Thinking About Growth

Preliminary, “Beta-Test” Version

by

Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess
Co-Directors, Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado
Campus Box 580, Boulder, CO 80309-0580
Phone: (303) 492-1635, Fax: (303) 492-2154, E-mail: burgess@colorado.edu

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Introduction

“Be careful what you wish for, you might get it.” This is a phrase to which people worried about growth-related, environmental and social problems should pay attention. The changes brought by rapid population growth are unsettling. On one hand there is the pain of seeing treasured vistas paved over before your eyes. On the other hand, there is the danger of losing the many opportunities which growth presents for advancing community interests.

It doesn’t help to simply be worried, frustrated, or angry about such issues. Finding solutions requires a next step – active participation in community policy-making and problem-solving processes. You can either participate directly, or actively support one of the many interest groups working to address growth. However, if you don’t think things through carefully, you might make the mistake of supporting positions and organizations which don’t really advance your interests.

This website offers a process through which individuals, students, and community groups can think through growth-related issues and sort out the many difficult choices such issues usually involve. By going through this process, you are likely to learn that the implications of growth are more complex and challenging than you might have initially realized. Thinking About Growth asks you to consider some very difficult moral issues for which there are no easy or “right” answers. Given the intense emotions which these issues can provoke, we’ve also included a few guidelines for creating safe spaces for discussing these issues.

Framing Questionnaire

The way that we think about growth and the actions that we decide to take to advance our interests result from the way we define what growth issues are “about.” Conflict resolution scholars refer to such definitions as “framing.” As we decide what we think about growth, we are making a number of important framing decisions. In most cases these decisions are made at a subconscious level and we are often unaware of their importance. We also often fail to consider the very real possibility that further
consideration of our framing decisions might significantly alter the way we think about growth and the actions that we advocate for addressing it.

This *Thinking about Growth* program addresses this problem by providing a structured framework which encourages people to systematically reflect upon and, where appropriate, reconsider the ways in which they frame growth-related issues. The core of the program is a questionnaire which can easily be completed in about an hour. It begins by asking you to indicate your views on a variety of issues using a five-point scale. We then encourage you to think about the reasoning behind your decisions, and what it would take to persuade you to modify your views (in ways which might be more sympathetic to opposing groups).

You can fill out the questionnaire as an individual exercise, or it can be used as part of a group process in which participants first fill out the questionnaire and then spend an hour or two in small group, facilitated discussions designed to help participants further explore and reflect upon their differing frames.

No one should be asked to change their positions as part of this program (though participants may want to incorporate any reassessment of their views into their future, personal growth-related decisions). It might also be possible to use this process as a starting point for community problem solving and consensus building efforts.

As you work your way through the questionnaire, you may find it helpful to consider the questions in light of the Vermillion / Silver Cliff scenario found at the end of this document. Use of this scenario allows you to avoid making politically sensitive statements about ongoing policy conflicts in which you are involved. The scenario also creates a common history, which, at least for the purposes of this exercise, is not subject to debate. This makes it easier to focus on the underlying issues without getting caught up in the details of an ongoing conflict.

**Group Identification**

Perhaps the most fundamental decision to be made when thinking about growth is, “who’s side are you on?” We all tend to identify ourselves as members of some groups and opponents of others. Not surprisingly, we also tend to favor policies which advance the interests of our group at the expense of opposing groups. The first part of the questionnaire asks you to assess the degree of identification and sympathy you feel with several prominent constituency groups. More importantly, however, we would like you to reflect upon the reasoning behind your decisions and what it might take to persuade you to broaden your group identification.

How much do you identify with each of these groups?

**Identification level:**
Newcomers – People who recently moved into a rapidly growing community.

Oldtimers – Long-time residents who have lived in an area before a recent influx of newcomers.

Environmentalists – People who tend to identify themselves as supporters the political agenda of environmental interest groups.

Recreationists – People who value natural areas for their recreational opportunities (e.g. birdwatching, hiking, mountain biking, running, hunting, fishing, etc.).

Business/Development Interests – Executives, employees, and supporters of businesses active in the development projects associated with growth.

Social Groups – People who tend to identify themselves as members of religious, racial, gender, or ethnic groups.

List groups (optional):_______________________________________

Economic Groups – people united by similar economic circumstances.

List groups (optional):

Neighbors – People who live in your immediate vicinity and with whom you interact on a day-to-day basis.

Other?______________________________

Other?______________________________

Other?______________________________

Facts

Also key to determining the way in which we think about growth is our image of the underlying facts regarding issues such as the vulnerability of the natural ecosystem, and the extent to which growth pays for itself. Not surprisingly, many policy disputes are ultimately attributable to factual disagreements about the nature of growth. This part of the questionnaire encourages you to first identify the key facts which underlie your opinions on growth. We start by asking you to indicate your support for a number of factual statements. We also provide an opportunity for you to identify additional issues which you see as playing an important role. This can include factual statements that you believe in and as well as those which you doubt.

Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the following statements:

Agreement Level:

The Environment is Very Fragile – Urban development has placed natural areas under extreme stress. Additional development and human visitation can be expected to lead to environmental collapse and species loss.

The Environment Is Robust – Plants and animals living in natural areas adjacent to urban development can easily adjust and adapt to increasing human presence.
Newcomers Don't Pay Their Way – Rules governing infrastructure development associated with population growth favor newcomers. Existing residents must absorb significant financial costs associated with growth.

Infrastructure Development Will Alleviate Congestion – Ongoing infrastructure development plans will be able to eliminate the congestion associated with growth.

Other?

Values

Views regarding growth are also determined by our underlying values and, especially the relative weight that we place upon competing policy goals. To what extent, for example, should we favor efforts to promote economic growth, jobs and material prosperity among disadvantaged citizens over efforts to protect rare, though not necessarily endangered species.

Please rate your support for the following value statements.

Agreement level:

Human Needs – When setting priorities, the meeting of human needs should take precedence over the preservation of natural ecosystems adjacent to urban areas.

Natural Resources – Undeveloped land should be valued primarily as a resource capable of helping society meet human needs.

Social Ecology – Undeveloped natural areas should be valued primarily for the contributions that they bring to human quality of life through activities such as hiking, birdwatching, fishing, etc.

Deep Ecology – Natural areas have an intrinsic right to be protected from human encroachment which is independent of human uses for the land.

Other?

Credibility

Few of us have an opportunity to personally investigate factual claims regarding growth-related issues. We are, of necessity, forced to base our opinions on the expertise of others. Not surprisingly, we all tend to trust some sources of information more than others.

Please rate your confidence in the following information sources. As you do this, consider how the sources which you rank lower might earn your confidence.
Common Sense – Most growth-related issues are relatively simple. Sound decisions can be made on the basis of common sense without assistance from complex technical studies which tend to be misused and often biased.

Government Studies – Government studies of the impacts of growth and the likely effectiveness of mitigation plans provide a sound and reliable basis for decision-making.

Business/Developer Plans – Developers routinely conduct exhaustive impact studies and prepare development plans which accurately reflect areas of concern and assess mitigation options.

Environmental Research – Research sponsored by environmental groups offers the most reliable assessment of the true cost of urban growth.

Media – Newspapers, radio, and television offer sound and objective analyses of growth management options.

Competitiveness – The foundation of our capitalist society is a competitive system in which individual accomplishment reaps significant financial rewards. Growth management programs should not interfere with this process. Successful people should have preferred land use opportunities.

Interest-based Compromise – The goal of equitable policy making should be compromise and the ability to take advantage of all available win-win opportunities.

Empowerment – In the pursuit of environmental justice, growth management policies should try to reduce the power imbalance that exists between more and less wealthy segments of society.

Environmental Rights – The rights of nonhuman species must be guaranteed for their own sake and independently of human interests.
Gain / Loss

Individual reactions to growth issues vary depending upon whether we focus upon potential gains or losses. Do we see growth as creating opportunities which we would like to pursue, or do we see it as threatening losses which we feel we must try to avoid? This short section of the questionnaire asks you rank the importance of gain and loss issues. We also encourage people who tend to focus on the down side of growth to spend some time thinking about the upside. Conversely, we encourage people who tend to focus on the promise of growth to consider ways of limiting its negative effects.

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following:

Agreement level:

Pursuing Gains – Growth and the resources which accompany it offer great opportunities for personal and community advancement. My primary focus is upon finding ways to take advantage of these opportunities.

Avoiding Losses – My primary focus is defense against the environmental and quality of life threats associated with growth.

Long / Short Term

The costs and benefits associated with growth can differ substantially depending upon the time frame considered. For example, many growth-related problems such as crowded schools and jammed highways are short-term in nature and will be alleviated once needed infrastructure improvements are in place. There are, of course, also aspects of growth which produce only short-term benefits. For example, some developments may yield short-term profits at the expense of longer-term economic sustainability. In other cases, the attainment of long-term benefits may require short-term sacrifice.

Please indicate where you stand on the long vs. short term issue.

Agreement level:

Short Term Focus – In evaluating strategies for dealing with growth, my primary concern is with the short term problems and opportunities which will present themselves over the next couple of years.

Long Term Focus – My biggest concern is the long-term sustainability of the community and its ability to preserve quality of life 10, 20, or 40 years from now.
Process
Different people tend to pursue different strategies for advancing their interests. To some
degree, these strategic choices reflect tactical concerns. It makes sense to use those
processes which are most likely to advance your interests. There is also a tendency of
people to employ only those processes with which they are familiar (even when there are
better alternatives). This last part of the questionnaire asks you to assess the degree to
which you feel inclined to use alternative procedural approaches.

Please indicate your preferred approach(es).

Agreement level:

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Group Settings
If you decide to discuss the questionnaire results in a group setting involving people with
substantially different views on the growth issue, there are a number of steps which can
be taken to reduce the risk of counter-productive confrontations. First, there needs to be
a clear set of ground rules that prohibit participants from making personal. Everyone
should be asked to state their views in a positive way rather than attacking the views
presented by others. A facilitation process with newsprint flip charts is often helpful, as
it simultaneously records ideas for everyone’s benefit, and keeps attention focused on the
newsprint, not on “the enemy.” By recording all views, it helps avoid destructive arguments over whose views are correct. (There should be no expectation that people will change their positions during the course of the meeting.) It is hoped, however, that the thoughtful introspection which this process is designed to encourage will, over time, lead to people to make subtle changes and improvements in the way that they think about growth issues.

**Vermillion / Silver Cliff Scenario**

The communities of Silver Cliff and Vermilion are found in a spectacular region of small plateaus, rolling hills, and broad canyons. They are separated by the Golden Hills, a 30-mile stretch of glorious meadows situated on a series of plateaus separated by red rock cliffs and rolling forested hills. While hardly of national park quality, it’s the sort of country in which people would love to spend time. Silver Creek and Vermilion lie in two broad valleys where the Silver and Vermilion creeks emerge from the hills.

An early Vermilion settler bequeathed his ranch on a plateau overlooking the town for construction of Vermilion College. In part because of its spectacular setting, the college flourished to eventually become one of the state’s major universities. Over time, Vermilion’s economy became less dependent on agriculture, mining, and forestry. It began to develop a series of university-related businesses, which would later be called hi-tech. The economy flourished along with the average wealth of its citizens.

Without a university, Silver Creek’s development followed a very different path. It became the regional center for the ranching, farming, mining, and timber industries. The economy was further bolstered by a small military test facility located in the prairies outside of town. It also attracted a number of modest manufacturing plants which supplied a steady stream of moderate income jobs. Recently however, the community has fallen on harder times with many of its manufacturing jobs lost to international producers. The timber industry languished because of environmental concerns and the fact that the most profitable stands had already been cut. Still, Silver Cliff had been through hard times before and the community had always managed to sustain itself. People liked the traditional, low key, small-town atmosphere and there was little desire to join the hectic modern world.

The land between the two communities, the Golden Hills, was a patchwork of private land holdings and Forest Service land. In the 1990's the latest technology boom started to change things. Highly profitable new technology firms prowled the country, looking for desirable places to establish their sprawling new campuses. In the highly competitive environment, the ability to offer employees real quality of life often made the difference between success and failure. Vermilion was just the sort of place that these companies sought. In the mid ’90s two companies bought and moved onto spectacular ranches while countless imitators and spin-offs flooded the area with new and quite wealthy citizens.
It was these individuals who tipped Vermilion’s local balance of political power toward growth and high technology. Many long time residents, who didn’t like these developments, sold out and left as housing prices sky-rocketed. The Hills were quickly becoming urbanized with new shopping centers and office parks, causing demands for an enlarged airport and even faster highways. Areas within reasonable commuting reach of Vermilion were rapidly filling up. There were strong demands for the new highways required to open up areas for development.

To the residents of Silver Cliff, the Hills had always been a prized natural playground. Not surprisingly, they came to view Vermilion’s sprawling development with horror. Especially alarming to Silver Cliff residents was the leap-frog nature of development. Everyone seemed to want a pristine setting for their new development.

Newcomers, for the most part, had left congested and, from their perspective, quite unlivable cities. They were thrilled with the opportunity to live in a rural, small town setting – the kind of lifestyle that Silver Creek and Vermilion residents had enjoyed for decades. While congestion was annoying, they saw it as a temporary problem which could be alleviated once infrastructure development caught up.

They were, however, distressed with the hostile reception that they received from the oldtimers. They felt that many community institutions were badly in need of modernization. Schools needed a more challenging curriculum, especially in mathematics and science. After all, students needed to be trained to compete in the high-tech world. There were also differences in social philosophy, newcomers tended to be more liberal than the oldtimers. Tensions also arose between the new environmental community which proposed limits on relatively free access to the Hill country which oldtimers enjoyed. Hunting, fishing, and the use of four-wheel drive roads were facing increasing environmental challenges. Also in contention was the decline in affordable housing. More and more people began to make the commute from Silver Cliff and started to drive up housing prices everywhere.