are given the crumbs off the table. We need to be a bigger entity” (2011, interview).

There have, in fact, been smaller scale cases of amalgamation in the Almaguin Highlands in the recent past. In Ontario, in response the downloading of costs from the province to municipalities, there was a massive restructuring of municipal governments between 1996 and 2004, including an increase in amalgamation. In those years the number of municipalities went from 815 to 445 (George, Mair, and Reid 2009). One example in the Almaguin Highlands was the Municipality of Powassan. Ron Buxton recalls the government using a “carrot and stick approach,” informing municipalities that they would be awarded incentives and grants if they voluntarily chose to amalgamate (2011, interview). Under the sense that eventual amalgamation was inevitable, the former town of Powassan and the former Township of Himsworth South decided to amalgamate; however, they needed their neighbor Trout Creek to be part of the
process because the province required a minimum of three municipalities. Interestingly, however, the province only required two of the three to be in agreement with the amalgamation, and, in Ron’s words, “Powassan and Himsworth South satisfied the equations to do it whether Trout Creek liked it or not, so it was basically a hostile takeover” (2011, interview). Ron argues that although the leadership of Trout Creek agreed on the logic of amalgamation, for the residents it was incredibly unpopular: “If there had been a plebiscite, or any sort of referendum, they would have failed miserably. 90% would have been against it” (2011, interview). The unpopularity of the amalgamation, according to Ron, was steeped in a history of mutual dislike between residents of Trout Creek and Powassan, “just like Montreal Canadiens and Toronto Maple Leafs fans” (2011, interview).

As the amalgamation progressed the leadership of the three participating communities worked well together, but they did not have the full backing of the population. To demonstrate this, Ron told me a story about going to a public meeting with the local undertaker regarding what to name the new municipality. They were both heavily involved in the Town of Powassan's business improvement association at that time. At the time the provincial government allowed the newly amalgamated groups to choose a new name for the municipality. Within Powassan there were no arguments – everyone was in favor of calling it the Municipality of Powassan. Trout Creek residents, on the other hand, stated that they would rather call themselves anything other than Powassan. Ron recalls, “They'd have rather been Kublai Khan or Xanadu rather than Powassan!” When Ron and the undertaker went to the meeting and made their pitch regarding their suggestion for the new name:

We got booed and hissed and yelled at. At the end of the day there was this one old lady from Trout Creek, and she said, ‘Well, I am totally pissed off, and I am off to see my lawyer in the morning. I am going to change my will. I am going to put it in my will that I am going to be buried in North Bay by McGuinty Funeral
Homes. I am not going to that damn funeral home in Powassan with that man!’ She just about got a standing ovation for that, and she did do it. The undertaker’s family has been burying people for generations, and she changed it! So yeah, it was met with some resistance. (2011, interview)

But Ron concludes, “At the end of the day the amalgamation has been a good thing, I think” (2011, interview). Ellis Butler, however, suggested that since the amalgamation, residents in Trout Creek feel abandoned and are disappointed with the leadership (2010, interview).

Provincial officials inform me that they do not foresee any forced amalgamations in the near future. Overall, the forced amalgamations of the late 1990s and early 2000s were unpopular. Gerry Robinson states, “The government took an awful bashing in the 90s when they did all those amalgamations, and nobody is sticking their toes in that pool again” (2011, interview). MNDM representative Andy Ronson is adamant that amalgamation has to come from the communities – it cannot be forced (2011, interview).

Regardless of how it occurs, many individuals I have met with predict that sooner or later amalgamation will occur. Paul Lipton feels that with newer residents moving in, there is more acceptance of a future amalgamation, but that the old rivalries between many individuals in these communities run deep (2011, interview). Darlene Peterson predicts eventual amalgamation because small municipalities simply cannot afford to go it alone anymore: “That will bring us together if nothing else” (2011, interview).

Mark Abrams, however, does not predict amalgamation in the near future. He feels that there is still too much community pride in each township and village, adding “There is nothing wrong with that, but I don’t see amalgamation unless the province forces it. That probably won’t be happening in the immediate future” (2011, interview). Mark further suggests that not amalgamating is completely acceptable. He points to the fact that many municipalities in the area already share services, noting, “So if you look at it, with all of this sharing, I’m not so sure what
the benefits of amalgamation will actually be. You’re adding another tier of government, more overhead. I don’t think there are many efficiencies to amalgamate - it wouldn’t be a massive cost savings” (2011, interview). Gerry Robinson does not predict amalgamation in the near future either, but he finds this unfortunate: “There is nothing that is going to spark it…There is zero political will” (2011, interview). He suggests that even though many local politicians may see the need for amalgamation, “Nobody wants to wear it forever that they were the ones who brought amalgamation” (2011, interview).

6.6 – Conclusion

As this chapter demonstrates, in recent decades neoliberal policies have led to an increased “survival of the fittest” mentality between municipalities. This has resulted in an increase in economic development committees and other municipal organizations whose main goal is to attract outside private investment. Oftentimes these committees seek to hire “expert” consultants who will guide them through the economic development process. This process often requires the creation of a costly strategic plan that may be created under a “blueprint development” model, where the consultant uses a similar plan to one he or she used in another area. As Ferguson (1994) emphasizes, it is not necessarily important that the planner know the area, rather that the planner know development. In addition to a strategic plan, consultants typically insist that the municipalities hire economic development officers. As I have shown in this chapter, the major role of this individual is to serve as a salesperson for the particular municipality to attract private enterprise.

Interestingly, economic development committees, outside consultants, strategic plans, and economic development officers are often funded by provincial and federal agencies. In Ontario, provincial and federal grants often cover most of the costs of hiring consultants, creating
strategic plans, and even paying a portion of an EDO’s salary. This may seem antithetical to the aspirations of neoliberal philosophy; however, as I demonstrate, the funding is dispensed in the hopes that the funds will eventually decrease the municipal dependence on the provincial and federal governments. In my many talks with provincial and federal representatives, although provincial and federal dollars fund the projects, the representatives are adamant that the vision of the plan remain in the hands of the municipalities. The goal, then, is creating independent municipalities who make their own decisions. Based on my research, this goal has not yet been realized in the Almaguin Highlands.

Finally, as I have established in this chapter, many of these provincial and federal funds are distributed in the hopes of incorporating rural and northern municipalities into the global free market. A perfect example is the Northern Communities Investment Readiness (NCIR) program. The goal of the program is to make Northern municipalities globally competitive via the creation of a community profile that lists the particular area’s assets. Once a community’s profile is complete, provincial trade investors attempt to sell that community globally. As I discuss, becoming globally, or even locally, competitive has proven difficult for many municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands because they lack the necessary infrastructure and resources to attract industrial, commercial, and even residential development. As programs like the NCIR also demonstrate, municipalities, contrary to some reports, are not autonomous in the neoliberal era; rather, instead of responding to the state they now respond to private enterprise. The program also makes clear that federal and provincial governments are still incredibly active in the neoliberal era; however, their activities have changed significantly since the Keynesian era. Today, their main goal is attracting investment. In the next chapter I specifically examine the
Highway 11 development project as a recent economic development initiative in the Almaguin Highlands, and the reactions to and consequences of this massive project.
The Highway 11 Development Project
“Places really can go away, they can vanish”

7.1 – Introduction

Economic development initiatives, of course, are not limited to the topics I discussed in Chapter 6. In this chapter I want to focus particularly on the Highway 11 development project. As is made clear in the *Growth Plan for Northern Ontario 2011*, continued development of transportation corridors is a major goal in Ontario for the next 25 years. In the countryside, new transportation systems, like Highway 11, make previously “remote” areas more accessible for development and economic growth. Gary Howe, representative from the Ministry of Transportation of Ontario (MTO), acknowledged these goals, informing me that a broader goal of the Highway 11 development project is to “open up the north to facilitate economic development” (2009, interview). The *Growth Plan for Northern Ontario 2011* emphasizes that improvements in transportation infrastructure will ensure the economic strength and vibrancy of Northern communities (Ontario Ministry of Infrastructure 2011).

The Highway 11 development project began in the mid 1990s and was completed in 2012. The project transformed the former two-lane highway to a four-lane divided highway (see Figure 22). Additionally, over the course of the project, several villages were bypassed, including Sundridge and South River in 2011. Throughout this chapter I discuss the perceived positive and negative aspects of the new highway in relation to economic development, the implications of the bypassing of Sundridge and South River, debates over highway signage, the expropriation of property during the Highway 11 project, and access to “expert” knowledge.
7.2 – Highway 11 and Economic Development

In my many conversations with individuals in the Almaguin Highlands, including provincial and federal advisors, business owners, and everyday citizens, nearly everyone agrees that the highway serves as conduit for economic development. In fact, EDO Peter Cook argues that, when done correctly, a highway is “the world’s largest development tool” (2011, interview). However, whether the Highway 11 development project is an overall positive or negative contribution for the Almaguin Highlands depends upon the person and his or her interests.

A particular goal of the project is to “open up the north.” This is accomplished, according to *The Growth Plan for Northern Ontario 2011*, by promoting and developing five “strategic
core areas” in the North, one of which is North Bay. With this in mind, MTO representative Gary Howe proposes that although the highway project may bring development perks to the Almaguin Highlands, it is not necessarily part of the larger goal of developing the core areas: “This area here [the Almaguin Highlands] is in-between…but the broader provincial goal is to open up the north to facilitate economic development throughout the north” (2009, interview). James Ferguson noted similar projects in his work in Lesotho: The creation of a new road to a particular village was useful for transporting goods to the area, it also more strongly connected to region to the country’s capital; however, it most villagers expressed that it not provide them with any benefits (1994). Reporter Gerry Robinson has noted a similar experience in regards to Highway 11, explaining that the highway is not creating any new permanent jobs in the Almaguin Highlands: “MTO discusses the highway project as a road to economic development, but if you look at these cases, that has not been the case. It is a road to economic development, but not for us! It is for North Bay, Sturgeon Falls, Timmins – we just happen to be in the way” (2010, interview).

For example, the highway project was only temporarily positive for employment in the Almaguin Highlands. During the many years the highway was under construction nearly all hotels, motels, and rental properties were occupied by the massive amounts of construction crews living in the area. Local restaurants, coffee shops, and grocery stores were also frequented by the workers. Take the Algonquin Motel (Figure 23) – the motel was fully booked with construction workers for the many years the highway was under construction. In fact, the owners consistently turned away guests because of this, and were concerned about the implications in the future. The owners noted the irony in providing rooms to the workers who were building the highway that ultimately bypassed their motel. The project also provided many local residents
with jobs, from construction to office work. However, in 2012 all of these factors disappeared, leaving a large hole in the local economy.

Figure 23. The Algonquin Motel

The four-laning has also played a role in *retail drain* in the area, now that the drives to Huntsville and North Bay are faster, safer, and more convenient. Local resident Lee Carling told me, “I don’t have to go over to that general store and buy a bag of milk at six dollars because now I can slip out to Highway11 and be into Price Chopper [in Huntsville] where it’s $4.19. The only thing the price of gas has made me do is make sure that I have a good list when I get there
once a week [laughter]!” (2008, interview). Because larger chain stores are often able to sell goods for lower prices, many residents find it worthwhile to drive 20 to 30 minutes to purchase them. Municipal councilor Ellis Butler explained that, in the past, making a trip to Huntsville was a planned event that a family would only take monthly. Today, however, people are willing to drive to Huntsville multiple times per week because the highway has made the trip much faster and easier. He told me, “People won’t settle, they are willing to drive the extra mile to get what they want” (2008, interview). Resident Hillary Peth adds, “People will travel to the next biggest place to get the goods. People are no longer satisfied with the general store, because now the transportation allows you to get to the bigger community… Huntsville is sucking this area dry” (2008, interview). Resident Marsha Gilmour explained to me that although she would prefer to shop locally, the prices in the Almaguin Highlands are higher, the selection is inadequate, and the hours of operation are limited when compared to Huntsville (2011, interview).

Yet there are many individuals who do feel that the project is making the area more attractive for development. These development opportunities include many of the topics I covered in Chapters 2, 3, and 4, including tourism, cottaging, and various new permanent residents. Decreased travel times are beneficial to a wide range of individuals, including commuters, cottagers, tourists, and local residents. For example, it has made it easier for residents in the Almaguin Highlands to access medical care and educational opportunities in the nearby hubs of Huntsville and North Bay. The new highway also presents opportunities for development projects on land located at new interchanges along the highway, including the Road Ahead project discussed in Chapter 6.

Finally, nearly all individuals find the new highway to be much safer, and, according to an MTO official, this factor will make it more likely for people to visit the area. Many
individuals have suggested to me that there is a mentality in Southern Ontario that a two-lane road, which is what Highway 11 was prior to construction, is not one on which most people want to travel. Gerry Robinson told me, “A lot of people from big cities get onto a two lane highway and they think they’re in the boonies [laughter], they’re up in the Northwest Territories essentially” (2008, interview). He proposes that the four-laning will alleviate that fear, attracting more people to the area. New resident Caitlin Simon confirms Gerry’s suspicion. Caitlin told me that she would not have moved to the Almaguin Highlands had it not been for the new highway. Her job requires that she drive frequently, and she told me that she would not feel safe doing so on the old highway, particularly in the winter (2009, interview).

Although making travel easier and safer for vacationers, local residents, and many others, MTO planner Nathan Rodkey emphasized that the major goal of the Highway 11 project is to provide a transportation route that allows for the movement of *goods and services* from points in the south to points in the north in an efficient and cost effective manner (2008, interview). North Bay resident Jonathan Belden has taken note of this goal, telling me, “I don’t think the purpose of the highway is to move *people* to new locations, the purpose of the highway is to move *trucks*” (2011, interview). These trucks are transporting both extractive goods *out* of the North (e.g. logs), and bringing *in* consumer goods.

One of the largest areas of concern regarding the highway project has been the recent bypassing of Sundridge and South River (see Figure 24). On September 22, 2011, after nearly a century of having traffic run through both villages, the bypass was complete. Business owners who are economically dependent on travelers now worry that they will not have the extra-local consumers they depended on for many years, and that their businesses will suffer (Figure 25). Restaurant owner Amy Waters estimated that 40% of her business was from highway travelers.
prior to the bypass (2011, interview). With such statistics in mind, MNDM representative Andy Ronson suspects that in the short term, the implications of the bypass will be dramatic, including the eventual closure of many small highway-dependent businesses: “They are already depressed communities to begin with, and to have that kind of a large change will be hard.” Ted Hollingsbrook half jokingly told me, regarding how quiet the villages have become since the bypass, “The area will be a great set for horror movies in ten years [laughter]” (2009, interview).

Figure 24. Municipal councilors and employees view the Highway 11 bypass weeks before its completion
The path of the new highway has not only bypassed the villages, it has also made them invisible to passing drivers. In Figure 26 one can see Highway 11 in relation to Sundridge and South River. Prior to the bypass, what is now known as Highway 124 was previously Highway 11. Although there are highway signs announcing the business districts for both Sundridge and South River, for a person unfamiliar with the area there is no indication of how far from the highway these villages are (approximately 1.5km). Shortly after the bypassing of Sundridge and South River I met with Ron Buxton. He was taken aback at the lack of visibility of the villages from the new highway: “It is quite shocking that all you can see is trees. There are no water towers, no nothing to give any indication that a kilometer over those trees there is a little town over there…Unless you have a pressing need to stop, you are not going to go out of your way for
anything that is off the highway” (2011, interview). OTMP representative Brain Harrison agrees, “They have no visibility from the highway whatsoever, so they are an island now” (2011, interview).

Figure 26. Sundridge and South River Bypass
With the bypass and lack of visibility in mind, some businesses took precautions to prepare for the bypass. The owners of the Algonquin Motel made sure to inform all customers of the upcoming bypass and constantly reminded them that they would still be open for business after the new highway opened. Restaurant owner Amy Waters also took initiatives to remind customers of the bypass. She handed out calendars to all customers, and when doing so reminded them to return after the bypass: “I've been giving [tourists and hunters] calendars saying to them ‘Don't forget where we are when the highway comes through.’ Same with when someone says, ‘We really enjoyed our breakfast.’ I tell them to remember us when the highway goes around” (2011, interview). Now that the bypass is complete, Andy Ronson suggests that the bypassed villages need to devise a “creative way” to both bring travelers off of the highway and get them to come to the area as a destination (2011, interview).

Regardless of these precautionary measures, many residents feel that both local businesses and the municipal governments could have taken further measures to better prepare for the bypass. Business owner Jason Adelman emphasizes that everyone, including individuals, businesses, and municipalities, had plenty of time to prepare for the bypass, but, for whatever reason, chose not to. He explains, “When I was campaigning I walked into one of the businesses on the main street on the highway, and I asked what he thought the impact of the highway was going to be. He said, ‘Oh, it’s going to kill me.’ So I asked him what we should do about it. ‘Dunno.’ ‘Don’t you think we should be looking for alternatives to take the place of the transit people coming through now?’ ‘Yeah, it might be a good idea’” (2009, interview). Jason explained to me that this general apathy was quite common in his conversations throughout the village. Yet, a local mayor asserts that he and other local councilors started discussing the impending bypass with business owners in 2007, five years prior to its arrival (2011, interview).
This mayor, like Jason, discovered that very few individuals were interested in discussing possible strategies. As a result, he and other village councilors started CAEDA in an attempt to prepare for the bypass.

The local go-to example of the potential negative consequences of bypassing is the village of Trout Creek, in the northern Almaguin Highlands. Trout Creek was bypassed in the early 2000s, and soon after, many businesses in the village closed. A long term resident told me, “Because of the way the four-laning went, you have to go off a good kilometer and a half to get into [Trout Creek]. So it just sort of went to a ghost town” (2008, interview). Three months prior to the bypass the village had three gas stations, and three months after the bypass there were none. Reflecting on the bypassing of Trout Creek, resident Amy Waters observes, “Places really can go away, they can vanish. Something that seems so much alive can be dead in such a short time. I would never have conceived of that place [Trout Creek] dying, but sure enough, it did.” Pondering this led to Amy second guessing her belief that things would be okay for Sundridge and South River post-bypass: “So maybe I am naïve thinking it will be alright…You can do everything in your power, but really, you don't have control” (2011, interview).

To further understand the implications of the bypassing of Trout Creek, I interviewed the owner of a Trout Creek restaurant/motel. He purchased the motel in the mid-1990s. At that time business was thriving. The business was located directly on Highway 11 and it benefitted from the many drive-by customers. As soon as the highway bypassed Trout Creek, however, things took a dramatic downturn. Between 2005 and 2009 he lost over 50% of his business, many of whom were travelers coming off the highway. When I interviewed him in 2009 he told me, “It ends up being a slow death. Because when it first happens you can feel a small impact, but it’s not huge… The first year you’ll feel a small impact and say, ‘Oh, that’s not bad.’ Second year
it’s a little bit more, once you get into your fourth or fifth year you are wondering whether you should even be there” (2009, interview) Yet reporter Molly Harris interviewed residents of Trout Creek shortly after the bypass expecting to hear “all kinds of cries and woes.” Instead, Molly found that most residents were pleased with the quietness of the bypass (2009, interview).

Many residents in Sundridge and South River feel similarly. Those who welcome the bypass suggest that it makes the villages more “charming” and protects them from noise and traffic accidents. As a major conduit to the north, having Highway 11 go directly through Sundridge and South River meant the constant hum of traffic. New resident Anthony Lombardi explains, “The highway that went through the towns, I didn’t like that when I used to come up here [as a tourist] because you’d be doing your holiday thing, and if you came to the grocery store you’d have highway trucks and traffic. The bypass always seemed to make sense to me” (2011, interview). Municipal councilor Andrea Taylor suggests that now that the bypass is complete, the villages will be much nicer places to live; referencing post-bypass Trout Creek she told me, “Trout Creek homes have been renovated, lawns look nicer, it is a new demographic. People live there for different reasons…These villages will potentially be spectacular” (2009, interview). In an example of how the bypass is positive for some and a negative for others, Brian Harrison of OTMP shared this story a few weeks after the bypass opened in fall 2011:

As I was driving up to North Bay, I was driving up and I was going like, “I love this highway. I’m loving this bypass of Sundridge, I’m loving this bypass of South River.” So I’m getting in the meeting…and I make a note to myself: Talk about the great access we now have, okay? That was until the moment they introduced the mayors of Sundridge and South River. And I went, “I’m not gonna bring that up.” (2011, interview)

Brain feared that mentioning his enjoyment of the bypass to the mayors of the towns that were recently bypassed would offend them and cause them stress and fear for their future.
Finally, although most residents feel that the highway development project, including the bypass, was necessary, some suggest that the process could have been handled more appropriately with more concern for the needs of the municipalities and individual residents. Mayor Jeff Branson suggests that part of the problem is that although engineers are adept at designing roads, they do not take the human factor into account: “They can build a perfect stretch of road, but there is never sufficient thought put into bypassing communities. There is very little thought put into the decay for the smaller communities where these take place” (2011, interview). He adds that when planning large-scale projects like Highway 11, most decisions are made with the “big picture” in mind, and often fail to take into consideration what bypasses do to municipalities. This disconnect has become such a concern that the MTO recently hired a public relations advisor to assist with these issues. He told me, “I’ll be honest with, part of the reason that I am working there is that sometimes technical people don’t understand how to communicate their message well” (2009, interview). Another Ministry of Transportation official confessed that Ontario is “still playing catch-up” in trying to understand what bypasses do to communities, adding, “Ontario has a tendency to look more at what the ultimate goal is, and that is to provide a safe facility to travel on” (2008, interview) (Figure 27). He noted that in the United States, for example, highway planning agencies tend to spend more time examining the effects that bypasses have on municipalities, something that he suggests the MTO begins considering. This failure to take into account the “human factor” is further discussed in the last section of this chapter on “expert” knowledge.
7.3 – Highway Signage

An additional challenge to the bypass was a provincial signage policy that restricted municipalities and businesses from advertising along the highway. When I first started working in the area in 2008 the province had a policy that prohibited the use of billboards on four-lane highways. What this meant was that, in addition to being bypassed, the businesses in the Almaguin Highlands would not be able to advertise on the highway, with the exception of certain tourism related enterprises (I discuss this program below). Prior to being four-laned, billboards were allowed on Highway11 because the province allows billboards on two-lane highways. The
rationale behind this policy is that because cars travel at faster speeds and because there tends to be higher traffic density on four-lane highways, the billboards become a safety concern.

Recently, in part due to a CAEDA campaign which requested that the MTO review their signage policy, the province has amended some of these restrictions. The first change came in 2009 when the MTO made the province-wide concession to allow what they call Community Message Boards (CMBs). The purpose of these boards was to make up for the disallowance of billboards along the highway. The municipality pays the province for the sign fee, after which they must decide which businesses will be allowed to advertise on the sign. Tourism based businesses are not allowed because they already qualify for Tourism Oriented Directional Signs (discussed below). The signs can have up to four businesses on each CMB.

Interestingly, after all of the time and effort devoted to persuading the province to change its signage policy, as of December 2012, three years after the MTO unveiled the CMB program, not one municipality in the Almaguin Highlands has taken advantage of it. Pete Otte argues that the biggest challenge with the CMBs is deciding which businesses will be allowed to advertise, because only four businesses are allowed on each sign, and only two signs are allowed for village in each direction. For Pete the answer to this problem is obvious: “My preference, would be to get it out of municipal hands and back into private enterprise, and leave me alone. That is where it should be – private enterprise” (2011, interview). In December 2011 Pete’s wish came true: privately owned billboards are now allowed on Highway 11 as well.

The new billboard policy allows for one privately owned billboard every one thousand feet on four-lane highways in Northern Ontario. This change came after municipalities, a local advertising agency (Price Advertising), and MPP Vic Fedeli lobbied the province to change the billboard policy. Vic argued, “Now that traffic no longer moves directly through these
communities, this billboard advertising is critical to local businesses, many of whom are in the service sector and are reliant on visitor traffic and tourism dollars… They could benefit greatly from increased visibility and traffic from the new four-lane highway. In fact, for many, it could mean the difference between survival and closing the doors” (quoted in Dale 2011). These individuals were able to persuade the MTO by arguing that Northern Ontario and Southern Ontario are very different places, and that policies intended for the south do not necessarily apply in the north. Foremost, they argued that traffic is significantly less dense on four-lane highways in the north. Following the change in policy, MTO spokesperson David Salter stated, “To meet the needs of businesses and communities that use advertising along highways to generate business, the ministry recently decided that it will permit billboards on freeways designated as bush country highways, such as Highway 11 between Gravenhurst and North Bay” (quoted in Dale 2011). In response, the Price Advertising website stated the following: “This has been a long, expensive but rewarding fight…Together we created the ‘political will’ to recognize the economic importance of signage to our Northern Economy” (Price Advertising 2012).

Interestingly, in a telling example of the differences between the Almaguin Highlands and Muskoka, at the same time that municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands were lobbying for the allowance of billboards and other signage, many of the municipalities in Muskoka were lobbying the ministry to prohibit all commercial signage on the highway, including the remaining two-lane sections. Municipal councilors in Muskoka argued that cottagers and tourists come to the area for wilderness, and that highway advertisements detract from the aesthetics. CAEDA member Pete Otte understands this train of thought, but argues that it is not realistic for Northern Ontario. He told me, “Southern Ontario doesn’t want to come here and see signs. They want to see trees and nature and all of that, whereas people here have businesses to run and
incomes to earn, so there is a little bit of conflict between” (2010, interview). In the midst of all of these changes, one type of highway advertising has been consistently allowed on Highway 11: Tourism Oriented Directional Signs (TODS)

The TODS program is one of the most controversial aspects of the signage policy in Northern Ontario. Canadian TODS Limited is a private company that brokered a deal with the Ontario government to be the primary provider of highway signage for tourism related businesses. Canadian TODS Limited is a subsidiary of the American company Lamar Advertising, located in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. If tourism related businesses want to advertise on a highway other than using billboards, they must use TODS. For example, a motel would not be allowed to advertise on a CMB because of the provincial agreement with TODS. Having to advertise with a privately owned American company is unpopular with many Canadian tourism operators. Former Powassan EDO Eric Miller told me, “It’s been subcontracted to a private company in the U.S., which is upsetting because there are a lot of sign companies in Ontario” (2008, interview).

One of the most unpopular features of the TODS program is the cost. For example, for restaurant owner Amy Waters to have a large (480cm x 120cm) sign with a logo on Highway 11 her costs would be $3900 annually in addition to a $500-$700 set-up fee. Furthermore, she would be required to sign a three-year contract. Amy is not alone is arguing that the TODS program is far beyond her price range. As restaurant owner Phil Doyle notes, spending thousands of dollars per year for a highway sign used to advertise a small business in Northern Ontario is a massive investment. He told me, “There is no way. I don’t serve that many hamburgers” (2009, interview). The TODS contract with the Province of Ontario, which many small business owners suspect is the result of “greasing someone's palm” (2011, fieldnotes), is an example of the ways
in which many Almaguin Highlands residents feel that the province, particularly the MTO, lacks understanding and compassion for rural Ontario. Another example is the expropriation of property.

7.4 – Expropriation

The Highway 11 development project has meant the expropriation of property from many individuals and businesses throughout the Almaguin Highlands. Expropriation law states that the province is able to acquire private property for public purposes, so long as the landowners are compensated with fair market value for the property, as well as relocation costs and business losses. Regardless of the compensation, the expropriation of land from local residents and business owners can be a difficult and time consuming (up to ten years) process.

To further understand the overall expropriation process I interviewed Colin Watts, an expropriation attorney. Colin informed me that the Expropriation Act states that the government authority can expropriate a piece of property for the common good and that they must pay the owner of the property what a willing buyer and a willing seller would normally accept. In almost every expropriation case he has done, approximately 150 to date, the owners tell him that they are not “willing sellers” (2009, interview). When the seller is not willing, there are two general ways in which individuals protest the expropriation of their property: 1. Cases where an individual does not agree with the price that the MTO offers. 2. Cases where individuals do not agree that their property is needed for the particular project. When individuals are not willing sellers, however, Colin has discovered that they tend to expect a premium on their property. He notes that because they do not want to move in the first place, they often think they should be getting approximately double what their property is worth. Many residents, however, have told me that the MTO offers “unfair” amounts for their properties. Colin, however, does not feel that
the MTO purposely offers unfair prices. Instead, he argues that because the MTO handles many cases at once they cannot possibly know the nuances of each property: “The MTO does this in batches; they’ll go out and appraise 50 properties at once. I know that the appraisers aren’t looking at these properties in detail.” He adds: “So when a client comes to me I let them know I will be the squeak that gets them the grease. I make sure they get fair market value plus all of these other entitlements” (2009, interview).

Various residents I have spoken with, however, suggest that the MTO fails to take into consideration the emotional implications of the expropriation process on residents. Mayor Jeff Branson goes so far as to call the expropriation process “unfair” and “inhumane” (2011, interview). He discussed an expropriation case in the Almaguin Highlands where the MTO severed a portion of a third-generation farmer’s fields: “They cut it in half and said, ‘Take it or leave it. We are taking it anyways.’” He continued, “It is very demeaning the way it is done. And they will get your property one way or the other. They will cut your property right in half” (2011, interview). In 2009 I interviewed Linda Kelly. Her family’s land was set to be expropriated, but after eight years of legal battles the MTO reversed its plan. Although Linda was relieved that she was able to keep her land and that the MTO paid all legal fees, she told me:

Unless you are in the position, you do not realize the impact. Your life gets put on hold, and ours was on hold for eight years. Every time I planted my garden I thought, ‘This is the last time I’ll plant this garden.’ [The MTO] didn’t seem to realize that we needed some kind of an answer to prepare us for our decisions...We just had such a feeling of helplessness when we were going through that. We just had to sit and wait. (2009, interview)

MTO planner Nathan Rodkey is aware of the problems that families endure in the process, but he also notes that once the highway design plans are finalized, it is challenging to revise: “You can’t just put a jog in it to get around something; it takes kilometers to make a curve” (2008, interview).
In June 2010 I pulled into Gord Anderson’s driveway. Gord lives along Highway 11 in the Almaguin Highlands, and over the past few years he has been going through the expropriation process. Portions of his residential property as well as his entire former business were expropriated for the highway project. As I met with Gord, it became immediately apparent he was not only upset about losing his property, Gord also questioned the manner in which the MTO handles the process. He cited examples in his vicinity of the MTO offering unreasonable prices for properties and using intimidation and fear to discourage property owners from seeking legal counsel. Generally, he argues that the MTO lacks compassion for Ontario residents. He stated: “The MTO method is to send a 6’2” 300-pound guy who is intimidating to make the offer” (2010, interview). He adds, “The old lady down the road was given a total of $33,000 for her 20 acres. She was told that was what it was worth, and there were no lawyers involved. They intimidated her, and she took the check” (2010, interview). Gord suggests that the reason the MTO handles the cases in such an impersonal manner is that in the 21st century, government works less and less for the people, and behaves more like a corporation. He told me, “It’s interesting. I’ve always had a better concept of government structures being more human, but now I really see the corporate structure in action. They treat me like I am a corporation and they are going to try to destroy me to the best of their ability…They beat all the little guys down” (2010, interview). Gord suggests that the treatment of individuals in these cases would have been different in an earlier political era.

Expropriation is also financially difficult for small municipalities. The homes and businesses that are expropriated become a loss of taxable property; as soon as the MTO purchases the land from the private landowners the municipality loses the tax revenues. Armour Township lost both residential and commercial taxbase over the course of the development
project, including gas stations, restaurants, and campgrounds. The township has had to make up for those losses by increasing taxes. Ed Dugan told me, “From an economic point of view the highway has shrunk our economic base, which is sort of counterintuitive, but it has” (2011, interview).

In response to these individual complaints regarding the MTO’s handling of expropriation, the MTO informs me that their goal is to meet with individual families to negotiate a price on a willing seller/willing buyer basis for fair market value. Through the process, the MTO covers all costs including appraisal, moving costs, legal fees, land-transfer fees, and the disconnection and reconnection of all utilities. MTO planner Nathan Rodkey suggests that part of the problem is because “It becomes a ‘We’ve lived here forever’ thing, and that is hard to deal with” (2008, interview). However, expropriation attorney Colin Watts suggests that a major problem is that the MTO does a poor job of explaining all of the perks the MTO offers in the process. For nearly all of his clients he has to explain these issues in detail. He feels that if the MTO simply did a better job of explaining the process, his services would be needed much less (2009, interview). One disconnect in the entire process lies in the assumption by many government agencies that they possess “expert knowledge” that the average Ontarian lacks.

7.5 – Expert Knowledge

In the Almaguin Highlands it is often the case that a provincial agency like the MTO will claim to possess “expert” knowledge, for example in regards to bypassing or signage, and attempt to impart it upon local residents. Scholars including James Scott (1998), Paul Nadasdy (2003), James Ferguson (1994), and Bruce Braun (2002) analyze the ways in which states employ planners who possess “expert” knowledge that is “illegible” to the average citizen. This
serves as a way of maintaining power. One resident in the Almaguin Highlands explained: “It almost always seems like it is local people who have some first-hand information who are going up against a ministry [official] who has a diploma saying that they know otherwise” (2008, interview). MTO representative Gary Howe confirms that when it comes to MTO decision making, it is often best left up to the experts: “The public sometimes sees the highway planning as a democratic kind of process. If one person comes up with a good idea it will be looked at, but if an idea is not the best idea and [even if] 50 people have it, it doesn’t mean that is what we are going to do…it is not a popularity contest” (2009, interview). As a result, although the MTO will listen to suggestions from the general populace, in the end, it is those with “expert” knowledge who make the decisions.

A further critique of the MTO is that because they are so focused on building highways, they do not pay attention to social concerns that residents may have. When I asked Municipal Councilor Andrea Taylor if she thought that the MTO understood rural development, she responded, “I don’t think they care. They make highways” (2009, interview). She believes that the incidental “inconveniences” that come along with highway development, including the expropriation of property, business closures, and the clear cutting of large tracts of forest, are not important to the MTO in the context of the larger picture of highway development. Local resident Linda Kelly adds, “If they have a concern of the impact on families it is a monetary concern” (2009, interview).

In response, MTO officials have informed me that public input has played a large role in the highway planning process. For example, the MTO is required to host extensive public consultation programs for the highway project, distribute business surveys, and inform individuals well in advance of upcoming projects. According to Nathan Rodkey, the MTO wants
communities to be involved in the planning process. The MTO also asserts that they value the opinions of residents, citing that have held public meetings to hear local concerns. Nathan told me, “Public input over time has played a role. Municipalities have been involved; some would say more than we need” (2008, interview). EDO Peter Cook agrees, telling me that the Ontario government does an excellent job in the consultation process, providing many public forums for residents to provide input (2009, interview). However, many residents I have met with suggest that these public forums are only for the sake of public relations. Linda Kelly, Jeff Branson, Gord Anderson, and many others are convinced that when the MTO holds public consultations regarding development plans, their decisions have already been finalized (2008-2011, fieldnotes).

7.6 – Conclusion

Overall, as one can see, the Highway 11 development project has been contentious for the Almaguin Highlands on a variety of levels. For one, although the goal of the highway is to “open up the North” for economic development, the Almaguin Highlands is not necessarily part of this process. Based on my observations, the Almaguin Highlands will not draw new high-paying jobs via new factories, logging and mining operations, or the tech sector, in part because the necessary infrastructure to attract such industries is not in place in the area. In this context, the highway serves to open up only certain parts of the North; in particular, this new development focuses on the core areas mentioned earlier in this chapter.

Furthermore, the new highway has led to increasing retail drain in the area. With the nearby hubs of Huntsville and North Bay home to various large chain grocery and other retail stores, local businesses have suffered. As I have mentioned throughout the dissertation, economies of scale make it so that small businesses struggle to compete with large retailers
because they cannot afford to purchase the quantities necessary to sell at lower prices. In this sense, the highway undermines the local economy; potentially dispossessing residents of their livelihoods.

Yet in other ways the highway does bring development to the area – in particular, it brings those new forms of development and production that I have been mentioning over the course of this dissertation: recreational, residential, and touristic development. The highway assists in the process by making it easier and faster for potential tourists, cottagers, and new residents to visit or move to the area. In the past, GTA residents may have thought that anything north of Muskoka was too far; toady, as I have demonstrated, this is no longer the case. With these new residents, however, have come new conflicts and challenges to the area, including decreasing full-time employment opportunities, increasing youth outmigration, ever-increasing property values, and disagreements over what constitutes proper development in the area.

Finally, the new highway serves as an example of the ways in which those who possess “expert” knowledge are able to maintain power and control over those who do not. For example, although nearly everyone I have talked with agrees that the completed highway is an improvement from the former two-lane highway, there is disagreement regarding the tactics used by the MTO, and the planning process. I do not mean to imply that the MTO is intentionally deceitful or malicious, but that rather under the assumption of the possession of “expert” knowledge, they fail to take into account many social factors, and instead focus on the larger goal of development.
8 – CONCLUSION
Where do we go from here?

8.1 – Introduction

Over the course of this dissertation I have aimed to broaden our understanding of the North American countryside. Although the countryside remains very productive in the 21st century, as should now be abundantly clear, the focus today is often on a new kind of production – one that focuses on real estate, recreational, and touristic development. The implications of these changes are significant for policy makers, developers, investors, scholars, and, most importantly, those residing in rural areas. In some cases, these changes have meant a gentrification of the countryside, significantly altering the class dynamics of rural areas, and leading to both new alliances and new conflicts. Furthermore, neoliberal economic policies have changed the ways in which rural municipalities operate, often leaving their fates in the hands of private enterprise. As the last two chapters have demonstrated, this has led to a new focus on attracting economic development in any way, shape, or form.

That the word “development” is so central to our thinking is a peculiarity of our era (Ferguson 1994). During the nineteenth century Marx, Weber, and Durkheim all observed how society was changing, noting a new focus on efficiency and organization (Roberts and Hite 2000). Those who adopted these practices were seen as modern and progressive, and those who did not were seen as irrational and outmoded (Roberts and Hite 2000). One way to become “modern” was through development, and this remains the case today. Development institutions were, and still are, often “anti-politics” machines in that they understand development projects as apolitical and ahistorical, ignoring, as I have demonstrated, how incredibly political they are (Ferguson 1994).
Yet, as I have established throughout the dissertation, there are significant disagreements regarding what constitutes “good” economic development. As Ron Varney told me, “Economic development is the whore of any cause you want to put it to. Put ten people in a room you’ll get ten definitions of what it is and how it is to be done” (2011, interview). For example, in the Almaguin Highlands, many residents, particularly those who are seasonal and those who use the area as a bedroom community, do not want massive commercial or industrial development; instead, they prefer that the area to remain in its “untouched” state. This romanticism of nature can be best understood as part of the bourgeoisie ideology of nature (Smith 2008). As former Minister of Tourism Monique Smith told me, “There are those that don't want to see it grow because you do lose some of that charm and attachment and the beauty of being a small community” (2011, interview). However, when communities discourage certain forms of development, it is likely that young people will have to seek employment opportunities elsewhere.

8.2 – Youth Outmigration

Youth outmigration from rural areas is not a new issue. For example, farmer Darcy Engel recalls being told as a child in the early 1980s that the best performing students would be encouraged to leave the Almaguin Highlands after high school to seek higher education, in part because many farmers could see the end of agriculture as a livable profession. Darcy told me, “I remember reading in Acres magazine about how the disrespect for farming had gotten so widespread that the parents would keep the stupid one home instead of the child most likely to be the best farmer and the smartest. They sent everyone else away” (2011, interview).

Over the years I have repeatedly heard stories of young adults who would like to stay in the area, but are unable to because of the lack of opportunities. Cottager Dave Owen told me,
“There is nothing here for them, and that is unfortunate. And I don’t want the McDonalds or Wal-Mart. A decent career job is what I am talking about. How you attract that, I don’t know” (2011, interview). As a result, as Ted Hollingsbrook states, “They grow up and get the hell out…They grow up and there are two options for kids who grow up in the area: They can stay and be poor, basically, or, they can leave and get an education and a job that pays a living wage” (2008, interview). Take municipal councilor Andrea Taylor, for example: her children, who left the area to attend university, desire returning to the Almaguin Highlands, but there are very few employment opportunities for them. In 2009 I met with Andrea at her office in the Almaguin Highlands. In addition to being a career councilor, Andrea also serves on municipals councils and volunteers on economic development committees. During this particular interview, Andrea was very forthcoming regarding her frustrations with the state of the 21st century countryside. Regarding youth outmigration, she told me:

If you do not want to be a builder, if that is not your career goal, how do you come back?...With the economy we are telling more and more people that they will have to move. It is heartbreaking, but what are you going to do? Are you going to waitess at a restaurant for four months out of the year? Then what? You and your kids starve the rest of the year. It is the men too. People do income patching because it is so seasonal here….From a very young age you are training them to leave. You are telling them, “You don’t count if you are rural. You need to be urban.” (2009, interview)

Those who do return often have to commute to the North Bay or Huntsville. Thirty-seven year old elementary school teacher Donna Schauer is the only person in her peer group from high school who currently lives in the area. Donna notes that one generation earlier the majority of people raised in the area remained there through adulthood (2011, interview). As a result of these challenges, there are many individuals in the area, as is clear from Chapter 6, that are encouraging new forms of economic development.
8.3 – Infrastructure

For those who are encouraging development, a major factor that stands in the way in the Almaguin Highlands, and in other small rural municipalities throughout much of North America, is underdeveloped infrastructure. As mentioned earlier, a particular village may have sewer but not water, and vice versa. Developer Tony Dimucci told me, “The problem is that we can’t accommodate [potential development] because the basic water and sewage isn’t there to accommodate” (2008, interview). Furthermore, some of the villages that do have water and sewer are operating at capacity and are unable to afford upgrades, further limiting development possibilities. In some cases, not only are they at capacity, the systems are also deteriorating and in need of significant investment – something that small municipalities cannot afford. MNDM representative Andy Ronson states, “It is tough when you lack the basic infrastructure and resources needed. And there is so much competition. That company that is coming in is not just looking elsewhere in Ontario; they are looking all over the world. Who can provide the best incentive? You are completing in a global economy” (2011, interview). As a result, villages like those in the Almaguin Highlands rank very low for potential investors looking to expand or start new industries. Furthermore, for FedNor to consider funding municipal infrastructural upgrades, they require a commitment from a new industry that is considering locating in the area. This requirement is a Catch 22 – businesses do not want to develop in areas with insufficient infrastructure, yet municipalities cannot receive funding assistance to improve their infrastructure without commitment from private enterprise.

As a result, many individuals discourage villages in the Almaguin Highlands from attempting to attract businesses that require infrastructural improvement, such as manufacturing operations. These individuals feel that such attempts are a waste of time, effort, and money.
Economic development advisor Carly Grant told me, “[Municipalities] think companies will be magically attracted to them, even though they have only dry lots; they don’t even have wet lots for sale. So they are not even competitive that way. That is not realistic” (2009, interview). Economic development advisor Betsy Hauser adds, “Yes, you need development to broaden your tax base and all that, but at the end of the day, sometimes you just need to be who you are. No Yamaha is going to build a manufacturing facility in downtown Powassan. They all talk about their industrial parks. Really? At the end of the day who is going to come and build those? They aren’t. So better to support as many small businesses in these communities as you can” (2011, interview). This is a strategy that many villages are currently embracing; yet, generally speaking, there is an overall uncertainty regarding the future of the area.

8.4 – Where Do We Go From Here?

The most common question that residents have been asking me since I started working in the Almaguin Highlands is, “Where do we go from here?” This is a question that I, in turn, have asked of many of the individuals I have talked with over the years. The major recommendation regarding economic development in the North from a provincial perspective is the creation of a “diversified northern economy,” including forestry, mining, agriculture, tourism, manufacturing, health sciences, and the “digital economy” (Ontario Ministry of Infrastructure 2011). Although this sounds promising, as the above section indicates, it may not be realistic for the Almaguin Highlands.

As a result, for some, the outlook for the future is bleak. In addition to having few employment opportunities, the Almaguin Highlands, like many rural areas in North America, is a depressed region with a disproportionately high level of social problems, including drug abuse and domestic abuse. Member of Parliament Tony Clement stated:
There are huge social issues and social challenges in the area. You know Oxycontin\(^8\) and grow-ops [marijuana growing operations], and substance abuse generally, it is a big problem. I think it has to be tackled if we are going to see a healthy community...There are some serious social issues in the area. South River, Sundridge, those places have an underbelly of serious issues. Sometimes you don’t like to talk about it, but it has to be on our list as well...Alcoholism is big too. Per capita we are way above average. (2011, interview)

Kim Gehrig who manages a social service center for domestic issues concurs: “Poverty and domestic violence are huge issues...drugs are [also] becoming more and more of an issue...I would say that the majority of the cases that we open always has a drug element to it. (2011, interview). Yet at a time with increasing social problems the federal government is cutting back spending on social programs. In 1989 social spending was 59\% of the total federal government spending; in 2007 it was down to 49\% (Hurtig 2008).

Furthermore, employment agency case workers have shared with me the high levels of job seekers that come through their doors, and food bank volunteers have shared with me the disproportionately high numbers of clients they have (2008-2011, fieldnotes). In Burk’s Falls alone (population 967), the food bank has around 40 volunteers. Furthermore, Sundridge, South River, and Powassan all have their own food banks. This increase is not limited to the Almaguin Highlands; Canada has seen doubling of food bank usage between 1989 and 2007 (Hurtig 2008). Additionally, many residents in the area depend on the federal government’s welfare and employment insurance programs. Welfare incomes are well below the poverty line (Hurtig 2008).

Finally, the withdrawal of certain federal and provincial funds and support has meant that municipalities in Ontario are faced with decreasing revenue sources and increasing service responsibilities (George, Mair, and Reid 2009; Odagiri and Jean 2004). From the 1990s onward local empowerment and “self-help” has been the goal of government funding agencies; it is a

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\(^8\) OxyContin is the brand name for oxycodone, a prescription painkiller that has become a popular recreational drug.
cost cutting strategy (Lawrence, Knuttila, and Gray 2001; Sullivan 2004). George, Mair, and Reid provide the following: “By 1998, Ontario municipalities became responsible for generating 81.4% of their financial resources from their own coffers (up from 68.8% in 1988)” (2009: 28). Provincial and federal reductions that come as a result of neoliberal downsizing have the largest impact in areas that cannot afford to fund tasks municipally, and these areas are predominantly rural (McAllister 2002). Monica Johnson, a provincial politician told me, “The previous government [Conservative Party of Canada] downloaded on municipalities. They left them with a lot more responsibility and fewer resources, so I think for a municipality to really engage in economic development, it is more challenging. They are spending their money on potholes and basic services” (2011, interview). These costs include, for example, water, sewer, and roadway maintenance. Small stretches of road can cost municipalities around $3000/km per year to maintain – a significant investment for a small township or village. These prices escalate when roads need to be replaced. Forestry manager Steve Munro told me, “The cost of re-graveling or repaving roads is phenomenal. Tar and chip [a comparatively inexpensive form or road repair] is $20,000 a click [kilometer], and paving, forget paving…the cost of that, it is just phenomenal” (2011, interview). FedNor advisor Adam Brandt further expanded on the financial challenges that municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands face:

Even contributing $100 to something is a lot here. A lot of them are just getting by…Very few of them have reserves to invest. There is not a lot of wealth in this region; I don't need to tell you that…They don't have any money for these mega projects. They can't keep up. And as a council they like to keep taxes down to attract investment and so that people can afford to live here. (2011, interview)

The answer to these woes, for many, lies in the hands of the private sector. Adam Brandt told me, “The success is going to be continuing to get people to work together, and to get municipalities to be able to manage the requests they are going to be getting for investment”
These “requests for investment” that Adam, along with many others, envision, come from the private sector. Luring private investors is a major goal of economic development committees, it is a goal in nearly every strategic plan, and it is a mandate of both the federal and provincial governments. Adam stated, “By improving infrastructure we can make it so that the private sector with their wealth can move in which will create the investment and the taxes and the employment that will allow Ontario to grow… At the end of the day, they need to look to the private sector” (2011, interview). MNDM representative Andy Ronson adds, “In the end, everyone wants a community with sustainable jobs. The private sector not only brings jobs, but it brings money to the local economy, people, taxbase, innovation” (2011, interview). Provincial representative Gary Howe further explains, “I think it is going to be up to private developers to come up with the big vision. From what I have seen as an observer, this is not any part of my official role, but being at the meetings I have observed, it seems like the municipal [councilors] at the table feel it is their mission to find a solution, but really they might need to engage more with business and developers” (2011, interview). EDO Laura Jenner agrees, suggesting that Northern Ontario has become overly dependent on government funding, telling me, “The problem with the north is that they refuse to put any trust in private enterprise” (2011, interview). Small business owner Michael Thompson agrees, and he further suggests that municipalities should offer incentives to attract private enterprise, including free land and reduced taxes (2011, interview). In general, all of the municipalities in the Almaguin Highlands are keeping their taxes low for this very reason, and Powassan, for example does not have a development charge for potential investors, unlike many municipalities throughout Ontario. This vision of the private sector being the key to future prosperity is a clear reflection of the prevalence of neoliberal ideology in Northern Ontario, and across rural North America.
8.5 – Concluding Thoughts

As I have discussed over the course of this dissertation, neoliberalism, although often touted as deregulatory, is more accurately described as re-regulatory, with new regulations working in the interests of large corporations and the elite. In this context, federal and provincial governments are still incredibly active in the neoliberal era; however, their activities have changed significantly since the Keynesian era.

On a rainy morning in October 2011 I sat down with local lumberyard owner Michael Thompson. We were casually discussing the changing face of Canada, and his comments reveal a great deal regarding the contradictory and often confusing logic of neoliberal capitalism. Michael began by explaining his opposition to new governmental regulations that tend to favor larger operations over smaller ones:

The Ontario government is killing private enterprise with all the bureaucracy. We have the Ministry of Labor come in unannounced and check things. For small businesses this becomes very expensive, to the point where they cannot continue to operate. Not only are their required upgrades often expensive, there may also be fines that we have to pay. Some of the standards that they have put in are not possible to live up to…Government in Canada could deregulate. We have so many rules and regulations, that it is hard for small businesses to survive – from the MNR [Ministry of Natural Resources] to Ministry of Labor. There are so many small little rules that seem inconsequential – cutting back on those could make it easier for small businesses to be successful. (2011, interview)

Then, in a seemingly contradictory about-face, Michael began to criticize recent “deregulatory” trade agreements: “Free trade was the downfall for this country. Everybody loves the cheap goods, but there are no jobs. We're all guilty. Now there are so many people not working. It is sad, we sold ourselves out” (2011, interview). Rather than interpreting Michael’s call for deregulation and an end to free trade as contradictory, I see his comments as reflective of the re-regulatory nature of neoliberalism. Trade agreements that promised prosperity have hurt small businesses, and regulations that have promised safe work environments and consistency across
regions have proved cost-prohibitive for small scale farmers, loggers, and business owners. As is the case elsewhere around the world, however, these new regulations and trade agreements in Canada typically serve to create a “good business climate” for wealthy private investors.

Furthermore, because of new policies from provincial and federal governments that require municipalities to compete for private investment, villages and townships, now more than ever, must behave as sophisticated entrepreneurs and marketers (Lees, Slater, and Wyly 2008). A perfect example of this is the Government of Ontario’s Northern Communities Investment Readiness (NCIR) program, discussed in Chapter 6. Those that participate in the NCIR are expected to create a community profile that will assist them in marketing their village or township to global investors. This ties directly into Lees, Slater, and Wyly’s observation that with an increase in neoliberal policies, city and municipal governments today “act less as regulators of markets to protect marginalized residents and more as entrepreneurial agents of market processes and capital accumulation” (2008: 49). As a result, in the neoliberal era municipalities, contrary to some reports, are not autonomous; rather, instead of responding to the state they now respond to private enterprise (Hackworth 2007).

One response to these changes has been an increase in rural gentrification. Importantly, rural gentrification must be understood in the larger context of uneven geographical development, which reflects the class transformation of space related to cycles of capitalist investment. Therefore, when examining rural gentrification, unlike consumption-based scholars, we must not only acknowledge the role consumers, but also the roles of developers, investors, mortgage financiers, and federal, provincial, and municipal governments. We must also pay attention to the results of this process. With the transformation of former farms and timber operations into recreational retreats and upscale housing developments, rural areas are
undergoing new forms of class-conflict, increasing property values, and an increasing gap between the rich and the poor.

Part of what drives this gentrification is a middle- and upper-class romanticized interpretation of nature. The result of this “bourgeois ideology of nature” has been increasing numbers of urban middle- and upper-class residents spending increasing time in rural areas. Although these individuals come to the countryside to get away from the development that they witness in the city, they often fail to acknowledge the large amount of development and labor that is required for them to experience the rural idyll. As a result, recreational residents may object to certain types of development that occur in the countryside. As I have demonstrated throughout this dissertation, these objections lead to inter- and intra-class conflicts regarding proper uses and meanings of rural space. In many cases, those groups with more power and money are better able to have their voices heard and needs met.

Finally, and directly related to the abovementioned points, over the course of this dissertation I have demonstrated that the North American countryside side is not currently in a post-productive state. Instead, although production is alive and well in rural North America, in many areas it has taken on new forms. These new forms of production include residential, recreational, and touristic development, and they often have brought forth the displacement of working- and lower-class rural residents along with a decrease in full-time employment opportunities.

In this dissertation I have focused on some of the ways in which the North American countryside has changed in recent decades. These changes which include a shift to new kinds of production in the context of neoliberal economic policy, and incoming new residents leading to a gentrification of the countryside, are altering the class dynamics in the area, and leading to
conflicts over proper uses and meanings of rural space. Broadly, I suspect that similar trends will progress through many parts of the North American countryside, leading to increased challenges for working-class residents, and increased conflicts between the various groups of individuals populating rural areas. Where do we go from here?
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INVITED LECTURES

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2012  Conference co-organizer. Second City Graduate Anthropology Conference, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, March 3


CONFERENCE PAPERS

2012  “Down on the Farm: Emerging Challenges and Opportunities for Small-Scale Farmers in the Almaguin Highlands, Ontario” presented on a session on Producing the Countryside: Industry and Sustainability at the Crossroads of Agriculture, American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California, November 15

2012  "Nostalgia, Solitude, and Connecting with Nature: The Summer Cottage in Ontario" presented on a session on Recombmodation and the Im/Permanence of Space, UIC Second City Anthropology Conference, Chicago, Illinois, March 3

2011  “Now What? Development and Gentrification in the ‘Post-Productive’ Countryside in the Almaguin Highlands, Ontario, Canada” presented on a session on Politics and the Possibility of Place, American Anthropological Association annual meeting. Montreal, Quebec, November 20
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CONFERENCE PAPERS (continued)

2010  “Divided Highway: Conflicting Perspectives on the Highway 11 Development Project in Rural Ontario, Canada” presented on a session on Anthropology of Toxins, Pollution, and Neoliberal Policy, American Anthropological Association annual meeting. New Orleans, Louisiana, November 18

2010  “The Road to Nowhere? The Highway 11 Development Project in Rural Ontario” presented on a session on I Don’t Know This Place: Exclusion and Agency in Labor Transmigration and Landscape Transformation, Central States Anthropological Society annual meeting. Madison, Wisconsin, April 10


2009  “Rapid Change and Emerging Challenges: Rural Development in the Almaguin Highlands of Ontario” presented on a session on Engaging Change: Local Survival Strategies in a Globalizing World, Society for Applied Anthropology annual meeting, Santa Fe, New Mexico, March 18

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2009  “Student News: Anthropology Doctoral Student John Michels Explores the Byways that have been Bypassed,” Online Interview, e-Atlas: The News Site of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, February 27

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